EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND THE RECONCILIATION OF WORK AND FAMILY WITHIN THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

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In 1996 the Latham Working Group Eight (WG8) report criticized the construction industry for its poor equal opportunities record. Since the publication of the report, a significant amount of research has been conducted within the industry on equal opportunities. Most of this work has concentrated on women, and little attention has been paid to the circumstances of other under-represented groups such as ethnic minorities, or the issues affecting disabled workers, both employed and seeking work within the industry. Furthermore, the issue of creating balance and harmony between employees' work and home life (reconciliation of work and family) has also been relatively ignored. This paper discusses the meaning of the terms "equal opportunities" and "reconciliation of work and family" and the ways in which the industry could benefit from improvements in their implementation. The paper also discusses the findings of preliminary research by the authors, which was undertaken to establish the awareness and knowledge of, the legislation and directives which promote equality of opportunity and the reconciliation of work and family; and the attitudes towards their implementation amongst a sample of construction organizations. The preliminary study has found that, although most of those sampled were aware of both the legislation concerned with and the concepts of equal opportunities and family-friendliness, few of the organizations indicated that they implemented polices which would actively promote either issue. Many respondents also indicated that the nature and culture of the industry prevented it from becoming more equal and family friendly. The paper concludes by setting out an agenda for further research in this field.

Keywords: equal opportunities, family friendly.

INTRODUCTION

This research is concerned with two areas of human resource management. The first being equality of opportunity, for which the construction industry has come under much criticism, the second is concerned with the reconciliation of work and family for construction employees, an area which has been relatively ignored by construction.

The paper first discusses some of the relevant literature relating to equal opportunities (EO) and the reconciliation of work and family. The research objectives are also discussed. The second section discusses the findings of a preliminary study undertaken by the authors. The final section introduces the methodology for the main research.

Equal opportunities literature
In its simplest form equal opportunities 'rests on the premise of not acting or treating anyone in a blatantly discriminatory manner' (Bagilhole 1997: 31). Collins (1992: 4)

stated that 'equal opportunities mean treating everyone fairly on the basis of individual need'. In the sphere of employment this includes fair selection, recruitment and promotion of staff and the creation of a working environment free from harassment. The concept of equal opportunities is supported by an array of equalities legislation which dates from 1944 to the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act.

Since the publication of the Latham Working Group Eight Report (1996) (which highlighted the unsatisfactory situation of women within the construction industry), some research has been conducted which tackles the issue of equal opportunities. Most of this work has concentrated on the situation of women. Women are under-represented within the industry, accounting for 44% of the nation's total workforce, but only 10% of construction workers (Office for National Statistics1997). Although there was a small increase from 8% in 1981 to 12% in 1990, women remain heavily segregated into the traditionally female occupations such as clerical and secretarial work within the industry (Bowker 1990). Gale (1994) found a number of factors which affected the recruitment and retention of women within the construction industry. These included the poor public image of the industry and the attitudes of careers advisers (whom Gale refers to as 'Gatekeepers') towards the recruitment of women into the industry. According to Gale, females perceived the UK construction industry as having a low-level image, comparable with a cottage industry, and that careers advisers and teachers act as gatekeepers preventing women embarking on careers within the construction industry.

In addition to the low level of recruitment of women, the industry also has problems in retaining its female employees. Dainty *et al.* (1999) stated that although there has been an increase in the number of women entrants into the construction industry, a parallel growth in the turnover and wastage of female employees has also occurred. Dainty found that male and female construction professionals experienced disparate career progression rates. This disparity stemmed from the incompatibility of women's societal roles, a sub-culture which maintains and supports exclusionary and discriminatory work environment and the differing effect of structural organizational factors which shape career development. Dainty further suggested that to enjoy a successful career within the construction industry, an acceptance of long working hours, geographical instability and the subordination of domestic commitments was required.

Similarly research which has been undertaken regarding the issue of ethnic minorities within the construction industry also indicated that the industry has a poor image among some ethnic minority groups (Construction Industry Training Board 1988). More recent research indicates that many Black people felt that it would be difficult to get a job in what they considered to be a white dominated industry (Barrick 1999).

During 1995, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) undertook research into the practices of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), which found that ethnic minority groups were greatly under-represented within the construction industry. According to the 1991 census, 8% of 16-17 years old in Britain were from ethnic minority groups but only 1.1% of the CITB's trainees in the same years were from these groups. The CRE concluded that the methods used to find placements for trainees adversely affected the ethnic minority candidates and that indirect discrimination was occurring as a result of their use. These methods included 'do-it yourself' whereby the candidates themselves found their own placements. 'Kith and kin' which involved candidates using family connections to obtain placement and 'local residence requirements' where employers laid down rules that candidates must live within a

certain radius of the work place also limited the opportunities for ethnic minority recruits. A more recent survey (Commissioned by the CITB) undertaken by the University of Holloway indicated that 1.9% of the construction workforce was made up of ethnic minorities even though three million lived in Britain (Wood 1999).

