

# IMPROVING THE RETENTION OF CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS: A SOFT HRM APPROACH

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Understanding the career development of construction professionals is fundamental to developing HR policies to secure their retention. The objective of this research was to determine the factors and inter-related decisions that had influenced the career dynamics of construction managers and professionals, and to develop a framework of soft HRM practices aimed at improving their retention through enhanced career development opportunities. The research employed a primarily qualitative methodology to collect detailed career history profiles of the informants. These data were used to establish the factors leading to high staff turnover. The research provided insights into: the decision-making processes made by construction professionals in developing their careers; the resultant effects that these strategies had on their career dynamics; the compatibility and conflicts between personal action and resolutions; and the HR policy of large construction companies. The paper concludes by offering a soft HRM framework for improving the retention of construction professionals, which takes account of the factors causing staff turnover which emerged from the analysis.

Keywords: Career development, organisational culture, performance appraisal, soft HRM, staff retention.

## INTRODUCTION: STAFF RETENTION AS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY

It is becoming increasingly important for construction organisations to retain their professional employees in order to remain competitive. The incidence of inter-company mobility in construction is high in comparison with other industries (Young 1991; Druker and White 1996: 26). This is because construction professionals and managers have to move frequently to widen their experience and increase their salary levels (Ford 1997). Of all the flows in a manpower system, wastage is the most fundamental for construction companies strategic HR planning (Huang *et al* 1996), but there are now concerns that as the industry recovers from recession, staff turnover may increase as competition increases between different employers (Ford 1997).

Maintaining work force stability in contracting is particularly problematic, because of the industry's uncertain, geographically diverse nature (Hillebrandt and Cannon 1990). However, the need for companies to retain their professional staff seems set to become more crucial as they expand into new and diverse markets, and the demand for professionals and managers grows. Construction professionals are now more educated and sophisticated than in the past, and it is the better employees that will be lost to employers as the internal labour market becomes more competitive (Druker and

White 1996: 15). In a recent survey, 42% of construction professionals said that they were actively looking for new positions (Ford 1997).

Without an increase in labour resources, only companies offering a competitive salary package and career opportunities will be able to satisfy their labour requirements. Recent reports have suggested that skills shortages are already leading to increased salary levels (Cargill 1996; Knutt 1997b). However, increased remunerative costs lead to competitive labour markets which has inflationary effects on the cost of construction work (Agapiou *et al* 1995). Briscoe (1990) predicted that UK companies may start to lose projects to other countries if wage levels increase as a result of skills shortages, which may threaten the future growth of the UK industry. Thus, providing improved career development opportunities may be preferable to increasing salaries, and so only companies that develop pro-active and long-term approaches to employee development are likely to cope with the challenges that the internal labour market now presents (Cargill 1996).

At a wider level, it is also important that the construction sector as a whole can retain its managers and professionals. The cost of training construction professionals represents a considerable investment, and so the loss of such personnel has potentially serious long-term effects which are ultimately passed on to clients in the form of higher tender prices. Thus, wastage of construction managers and professionals contributes to the overall inefficiency of the industry, and adversely affects the UK industry's competitiveness in the face of global competition. Moreover, recent figures from the DoE (1997) have indicated that 151,000 managers and 43,000 professionals work in the industry, compared to 186,000 managers and 53,000 professionals in 1991. This represents a total fall of 45,000, and so the long predicted 'demographic trough' may be becoming a reality (Knutt 1997a; Ford 1997; Agapiou *et al* 1995). It is now essential that such concerns be elevated to the top of the industry's strategic agenda.

By gaining a better empirical understanding of careers, informed judgements can be made on how to develop HR policy to improve retention. However, in order to understand the influences on careers it is first necessary to understand the professional and organisational sub-cultural environment in which they work, together with the traits, beliefs and actions of employees. Career development can be seen as a function of the action of the individual and the structural and cultural environment under which they work (Evetts 1996). This study explores all three of these dimensions of careers.

