

# Mingling minded

Your next project may depend on who you know as much as what you know. If you want to win friends and influence people in construction, you need to attend the right events, as James Macneil explains.

IN THE EARLY EVENING OF MONDAY 17 November last year, more than 90 Tory MPs and peers crowded into the ballroom at the London Intercontinental hotel. They gathered not to plot against the leadership but to participate in the construction industry's premier networking event, the McAlpine family's annual reception.

Run by contractor Sir Robert McAlpine, the 1000-strong bash is considered the ultimate in construction industry networking events (right). But it is just one of hundreds of events every year that give construction professionals the chance to meet and greet people who may be useful contacts in their quest for lucrative contracts and commissions.

Good contacts can make the difference between getting your name pencilled in on a contract before your competitors hear about it and having to battle for work in an oversubscribed competitive tender. They can also boost personal fortunes. A survey by leading headhunter Stanton Chase International last June revealed that 45% of senior managers are almost three times as likely to get a job from someone they met over a glass of champagne as from the classified ads in a Sunday newspaper.

Opportunities for networking in the construction industry range from professional association dinners to sports days. In London, there are certain clubs to be seen at and long-lasting relationships to be built up on major

projects such as Broadgate. But pick the wrong party to join and you could find yourself mixing with people who don't have a clue about where *their* next job will come from, let alone where yours will. The following is a guide to how to meet the movers and shakers.

### In-house lunches

There is no such thing as a free lunch, but it is surprising how many people forget this if you invite them for some posh nosh in your boardroom. For firms that can't afford to rent the Intercontinental ballroom, a lunch with a select group of clients and consultants at your office may help jog their memories next time they are looking to place some work.

Subscribers to this form of flattery include project manager Buro 4 and multidisciplinary consultant AYH Partnership, which hold lunches in-house. Balfour Beatty's project and construction management arm Heery goes a step further, impressing three or four groups every year by feeding them at top London restaurant Mosimann's.

But whereas in-house events can cement relationships with people already known to a firm, it is unlikely that someone you have not met will turn up in your offices merely on the promise of a poached salmon steak and a plate of profiteroles. To meet new clients, the dedicated networker has to attend the type of events that might attract a wider audience.

### The industry dinner

Anyone who attends all the black-tie federation and institute annual dinners in the construction industry is likely to wear out a dinner suit within 12 months and have to join Weight Watchers. But, while plentiful, the various dinners and lunches staged by industry organisations are better places for catching up with old university mates than for meeting exciting new clients.

"Generally, the only clients there are guests of other people, so it is difficult to get to speak to them," says one architect about institution dinners. A marketing manager is also unenthusiastic: "Some are pretty boring, like the Association of Project Managers' do, but we attend so that our name is seen."

### The sector dinner

Worldly wise networkers are more likely to don their bow ties for events held by industry organisations whose membership crosses disciplines. For example, the concrete structures group Construct's annual dinner held at the Houses of Parliament last April attracted Peter Rogers of Stanhope, Ian Macpherson of construction manager Mace, a brace of senior managers from Laing, representatives of many of the main formwork contractors and a sprinkling of MPs.

Events held by other sectors can be happy hunting grounds for networkers. For example, anyone looking for airport-

related work could grace the dancefloor at the Aviation Ball. The drawback of such events is that ticket prices tend to reflect the profitability of the sector and are therefore generally higher than the construction sector norm. Guests at the aviation industry Grosvenor House hotel bash are expected to pay a wallet-draining £195 a head.

Other cross-sector events include MIPIM, the annual European property industry jamboree held every April in Cannes (below), where deck shoes are de rigueur for hopping between luxury yachts. Within the UK, the British Council of Offices and the British Council of Shopping Centres annual conferences are regarded with similar glee by experienced networkers. The British Council of Offices also holds regular lunches at the Institute of Directors.

### The games people play

With so many men in the industry, many networking events revolve around sporting events. These provide a more relaxed forum for getting to know people you might want to play corporate ball with. Directors from WS Atkins are often seen entertaining at cricket matches, the Derby and at Cowes. Higgs & Hill has a box at Lord's, whereas other firms organise golf days. There are also industry-wide sports events such as the Little Britain Cup, which gives the opportunity to meet other professionals with an interest in seafaring (below).