Waldinger (1995) stated that in the construction industry, the extent to which economic behaviour is embedded in ongoing social relations impedes access into the industry by outsiders, and in particular, ethnic minorities. The informality of the industry creates natural barriers to outsider groups and thwarts public policies designed to counter discrimination (Leonard 1990). Although there is no literature on the issues affecting the career progressions of ethnic minorities in the construction industry, research into the factors affecting black and Asian workers within the construction industry indicated that they were rarely seen in supervisory or professional roles and more likely to be found in labouring jobs (Wood 1999). Moreover, only a small share of construction investment was finding its way to ethnic minority firms (Harrison 1995).

The issues affecting disabled workers, both employed and seeking work, is also an neglected area. What literature there is suggests that some employment agencies did not believe that disabled people were suited for certain professions in the industry, such as surveying. The paper concluded that many misconceptions exist around the suitability of disabled people for work in the construction industry (Mathiason 1995).

Literature on reconciliation of work and family
The terms 'reconciliation of work and family' and 'family friendliness' are synonymous. The terms can be seen as an extension of EO, with particular emphasis on the family, acknowledging that home and work life are interconnected. 'Work/family' policies are those which enable employees to balance work and family responsibilities, and include providing flexible hours, addressing child-care needs and making supervisors more supportive of employees' home commitments. A family-friendly culture can involve the adoption of: flexible working hours; help with child-care issues; and supportive supervisors (Sommars 1997).

Family-friendly policies enable employees to balance work and family responsibilities. Many organizations have already begun to adopt such policies and practices . These include parental leave, job-sharing, flexi-time and child-care provision. Benefits from the implementation of such policies within other industries have included reduced absenteeism, higher productivity and increased staff retention. There are also public relations issues: to be seen as a caring employer can increase attractiveness to the available labour force and within the organization's market (Berry-Lound 1990).

It could be argued that as women are responsible for most of the parenting in the UK (Court and Moralee 1995) and that as they only make up 10% of the construction workforce, there is no point in responding to their needs. Due to the inflexibility of the industry (Bowker 1990, Bolton 1995) this could be the attitude the industry has adopted. However, research indicates that although the vast majority of carers are women, men are increasingly becoming involved in the care of children because of gradually changing attitudes to male and female roles, changing family circumstances, the increased divorce rate and growing numbers of single parent families' circumstances (Berry-Lound 1990). The next generation of fathers - the teenagers of today - are more willing to think flexibly about gender roles (Moss 1995). Men are also increasingly valuing their family roles and wishing to be actively involved in parenting (O'Brien 1992, Russell, James and Watson 1988). However, many men are

being prevented from playing more active roles in the parenting of their children because of long working hours. Research conducted by the EOC (Bowker 1997) indicated that employed fathers worked on average 20 hours a week more than employed mothers, and that the working week of fathers is on average 4 hours longer that childless men.

The workplace still functions on a system designed for men with the values of the 1950s (Johnson 1997). This system involves long working hours, including early starts and late finishing times, the frequent need to exercise mobility and no appreciation by employer of family or outside commitments.

Commitment to family is commonly seen as a lack of commitment to the organization. However, in reality, quite the reverse is true, because organizations which are prepared to be more flexible and often supportive towards their workers are, more often than not, rewarded with greater commitment and increased productivity (Bowker 1997).

If there are benefits to be had from implementing family polices which reconcile the differences between work and home, not only for employees but employers too, why has the industry not responded positively? The answer seems to lie within the embedded practices and culture of the industry. As already mentioned, work in the UK is mainly based on what is described as the 'male model' of work. If this is true in the case of most industries, then it is especially true in the case of construction. The construction industry has been described as a particularly masculine and conflictual industry (Waldinger 1995).

In addition, the industry seems generally old-fashioned (Scott *et al.* 1997). This inability to adapt to modern practices and the continued use of informal practices prevents the industry from implementing benefits which employees from other industries have begun to take for granted.

However, now that the UK has signed the European Social Chapter, the industry may be forced to change. Existing legislation is rather passive. Employers, although urged through various codes of practice to implement and promote equality of opportunity, are not expected to do anything in response. Employers may only be affected by the legislation if a complaint is made against them. However, the new directives contains a more proactive approach. The most recent directive to affect UK employers is the Working Time Directive (WTD). This requires employers not only to keep a record of all hours worked by employees, but if the employee agrees to work more than 48 hours a week then an agreement must be drawn up and signed by the employee.

