

***What inspired you to pursue your current career?***

My father owned a civil engineering firm back in Nigeria and I come from a family of Engineers and Lawyers. Initially Civils and Structures was my first calling but out of curiosity I decided to do a master's degree in Transport Planning and Engineering, and it became clear that that was my calling.

Another thing that drew me to my career is wanting to help people and have a positive impact in people's lives. There are lots of professions that can do that, for example, Medicine, but I felt like transportation was a big deal for me based on my love for engineering, because you can argue that transportation is one of the biggest markers or growers of an economy and coming from a developing country, you could see how much potential is being wasted because of the gaps in transportation.

Also, by contrasting within a developing country and a developed country, you can tell that so many things can be done to impact people's lives. That brings me on to road safety, as I feel like it's the same thing with road safety, being more pertinent in developing countries, where there is little to no attention paid to road safety, as they're focusing on delivering the product but not focussing on the end user of the products and you can see how the collision rates go up, Particularly KSIs (Killed or Seriously Injured).

Every time there's a plane crash, it's all over the news because of the fatalities and everything, but a lot more people die from road traffic than from plane crashes. So, it appears as though it's almost accepted in society that, road collisions are going to happen, people are going to die, so that's why I'm a big advocate of road safety.

***Were there any defining moments or people who played a key role in shaping your career path?***

I'd say everyone - colleagues and clients, as I've learned something different from every one of them. For example, I remember when I started working, my line manager then said something to me after reviewing my first report, he said the difference between a good engineer and a great engineer is how they're able to articulate themselves in the report that is going to be read by a non-transport professional, which highlighted to me the need to have excellent communication skills, not just writing but also speaking and listening to people - understanding what they need and what. I think that's something I've applied throughout my career which helps a lot.

***As a Black professional in highways and transportation, what does 'standing firm in power and pride' mean to you in your work?***

It means holding myself to a high regard, remembering all the challenges I had faced to be where I am today and the challenges I would still face tomorrow, based on unconscious bias. I think unconscious bias applies to everyone in a way, as everyone has a certain level of unconscious bias. For example, I remember when I started working and even whilst studying at University, my seating position and my posture were sometimes questioned, like I was not interested in what was going on, but which to some extent you can understand it because maybe everyone is used to seeing people sat down or dressing a certain type of way, that this attributed to unconscious bias.

I do think that the world is fast changing now, and everyone just needs to understand that it's easier said than done. Unconscious bias training helps me understand that, okay, this is a thing that I might be doing unconsciously, or is being done to me unconsciously, and I need to just find a way to remedy that.

For me, standing firm in power and pride also means giving back to society and helping in any way I can.

### ***What needs to change to create a more diverse and inclusive profession?***

Within the UK this depends on what you define diversity as, and what pillar of diversity you focus on, e.g. age, race and ethnicity or religion, gender, sexual orientation and so on. Things change, and it's not the same for any two people. For example, as a black male, it's different from what a black female might be facing.

I guess the most pertinent to me is race and ethnicity, as this is what I feel most comfortable speaking about. Diversity is somewhat integrated with immigration – less so now than before. When I was transitioning from a student to a graduate, the biggest challenge I faced was the visa application system and this was as an American – now imagine what it was like for people that were from other countries.

Undeniably, there is more awareness on Tier 2 visas now than then – when I was a student, some companies had never heard of it – however, there are now more restrictions with pay thresholds etc., that make it more restrictive to some demographics.

Globally, in having conversations with people, I came to realise that not a lot of people understand what transport planners do, and I think that is our biggest problem – awareness. Rarely would you see a kid grow up saying they want to be a transport professional and it because of a lack of awareness and representation.

Take Lawyers or Doctors for example, they not only represent their institutions but also represent their specialisms on a day to day. We have to be our own ambassadors and be proud of what we do. We literally save lives and grow economies on a daily basis, and this should be well portrayed not just for commercial value but also for social value.

***Have you noticed or experienced positive change during recent years in respect of diversity and inclusion?***

Definitely, and I think this is as a result of awareness. There are a lot of campaigns on EDI that help people recognise the importance of EDI and how unconscious bias might hinder it.

We are not at the finish line yet as there is still a lot of work to be done but we are currently in the right direction.

***What advice would you give to emerging Black professionals just beginning their careers?***

Never see your race as an obstacle, see it as an advantage – being black could arguably mean you have a different perspective on some things – use that to your advantage.

Regardless of race, gender or all other protected characteristic, every human being is different – different does not naturally mean good or bad, depends on how you apply the difference.