### Working for the industry

Some of the best networking happens when you are not trying. As well as helping to cure construction's ills, industry reform groups such as the Reading Construction Forum and the Latham working groups can allow invaluable business links to be formed.

Tony Merricks, chairman of piling contractor Stent Hercules, is actively involved in several industry groups including the Construction Research and Innovation Strategy Panel. He says that as well as giving him an opportunity to help improve the industry, participating in such groups also helps him make valuable contacts. "It is a far more effective way of networking because we are working together. You build a much better relationship than if you just meet over a pie and a pint."

### Belonging to the right club

Simply being a member of the right social club can help. According to *Who's Who*, RIBA president Owen Luder belongs to the RAC club, as does John Ritblat, chairman and managing director of British Land, BAA chief executive Sir John Egan and Bovis chairman Sir Frank Lampl. Former RIBA chief Max Hutchinson is an Athenaeum member. However, joining a club won't automatically improve your access to the great and the good: Sir Norman Foster, Sir Richard Rogers, Terry Farrell and Nicholas Grimshaw don't belong to any.

## EVENTS TO BE SEEN AT

**The McAlpine family reception is the most exclusive event in the construction industry. Last year's was held in the ballroom of London's Intercontinental hotel. Among the 1000 guests attending were Tory ministers Douglas Hurd, Michael Howard, John Gummer and Virginia Bottomley, architects Terry Farrell and Quinlan Terry, senior partner of Gardiner & Theobald Michael Coates, David Bucknall of Midlands consultant Bucknall Austin, Jenny Page, chief executive of the Millennium Commission, broadcaster Sir Robin Day, former Times editor Simon Jenkins and advertising guru Sir Tim Bell. The bash is described by guests as "an absolute institution" and "the ultimate in networking". Reputedly, it is extremely difficult to get on the invitation list but easy to get dropped off it.**

**For project managers and architects looking for commissions on office schemes, the European property industry's annual jamboree, MIPIM, is not to be missed. It takes place**

**over three days just before Easter in Cannes on the French Riviera. The show combines an exhibition, where the likes of Gardiner & Theobald and AYH Partnership can be seen hawking their skills, with a round of cocktail parties, often aboard yachts moored in the bay. Developers from all over eastern and western Europe attend to look for opportunities.**

**Another not-to-be-missed event is the Little Britain Cup. This construction version of Cowes week is the brainchild of Steve Green of cladding consultant Cladtech and architect Peter Thompson. Both keen yachtsmen, they dreamed up the sailing challenge while shopping in Europe for cladding for London's Little Britain development. In less than a decade, it has grown from a head-to-head challenge for the price of dinner to an 83-boat regatta with more than 1000 participants. This year, it will take place on 13 and 14 September and aims to raise more than £9000 for charity.**

## HOW TO GET CONNECTED

There is more to networking than knowing how much champagne you can drink before you pass out and how to eat a vol-au-vent without tipping it down your tie. Paul Pearce, chairman of the Chartered Institute of Marketing's Construction Industry Group, picks out the dos and don'ts of meeting the people that matter.

### Do

- \* Decide what kinds of people will lead you towards the opportunities you want. Consider where they can be met on a basis that will permit "business friendships" to be built. Go there regularly.
- \* Build long-term personal relationships on the basis of reciprocal interest. We all refer clients or pass on information to those who are likely to do the same for us.
- \* Develop a succinct and positive introductory statement about what your firm does and the kind of business it seeks.
- \* Keep good records. But do it discreetly.
- \* Prioritise your best "business friends" and persevere with them. Review a core list and keep it up to date.

### Don't

- \* Go for the jugular. When you meet someone, ask courteous social and business questions to establish the potential value of the contact. The aim of the first meeting is to obtain a business card and to decide whether and how to pursue the relationship.
- \* Be dismissive or discourteous. You need all the friends you can get—and NO enemies. The person you cold shoulder may just be your fairy godmother in disguise.
- \* Be seen to be working the room. The most successful networkers are liked by everyone and are seen as the life and soul of the party.
- \* Forget that the other person is also looking to you as a source of new business.
- \* Run out of business cards.

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