

Sue Clayton

Meet the co-founder of Real Estate Balance, who has shaped the UK's real estate industry over the last 40 years through her leadership roles at CBRE and as a Non-Executive Director at major real estate firms.

“ Did you choose real estate? Or did it choose you?

A bit of both. I chose to do a real estate degree – mainly because I wanted a job which wouldn't tie me to a desk or a screen but also offered such a broad range of careers. My Dad was a part time farmer, part time surveyor - though he specialised in power lines, wayleaves and pylons so not something which appealed to me! I nearly studied law, but realised a real estate degree offered more opportunities and if I wanted to be a lawyer, I could still have done a law conversion after university. Going into real estate was the best decision I could have made as it's been great – and I'm still enjoying it!

How did you find the transition from executive leadership to non-executive? What do you miss the most?

I was fortunate in that as I was winding down my executive career at CBRE, I was approached for my first non-executive role. By then I was running some of CBRE's biggest client relationships but was no longer doing investment agency, so there were no conflicts. CBRE were brilliant - really supportive of me taking on more roles while I cut back on my time with them, so by the time I retired from CBRE the transition was much easier. In terms of what I miss the most, it's the team spirit and working closely with people. Inevitably as a

non-executive you don't see as much of people and it's more infrequent interaction - although I really enjoy my board roles and enjoy good relationships with the teams. In my role as Senior Independent Director at Helical, I am also the Employee Engagement Director, so I meet with the wider team regularly. At SEGRO we have regular meetings with a mixture of staff across the UK and in continental Europe outside of Board meetings and that makes it more rewarding. I continue to mentor a few people, keeping me engaged with younger professionals despite no longer being in an executive role.

If there was one business decision you could change from your career, what would it be and why?

I joined Richard Ellis as a graduate. I liked the fact that the firm was international and envisaged that I would work overseas for a few years. 40 years later I was still in London! I don't regret any aspects of my career and personal life choices – but I do think I should have pushed to spend time in another country and experience a different market and way of life. I've made up for it by ensuring we have travelled extensively as a family, but visiting as a tourist is not the same as immersing yourself in another country.

How do you balance people (human impact) with profit?

Businesses will be more profitable with a motivated and empowered workforce, guided by strong leadership. Badly managed companies



lose good people and teams – and that can't be good for the bottom line. Research by McKinsey and others shows that diverse teams deliver better results and higher profits—making DE&I simply good business sense.

You co-founded Real Estate Balance nearly a decade ago to drive greater diversity in real estate. While there have been some positive changes, what do you think still needs to change from a DE&I perspective?

There has undoubtedly been progress, but the pace of change at senior levels has been too slow. The proportion of women and those from different ethnic and social backgrounds in leadership roles remains disappointingly low. Improved working practices, such as flexible working and family-friendly policies, should help with retention, but businesses need to keep working at it. Who wouldn't want their daughter to have the same career prospects as their son? The reality is, it's still not always a level playing field, and creating more inclusive working environments is key to enabling everyone to thrive, regardless of background.

How can we balance diversity in the workplace with hiring the right people for the job? Is this the same thing?

With the right processes, we can enhance diversity while ensuring the best candidate is hired—focusing on positive action, not positive discrimination. I don't support quotas, but targets can drive behavioural change. For example, ensuring diverse candidate lists and prioritising skills and potential over just experience

WORDS OF WISDOM

What advice would you give to your younger self?

To be confident that you could achieve anything. To take time to reflect on and enjoy successes and be less self-critical.

What advice would you give to aspiring professionals seeking to enter or grow in the real estate investment sector?

Be curious, be flexible and explore different opportunities. There are so many exciting areas to work in, so look around and try a few areas before you decide to specialise. I did some valuation and Fund management for a few years before specialising in investment agency, and the experience gained in both areas was invaluable. There were very few women in investment agency then, but I loved it and found it both rewarding and exciting. So never let anyone tell you can't do something.

Do you have any tips for women or those from diverse backgrounds aspiring to be a future leader in the market?

Be yourself, be authentic and just strive to be the best you can be. Take every opportunity to broaden your experience and progress where you can. Join networks and industry groups to build up your contacts and seek out support and mentors. Be ambitious!

will create a more inclusive hiring process.

How do you maintain a good work/life balance?