## **HRM AND HRD IN CONSTRUCTION ORGANISATIONS**

Human resources management (HRM) and human resources development (HRD) can be seen as part of organisation theory, as policies designed to maximise organisational integration, employee commitment, flexibility and quality of work (Guest 1987). In most sectors, personnel management has been replaced by HRM as a strategic management process, as it offers long-term solutions to labour force planning problems, and competitive advantage for the organisation through its human resources. It relies upon a set of empirical and conceptual observations about the factors affecting organisational structure and the social behaviour of people in organisations, and provides a strategic approach towards acquiring, developing, managing, motivating and retaining employees (Storey 1992). HRD represents the developmental side of the HRM function, in improving career management and management development.

The HRM function is far more developed in some construction companies than others. However, if strategic involvement is taken as the factor differentiating personnel management and HRM (Storey 1992), few construction companies take a long-term view and adopt HRM policies (Druker *et al* 1992). Hancock *et al* (1996) found that, whilst large construction companies generally understood the concepts of HRD, only around half actually practice it. According to Mphake (1989), only 17% had management development policies. Even in large companies, the autonomy of operating divisions and project teams have led to HRM functions being devolved to line managers. The result is that HRM has been relegated to a second order function. Only 28% of HR managers occupy a board position compared to 54% in other private sector companies (Druker *et al* 1996).

In light of the industry's economic revival, Knutt (1997a) investigated the Institute of Personnel Development's advice on retaining employees. They suggested a series of recommendations to promote loyalty and motivation including: extended training schemes; performance management and career review systems; promotion of in-house staff; and flexible working arrangements. Thompson and Maybe (1994: 136) also suggested that effective career development policies increase the likelihood that the right people will be available to meet the changing HR requirements, and reduce frustration stemming from down-sizing and flattening of organisational hierarchies. Hence, career development is key to organisational performance and staff retention.

### **Hard and soft systems approaches to HRM**

Larger construction companies are beginning to rethink their approach towards strategic HRM as an integral part of the management of their business (Druker and White 1996: 14). Druker *et al* (1996) discussed two approaches towards HRM, defined by Guest (1987) as 'hard' and 'soft' systems. Organisations adopting hard models of HRM treat their human resources as any other factor of production, whose cost should be minimised, with the emphasis being on strategic business objectives (Formbrun *et al* 1984). In soft systems, employees are seen as adding value to the organisation, and as requiring careful management, training and development, and careful management of the organisational culture.

Druker *et al* (1996) contended that despite the applicability of soft HRM models to construction companies, they have retained a largely short-term approach to managing their human resources. This has occurred despite cutting back on personnel in the recession of the early 1990s which left companies with only key staff, ideal for the development of the 'softer' aspects of HRM. The alternative to soft models is to use extrinsic rewards to retain staff, and increasing salary levels has traditionally been used as a reactive retention strategy (Cargill 1996). However, this approach is ineffective in securing long-term retention (Knutt 1997a).

Clearly, organisations need to understand how careers develop, and the factors which determine development and lead to high staff turnover. This will involve gaining an understanding of career dynamics and the influences on the careers of their employees, as well as the strategies that they use to develop their careers. In this way, organisations can develop HR policies which are sympathetic to employee needs, and ensure that they meet their full potential within the scope of the opportunities available. These policies need to reflect the changing nature of construction and its professional roles and identities. As such, effective HRD may offer a panacea for the retention problems that the industry is currently experiencing.

## METHODOLOGY

Career theory is grounded in the work which charted the sociological change and onset of modern society (Sonnenfeld and Kotter 1982: 19). The majority of career development theories have been developed by psychologists, but more recently sociologists have focused on the antecedents to the attainment of status, including socio-economic factors as determinants of development (Brown and Brookes 1996). Within this new body of research there has been a paradigm shift towards the use of constructivist approaches which do not rely on assumptions regarding the actor's conceptualisation of their social world (Young *et al.* 1996). Contemporary approaches have grounded this work within an organisational context (Evetts 1996). Within this framework, to isolate vertical promotion as a singular factor in investigating careers oversimplifies a complex and dynamic process. This is because promotion structures, or career paths, are objectified in the experiences and perceptions of the individual, and how they react to them. Accordingly, recent development theories have begun to recognise the importance of individual values in the decision-making process, in recognition of the fact that people function holistically. Rather than examine careers as physical movement along occupational career ladders, such approaches focus on understanding how careers are managed by the actor (Evetts 1996).