Another directive which is set to affect the UK is the Parental Leave Directive (PLD). Although the specific details of this directive have yet to be finalized, it has been suggested that male and female employees will be entitled to three months unpaid leave on the birth or adoption of a child. Legislation has to be put in place in the UK by 1999 to support this Directive. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the construction industry is making any changes in preparation for this new legislation.

Both the Working Time Directive and the Parental Leave Directive have been designed to help employees reconcile their home and work lives. Unlike the existing UK employment legislation which promotes equality of opportunity, the directives call for employers to take a more proactive rather than a reactive approach to the issues they cover. If the construction industry does not start to modernize its work practices, it may find itself lagging behind other industries. Subsequently, the industry

may continue to experience difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff. The failure to retain staff within the UK construction industry will undoubtedly affect costs. It has recently been suggested that within the construction industry, skill shortages are already leading to increased salary levels (Cargill 1996). This increase in labour costs and the costs of retraining new recruits may affect the UK construction industry's competitiveness in world markets, thus affecting the economic prosperity of the UK industry.

There are many issues requiring research relating to the subject of the reconciliation of work and family and equal opportunities within the construction industry. The research described in this paper concentrates on providing insights in to the perception and practices of construction firms throughout the construction process, in relation to the implementation of policies which affect the provision of equality of opportunity and the reconciliation of work and family within the construction industry. The research also seeks to establish the level of awareness within the industry of the legislation which exists to promote the two concepts. In addition to this, the research will examine the way in which the home lives of construction employees are affected by the working practices of the construction industry.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To establish further the awareness of equal opportunities and family friendly legislation/directives amongst construction firms operating within the construction process

2. Identify any practices being undertaken within the construction process which may affect equality of opportunity or the reconciliation of work and family within the construction industry.

3. To identify further the attitudes and opinions of those involved in the construction process towards the implementation of policies which promote equality of opportunity and that help workers to balance work and family commitments.

4. Identify the effects working within the construction industry has on employees and their home life.

5. To use the information elicited from the above to establish guidelines for construction firms on the implementation of policies which promote equal opportunities and the reconciliation of work and family.

The research undertaken by the authors relating to these two topics has been divided into two stages. The first was a preliminary study undertaken with a sample of construction firms from the Civil Engineering Contractors File 1998. The second and main part of the research is being undertaken with specific construction projects and investigates the same issues through the construction process. From client thorough to labour only sub-contractors.

PRELIMINARY STUDY: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

The construction industry is widespread and consists of many different professions and trades, so it would have been impossible to survey all of them. Therefore, for this stage of the research, the purposive method of sampling was decided to be the most appropriate technique. This type of sampling technique is appropriate if the purpose of

the research is to study a small subset of a larger population in which many members of the subset are easily identified but the enumeration of all of them would be nearly impossible (Babbie 1990). In this sampling technique, the researchers purposely choose subjects who, in their opinion, are thought to be relevant to the research topic (Sarantakos 1993). In the case of this research, the target population was a list of construction contractors taken from the Civil Engineering Contractors File 1998. This was used as it was easily accessed, and provided not only names and addresses of contacts but telephone numbers as well. It was considered that for the purposes of the preliminary research this would make an ideal sampling frame from which to draw respondents.

Survey approach

The survey has been defined as a methodological technique that requires the systematic collection of data from populations or samples through the use of the interview or the self-administered questionnaire (Denzin 1978). The most commonly used surveys are questionnaires and interviews (Fink and Kosecoff 1985). For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was administered over the telephone. Telephone interviews are often employed when the interviews are simple, brief, when quick and inexpensive results are sought and when face-to-face interviews are not required (Sarantakos 1993). The main advantages of telephone interviewing over other methods of data collection are that it produces quick results, allows more open communication (since the respondents are not confronted with the interviewer), reduces bias in that factors such as race, ethnicity and appearance and age do not influence the respondents and that it is relatively economic. However, there are disadvantages associated with the method, such as a high refusal rate and the fact that it is not possible for the interviewer to control the interview completely. A postal questionnaire was originally considered for this part of the research, however the disadvantages associated with their use, in particular an anticipated low response rate, dissuaded the researcher from its use. In addition to the low response rate associated with postal questionnaires, the poor response and subsequent abandonment or the method by Dainty (1998) further influenced the decision not to use the method, but to administer the questionnaire over the telephone instead.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised open and closed questions. In addition to these, there were three questions which consisted of attitudinal statements on one of the surveys topics. The responses to these questions were answered on an attitudinal scale (Likert Scale) ranging from one extreme of favourableness to another (Naoum,1998).