Always keep a positive mind and remember the sky is the limit.

***What achievement or career highlight are you most proud of and why?***

I'm proud of every project because I've learned something different from every project. You come to realise that the smallest projects are the most difficult ones, that they're small for a reason. I went on site in Norfolk to take speed gun surveys because of the recording equipment being vandalized. At the same time, I worked on the Norfolk offshore wind farm projects, Boris and Vanguard.

I also worked with a bus public transport organization, Strategy International in Maputo (Mozambique), on projects in Saudi Arabia as well as Tanzania – so a varied mix of projects internationally and locally. International projects are particularly interesting because you have a different genre of stakeholders. You have people, you have the client, and you have to satisfy the client but doing that and maintaining integrity also.

Your integrity can sometimes be a struggle, so it's always knowing what you're doing, why you're doing it, and I've found out that communication and understanding the clients helps a lot because you can explain the benefits and reach an agreement with them.

***How do you think organisations can better celebrate and support Black professionals all year round, beyond during Black History Month?***

I feel like one of the biggest hinderances to EDI is unconscious bias – judging an individual based on how they look, walk, dress, sit, etc. over the years I have come to realise that its not always based on ignorance but a lack of understanding and thus why I recommend that regular training and wellbeing sessions are provided.

I also strongly believe that using prefixes such as “first black...” to celebrate an individual is counterintuitive as whilst it celebrates the individual, it highlights the persons race and suggests that the person was at a disadvantage in achieving such.

***Have you encountered barriers or unconscious bias in your career? How have you stood firm in those moments?***

Yes, I definitely have, based on my height, how I dress and how I talk – my lifestyle in general has led to several unconscious bias moments.

How have I stood firm? At first it was hard but then I realised it was easier to not personalise it and give the benefit of the doubt that the person lacks understanding rather than being ignorant. I found it easier to remove myself from the situation and later highlight to the individual the consequences of such actions in a polite manner.

***How do transportation policies and decisions effect Black communities that we serve as professionals?***

I feel like sometimes in design or policies you can argue that it's made for the standard white male in the sense that, for example, for attributed distances, walking distances - those considerations are made in designing a project. It's assumed that okay, these are the standard shift patterns, these are the standard shift times. These are the standard hours people are wanting to work.

I was working on a project in Norfolk where they were looking at bus timetables to improve accessibility, and they were basing it on church service times on Sunday. It then hit me that there was no consideration given for Friday Jummah / Jumu'ah prayers. I feel like these are wider examples of local requirements we need to consider, as well as the careful use of any data as it may not be an accurate representation and local population cohorts may be missed out .

### ***What role does equity play in road safety and access to safe transportation?***

By understanding that no two projects are the same and taking time to understand the end user of the scheme, it helps to consider road safety and safe transportation for all users, when for example calculating a safe distance to cross roads, ask, will it take longer for certain users than others

Also, what I've come to realize is how there's a certain integration between demographics, for example, there are some locations such as Birmingham, where you'd find a higher concentration of younger black people, and in some areas you'll find a higher concentration of older black people. So, it's not just about identifying local population by race or ethnicity, but also identifying other characteristics, e.g. age, religion or faith. If you feel there is not much pedestrian movement on a road that leads onto a mosque, have you considered what the level of movement might be on a Friday afternoon. So, it's just making sure that you're actively designing and auditing with everyone in mind.

### ***Are there particular projects you've worked in where you've seen the need for safer and more inclusive transport infrastructure or service delivery?***

I've heard about international projects where people are focussed heavily on delivery, that people are willing to cut corners in terms of safety and just provide the bare minimum. But I feel like what's worth doing is worth doing well and that includes safety implications, the pillars of safe systems. If you're in the UK now, the average response time of an ambulance is way quicker than in a developing country. So why make the road less safe in a developing country if the response time is less.

I know of projects where communities are heard in transport policy and design, and feedback is sought across all demographics. I also remember when I was speaking to

someone and promoting CIHT membership, and the person asked me why I joined, and I was honest with the person. Initially I joined the CIHT because it was free to join and someone had given a lecture at the University.

In terms of my characteristics in the industry, and that's one of the reasons why I was a Council member before and also on the West Midlands Regional Committee and now also a Trustee, because I feel like my experience as a professional is somewhat different from others' experiences.

People that have similar experiences to me, may feel like it would be nice to have their voice portraying, letting them know that these are the kind of struggles we face. For example, when I was applying for jobs at some companies, they didn't know what a Tier 2 visa was. Some had clauses that said you had to pay for the Tier 2 visa and carry out the whole process and on reflection, I was doing that as an American applicant. I know that others were applying as Nigerians or Ghanaians, and I know it was a lot harder for them because there were other stipulations.