In this study, the need to gain an insight into the ability of the individual to integrate into their professional and industrial sub-culture, necessitated the need for a methodology which allowed determinants relevant to the informants' careers to emerge from their frame of reference. As such, ethnographic interviews were used, in which the issues relevant to the study were allowed to emerge freely from the data, and theories developed to explain the emerging phenomena. These were systematically grounded within the original data. This approach is known as Grounded Theory, where the analysis results in the development of a set of inter-related theories to explain the phenomena under investigation (Dainty *et al.* 1997). A total of 82 construction professionals from five large contracting organisations took part in the study, representing all hierarchical levels, and with varying levels of experience. They were asked to describe their careers in their own terms, and to identify the key determinants which had led to their career progression, the factors which affected their retention both to their employer and to the industry as a whole. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using the qualitative analysis package NUDIST. Each of the emerging determinants were grouped under generic headings, and then related to each other using an axial coding paradigm model, which allows the researcher to link the emerging findings to provide explanations for the emerging phenomena (see Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The emerging determinants were divided into those which emerged from the structure of the industry and its organisations, and those which emerged as cultural factors. This approach established factors which determined or constrained career action. Finally, the strategies of the actor were explored to determine their effect in interacting with these factors. Following the analysis, recommendations were developed to mitigate the effect of the determinants causing poor retention within the companies. These were developed from suggestions from the informants, successful retention strategies from other sectors, and from discussions with the HRM staff from the participating companies. The resulting framework of recommendations was then built into an implementation framework. The resulting recommendations represent a

long-term soft HRM approach to managing career development which takes account of both organisational and individual needs.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

Careers are affected by a variety of variables including the individual's aptitude, interests, personality and family commitments, as well as economic factors and the process of change (Super 1957). All of these factors act in a synthesised and dynamic process, which continually adapts to reflect developments in the actor's circumstances, and the economic and social framework relating to the labour market that they work within. The structure, culture and action determinants of careers emerging from the interviews are discussed below.

### **Structural dimensions of careers**

All of the companies had developed flexible structures to accommodate varying economic conditions and HRM requirements. This had led to dynamic and complex structures which epitomised the 'adhocracy' style of organisation. These are characterised by changing titles, shifting responsibilities and a frequently changing internal shape (Mintzberg 1979). However, this structure had led to some employees becoming demoralised by regular changes to project structures and hierarchies, and was perceived as having impeded progression opportunities. One implication of the informal nature of HRM policy was that responsibility for staff development and appraisal had been largely devolved to line management. This had devalued HRD within the organisations, leaving all but graduate trainees to take sole responsibility for their own development. In four of the companies, performance appraisal systems were used to assess training needs and allocate places on courses. However, they gave little feedback on employees' relative performance and achievements, and left decisions to line management who had a vested interest in restricting their staff from undertaking formal training.

The informality of HRM policy within the organisations was also evident in the poor standard of communication. Site based employees relied upon the word-of-mouth translation of organisational policy. In particular, the rationale behind reducing hierarchical levels following the recession had not been explained to employees, and the resultant structures were viewed as offering little scope for promotion or development. This was ironic, as one of the benefits of reducing managerial levels should be an improvement in communication. However, poor communication had also led to a perception that the companies had no succession management policies, and that externally recruited staff were more likely to fill the limited middle management opportunities. This had resulted in low morale and increased staff turnover.

Rapid progression was seen as being reliant upon compliance with organisational edicts on working hours and commitment, which included a need for employees to be geographically flexible, and to prioritise work before their personal lives. Although not communicated as formal organisational policy, such doctrines were implicit within structural HRM processes such as staff allocation, which did not take account of the individual needs and preferences of their employees. As such, the structural conditions that the informants worked under were believed to have developed in a way which had deliberately maintained the existing culture and the work ethos of the companies. By devolving promotion and recruitment to middle and senior

management, staff were developed within the organisation with attitudes reflecting those of their superiors, and this maintained the informal nature of HRD.