When I worked full time and had a young family, I always ensured that I was 100% committed to wherever I was. At home the family were the absolute priority, and in the office I was very focused. After I had my children I cut back on some of the evening events – investment agents' cocktail parties for example. I focused on client events and made sure I optimised my time while I was there. Working parents can feel guilty at times, but I feel I got the balance about right. My children remind me that I never missed an important event of theirs, even though I wasn't doing the school drop-off and pick up every day. It's about getting your priorities right.

Work from home, work from office or hybrid?

Despite no longer being in an Executive role, the majority of my work is in the office. I do some on-line meetings but don't find them nearly as valuable as face to face meetings. I find it's very difficult in virtual meetings to ensure you're getting the best out of everyone as you can't read the room and those who don't speak up can be ignored. I'm a huge fan of teamwork, and unless people are regularly in the office it's difficult to optimise this. Having said this, I'm pleased we now have more flexibility in where we work. Put me down as a fan of both office and hybrid working, but I'd encourage people to go into the office on a regular basis to benefit from collaboration and learning from others.

You've had a range of roles in charities related to the real estate industry. What has been your experience?

I have relished the opportunity to give back to an industry that has given me such a rewarding career. As a former Trustee of the *Reading Real Estate Foundation*, I saw firsthand how its *Pathways to Property* programme opens doors for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Watching students attend summer school to learn about real estate careers makes you realise how important it is that we can offer this opportunity to those who would not otherwise know of or be able to access the industry. I'm also a Patron of *LandAid*, a brilliant organisation tackling youth homelessness, showing the industry has the power to make a difference. I am also a Vice President of *The Story of Christmas*, a real estate backed charity which last year raised £1m for great causes. One of the legacies I'm most proud of is co-founding *Real Estate Balance*, which continues to grow even as its original founders step back. Our industry offers many ways to give back. I encourage everyone to get involved—it's truly rewarding ■”

NED LEADERSHIP

What is the most important attribute needed when hiring for a senior board position?

I've been involved in hiring other non-executives on three of the boards I've sat on as a Non-Executive Director. The ability to think strategically is probably the most important, although being demonstrably collaborative is also crucial. It's as important to listen as it is to speak and to remember that you are not there in an executive role - some can find this difficult!

With interest rates remaining relatively high and the market recovery proving to be slower than anticipated, how important is it to have senior non-executives who have already “lived through” this type of cycle, post GFC?

The benefit of having non-executives who have worked through several market cycles is their ability to see beyond the immediate future – and to steer the ship calmly through troubled seas! There are undoubtedly many more challenging issues in difficult markets, so the relationship and trust between the executive team and the rest of the board is even more important. Ultimately the non-executives are there to ensure the firm is being run in the best interests of all stakeholders and what is in the best interest of the shareholders may not always tie in with the best interests of the executives, so that needs to be carefully but firmly managed to reach the best outcome.

What is the benefit of having a mix of real estate experts and those in other industries in a board?

A blend of experience and skills is very important on a board, as is diversity of thought. On all my boards, I bring the direct real estate expertise, but we also benefit hugely from those who have worked in other businesses, such as banking,

industry, marketing, retail or digital as they bring different perspectives and insights. The executive team have real estate skills but the board's role is to challenge in a constructive way and ensure that the team are looking at the bigger picture.

Helical PLC, where you are also a NED, is a sustainability-led investment and development business – why is ESG important to ensuring the longevity of investments?

Helical is a great example of a business focussed on maximising sustainability in the buildings it creates and this has led to our success in attracting both occupiers and investors to our office developments. ESG is not just a nice-to-have - it's critical to financial performance, by attracting the best occupiers, the top rents and in future-proofing our buildings for the longer term.

What assets should we be investing in right now? Why?

I believe asset classes which benefit from the new structural trends will perform the best. I still see urban last mile industrial offering good prospects particularly as urbanisation and city living continues to grow. Ongoing e-commerce growth continues to drive demand for well-located distribution warehouses and with increasing use of AI, we're seeing a rapid increase in demand for Datacentres. The key here though is power provision as well as location and planning, so not all sites are suitable. Whilst offices have been the weakest sector for several years, tenant demand for best in class is evident in Central London so I'm still a fan. I would be remiss not to mention the Living sector, although I'm concerned some sectors may get over developed.