Now however, there's a lot more awareness of the Tier 2 process, but at the same time there are a lot more barriers involved because of the salary caps, and imminent rule changes.

When you look at other Institutions, there is a high contrast of their UK based and internationally based member numbers to CIHT members. This means that we need to have a bigger voice from beyond the UK, whether that's partnering with universities to spread the word about CIHT, as things can be done virtually now, reaching out to a university and offering a free seminar to explain who we are, what we do, who can join and what transport professionals do in practice. The bigger our international membership sample size is, the more we can find out what people's issues are and help to mitigate them.

***How can highways and transportation professionals ensure that the voices of historically underrepresented communities are heard in transport policy and design?***

By continually encouraging representation and gathering feedback. A scheme should not just end after it is implemented, there should always be a monitoring and review process which should equally consider such communities.

***What changes would you like to see in the highways and transportation sector to make it more inclusive and representative of the communities we serve?***

Considering all communities and their needs because I feel like we have rules of thumb that we apply in our day-to-day practice, but understanding that that's just a rule of thumb, and what works well for person A might not necessarily work well for person B.

Engaging communities more proactively to increase understanding of what their needs are. For large scale projects there is a threshold that encourages public engagement, but it shouldn't be done as a tick box exercise – instead done to actually collate feedback and to consider and implement it where possible.

***In what ways do you think your identity enhances your perspective and impact in your work?***

My identity has helped provide me with personal and professional skills that have aided my career - for example, being exposed to multiple cultures and growing up in developing countries has helped me understand human behaviour and how they interact with change.

I am Nigerian, American and now British. I've travelled a lot. I've gone to school in different places and been exposed to lots of different cultures. What you realize, is how there's a lot to learn from. No one is doing it right and no one is doing it wrong. For example, I was in Dubai recently and I walked onto the train. I wasn't paying attention, I was looking down and when I looked up it took me a while to realize everyone was looking at me funny and I couldn't understand it. But after a while I realized that I was in a woman only carriage.

That stuck out to me because I have also been on the tube in the UK a couple of times and I have noticed that sometimes people are not comfortable taking the tube because they feel like people are going to press up against them. I'm not saying that there should be a drastic change or segregation because you have to be very careful here, but that might be something to consider in looking at how we design trains and how we can facilitate a safer and more welcoming environment.

Those are the kind of things where my identity helps me with my work as a transport professional, because being exposed to things like that, I'm able to have critical thinking, not only design but implementing day to day practice.

I try to take myself out of the picture and think about how the other person feels. I also think that learning opportunities such as unconscious bias training need to be preceded and followed up with conversations with people – not mandating that people attend training when they may not understand what it is and how they're going to benefit from it – as they may close their mind to it.

It's as much as a responsibility of individuals and organizations to make sure that they're adept in things like unconscious bias, because the world is changing rapidly. What is considered as being or not being unconscious bias today, could change tomorrow. That's why it's not just a one-off training session; it's having continuous discussions about it.

I had a recruiter ask me why I have been at my company for over seven years, and my answer was simple. It was because I feel like it's a family, I can see how much they're investing in people, not just the business. It does have positive impacts on the business, but they go beyond focussing on solely that. People need and want to be happy, and people need to be able to speak up and have a voice.

I could look at situations in the past where I'd felt like I was not being looked at seriously and just kept quiet or went into my shell - based on people judging me, based on their unconscious bias. In having attended that training or feeling like I'm in a safe space where I can always talk to my line manager or talk to anyone or even within the CIHT, I feel like that's helped a lot.

I think one of the first Council meetings I attended in was in 2023, there was a presentation where they used the acronym 'BAME' and I remember I initially didn't raise it, but I sent an e-mail to the presenter saying, you know this is not a term you should be and explained why and everything, but you could see how well received the message was, as well as the person saying I'm sorry, I hope this didn't adversely affect me.

For me, what struck me was how it wasn't just about identifying that that was a mistake but also identifying that that might have made me feel uncomfortable. I feel like that's one of the things with unconscious bias is how someone could have looked this and said, he's just being political, but that wasn't the case. The person actually wanted to find out how it made me feel and to understand.

Those are the things that are positive in our sector that we need more of, that we can't afford to take our feet off the pedal, that we need to keep going because we can see the lights at the end of the tunnel, but this doesn't mean we should stop or reduce our speed in pushing forward.