### **Cultural dimensions of careers**

All of the companies had recruited ambitious high achieving graduates, particularly during the recession where companies had many applicants for each vacancy. This had led to a competitive work environment within which employees competed for the limited promotional opportunities available following the reduction in management levels within the organisations. Despite recent re-structuring of companies towards flatter networked typed structures, the informants continued to seek vertical promotion encouraged by the competitive workplace culture. Few saw benefit in lateral development within their organisation. As such, construction companies could be seen as a cultural system that simultaneously promoted competition and co-operation. Members co-operated to carry out tasks, whilst competing for a limited career openings. Interaction within such a system was complex and adversarial. Managers at various levels had retained control over certain aspects of the cultural environment. At each level they promoted and rewarded managers with similar attitudes to themselves to maintain existing sub-cultures. Some middle managers, accused by their subordinates as having reached career plateaux, were believed to see new entrants as potential threats to their own careers. As such they restricted the development of their subordinates.

Continuing the concept of the participating organisations reflecting the 'adhocracy' structure, McDonald and Gandz (1992) suggested an ideological culture to support such structural conditions. Organisations exhibiting 'adhocracy' structures tend to show signs of authority being held on a basis of charisma and power wielded by reference to commonly held values. The culture of these companies is seen as adaptable, autonomous and creative, with employee compliance relying upon their commitment to a set of organisational values. Prominent amongst these values is the work ethic which defines the commitment, dedication and approach to work. Within the companies investigated, conforming to behavioural expectations, and the cultural images and symbols promoted by the organisation was seen as essential to career development. Accordingly, employees arrived early, worked late and sacrificed their holiday entitlement and personal lives for their employer.

Whilst it is convenient to see organisations as single homogenous cultures, this is rarely the case, as large companies contain several identifiable sub-cultures (Brown 1995: 26). Sub-cultures could be seen to exist at several distinct levels within the organisations studied: at a macro level in terms of the overall organisation; at a meso level in terms of operating culture of the divisional companies; and at a micro level in terms of individual project teams. At each of the latter two levels, the sub-cultural environment could be seen to reinforce certain aspects of the wider organisation, but contradict others. At the divisional level, organisational differences in sub-culture were most relevant. Each division had distinct identities, some of which appeared to contradict the aspirations and philosophy of their parent companies. Employees were expected to reflect the attitudes of their divisional senior management, towards whom organisational loyalty was directed. By the same token, senior divisional management deliberately retained staff by preventing intra-organisational mobility in an attempt to retain those who maintained their divisional sub-culture, regardless of the developmental needs of these employees. Structural changes to improve operating efficiency and meet individual staff training needs had not significantly effected the

culture of this operating environment, as employees quickly conformed to the expectations of existing divisional cultures in order to progress their careers.

### **Action dimensions of careers and personal resolutions**

Different career strategies were evident from employees with different levels of experience. In their early career stages (under 30 yrs), the informants envisaged rapid development through a transient life-style working within national divisions. This gave them the opportunity of gaining valuable experience on larger and more prestigious projects, during which time they were unlikely to be restricted by family and other personal commitments. For this group, HRM support for their career development was effective, and they tended to develop on the pre-defined progression routes which were allocated for them. The existence of such schemes secured the retention of the majority of junior managers and professionals.

Active organisational career support declined in proportion to the experience of the informants. Hence, during their mid-career stages (age 30 - 40), career strategies became increasingly significant. The competitive culture within the participating organisations had led many managers to seek vertical advancement, and so this group were the most difficult to retain, and exhibited the highest number of inter company transitions. Remuneration and promotional opportunities were seen as increasingly important, and so there were also marked changes in the strategies advocated. Priorities were re-focused towards ensuring that personal needs were met within the scope of work that the organisation had at the time, or through seeking opportunities in other organisations. This group relied upon networks of contacts to secure the divisional and project placements required, and in seeking positions within other companies. As such, they used the informal nature of HRD to further their careers.

Those in the maturing stage of their careers (41+) tended to have re-focused their career priorities. This group had secured geographical stability by reaching office based positions, and now generally sought to broaden their experience, to work on innovative or exciting projects, or to secure job and/or geographical stability. For this group, there appeared to be a comfort factor amongst informants, in that they preferred to work within cultures, systems and procedures with which they had developed an in-depth understanding over many years. Hence, this group were the easiest of the three to retain.

Of particular concern, however, was the number of informants who had long-term strategies to leave the industry. Over half of the informants perceived that limited moves to supporting functions or consultancy offered greater geographical stability. However, wastage of such employees was unnecessary, as some based in national divisions wished to move to regional divisions and vice-versa. Thus, whilst there was a conflict between individual needs and the perceived priorities of their organisation, this was not seen to be conflict between the overall needs of the organisation, if HR allocation was handled more effectively.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS: A SOFT HRM APPROACH**

The findings indicated that organisations need to be proactive in managing their employees career development, and in ensuring that the needs of the individual are optimised with the needs of the organisation. Such an approach may be possible through the use of a soft HRM approach which can be used both to manage HRD, and to mitigate the cultural factors currently leading to high staff turnover. Organisations can control and manipulate career development through the career management

process. This is where the progression dynamics of employees are managed to ensure that they reach their potential within an assessment of organisational needs. This ensures a satisfactory career for the employee, optimum use of the human resources at the disposal of the organisation, and employees who match the needs of the business (Thompson and Maybe 1994: 129).

Schein (1992) suggested that modern organisations have changing needs which will not necessarily be compatible with the needs of the individual. He suggested that organisations that operate in dynamic environments (such as construction) will need to improve the process of matching work to people, but that this could only occur through the individual being honest about their own career priorities to those responsible for personnel allocation. As such, there must be a transparent policy of employee appraisal where there exists a mutual trust between the employee and the assessor. In light of the findings of this study, line management alone are unlikely to promote such relationships, and so there must be HRM involvement if it is to succeed.

Whilst addressing the structural determinants of careers is relatively simple through policy measures, mitigating cultural variables which are entwined within the fabric of the organisations is more problematic. However, most HR managers now claim that organisational culture is their 'territory', and this is reflected in the literature where they have evolved together through a close conceptual relationship (Brown 1995: 130). HR managers can manipulate culture through recruitment (control over the types of people that gain entry to the organisation); promotions (control over who reaches positions of influence within the organisation); induction and socialisation (a strong influence over the social dynamics within the organisation); codes of practice/mission statements; and reward/appraisal systems. Of these methods, the performance appraisal system offers the greatest potential for creating the required change, as they can be used to induce behavioural change through the manipulation of performance goals.

According to Brown (1995), if the appraisal system measures traits (intelligence, communication skills and capacity to cope with change), then the company will be seen to value the personal strengths that employees bring to the organisation. If it measures work behaviour, the company will be seen to value what people have done, leading to a culture which places value on conforming to a set of organisational rules. If the system seeks to examine results (outputs), the company will be seen as promoting productivity. Thus, each of these methods promotes a different cultural route towards an organisation's business objectives. In this study the systems currently used measured the behaviour of their personnel, and so influenced their employees to act in a certain way. Thus, by adapting them to take account of the individual traits of the employees, this may bring about a cultural change so that individual strengths are valued, which should have positive effects in the retention of managers and professionals.

The performance appraisal system must assess the priorities of employees in terms of geographical location and work type. In effect, the employee would enter a training agreement which stated the employee's development priorities in their own terms. As a feedback mechanism, the terms of the agreement would be returned in a form which demonstrates that their needs are being reconciled against available opportunities within the organisation. An independent arbiter would monitor the appraisal system to promote consistency in appraisals and assist in relating future development objectives to the individual's career development plan. Independent careers advice



could be provided by mentors, external to the appraisal process, who would support the employee by offering informal assistance in setting development goals.

## CONCLUSIONS

The retention of professional and managerial staff within construction companies presents considerable difficulties for large contracting organisations, but must be seen as a strategic priority if UK companies are to remain competitive in the future. Fundamental to retention is ensuring satisfactory career opportunities. However, current approaches undervalue the HRM function, and have led to the use of approaches to HRD which do not take account of individual needs. Structural shortcomings in the approach of companies in managing HRD can be seen to have been intensified by sub-cultures where only those who subscribe to the existing work ethos progress. This has led to de-motivation and high staff turnover.

Whilst the cultural aspects of HRM may be difficult to change, a soft HRM strategy can promote an approach which takes a long-term perspective of HRD, and manipulates the organisational culture to value the contribution of employees. The performance appraisal system provides a suitable implementation mechanism for such an approach, as well as addressing the core structural issues emerging from this study. Such an approach has the advantage of managing career development, whilst simultaneously manipulating organisational culture in a way which improves the retention of professional and managerial employees.

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