Procedure

Once the questionnaire had been piloted and its content finalized, those people involved with and responsible for personnel issues within the organizations were sent letters explaining the research and informing them that they would be approached to take part in a telephone interview. Approximately three days after the letters were sent, the companies were contacted by telephone to conduct interviews.

STAGE ONE SURVEY FINDINGS

Of the 60 organizations contacted, 23 (39%) agreed to take part in the telephone interviews. This response was considered to be acceptable and higher than that which would have been elicited from a postal questionnaire.

General characteristics
Of the 23 organizations who took part in the research, 20 organizations described themselves as main contractors, two stated that they worked both as main contractors and sub-contractors and one stated that it was a consultancy company. All of the organizations who took part had over 101 employees.

Summary of preliminary research findings
Most (91%) respondents felt that the existing legislation designed to promote equality of opportunity and family friendliness in the work place had effected their organizations in some way. In the main, companies indicated that they had been affected by the WTD. Most respondents commented that the WTD, in particular had resulted in an increase in administration and costs within their organizations. Respondents blamed these increases on the directives requirements to keep records of all hours worked by employers and the process of drawing up opt out clauses for employees to sign (to opt out of 48 hour week). Those respondents who commented on the Parental Leave Directive felt that as far as their organizations were concerned it was too early to tell what the affect would be.

One respondent did comment that:

> *I anticipate it won't have much effect, because I understand that the parental leave means husbands can take unpaid leave, knowing the nature of them a lot will say 'no, I can't afford to take time off I want the money coming in'.*

With regards to the Social Chapter in general most (96%) organizations were aware that the UK had now signed the Chapter, All respondents felt that employees would benefit from signing the Chapter in some way. Many respondents felt that the benefits which would be experienced by employees would be few, and that employers would have to bear the cost for these benefits. Some respondents felt that employees would benefit from more protection in the work place, and that signing the Chapter would enable employees to enjoy some of the benefits experienced by their European counterparts.

The Race Relations Act (RDA), Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) and the Disability Discrimination Act DDA seemed to have had little to no effect on the respondents organizations. Although companies were making arrangements to comply with the WTD, none mentioned that they had taken any initiatives to promote either the SDA, RRA or DDA codes of practice.

With regards to the DDA, several respondents erroneously stated that because of the type of work i.e. construction undertaken within their organizations they were not be affected by it.

One respondent stated: *It (DDA 1995) doesn't affect us as the type of work prohibits disabled men working on actual sites.*

With regard to the equality legislation in general one respondent concluded: *I don't think if you took someone who was in construction ten years ago they would feel that much out of place. I think [legislation] has affected the industry but equally I don't think it has touched site practices as one might have hoped or expected.*

On a more positive front, only one organization stated that they did not have a written equal opportunities policy, however they did have an equal opportunities statement. The reasons respondents gave for having an equal opportunities policy ranged from

protecting employees to a requirement for tendering for work. Respondents wanted to be seen to be good employers and believed that having an equal opportunities policy helped to demonstrate this. However, only one respondent highlighted a business reason for having such a policy.

With regard to 'family-friendliness', although most employers were aware of the concept few had taken any steps to become more family friendly, despite the fact that many acknowledged that implementing such policies could benefit both employers and employees. Nearly all (95%) respondents stated that they did not believe that the construction industry was a family-friendly employer. Those respondents who did not believe the industry was a family-friendly employer generally felt that the nature and the demands of the construction industry prevented it from being so.

Conclusions of preliminary study

The preliminary findings have helped to develop the research questions. Although the sample was relatively small and cannot be claimed to be representative, it has still provided a useful insight into a previously un-researched topic.

The preliminary study has found that, although most of the sample were aware of both the legislation concerned with and the concepts of equal opportunities and family-friendliness, few of the organizations indicated that they implemented polices which would actively promote either issue. Many respondents also indicated that the nature and culture of the industry prevented it from becoming more equal and family friendly. Indicating the transient nature of the industry as a prevailing factor against the reconciliation of work and family for construction employees.

MAIN RESEARCH

It is clear from both the existing literature and the empirical work conducted by the candidate that the reconciliation of work and family within the UK construction industry is an area which has previously been un-researched. Furthermore, it is clear that the issue of equal opportunities within the construction (although it has received some attention in the past) also need further investigation.

The continuing research will investigate further the issue of reconciliation of work and the family and equality of opportunity within the UK construction industry. This work will concentrate on the construction process from client through to labour-only sub-contractor, examining how the practices and policies undertaken at one stage of the process may have an effect on another.

Methodology: main study

After identifying a suitable construction project, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires will be undertaken with personnel officers, contract managers and employees throughout the construction process from client to labour -only sub-contractors. As the research is also concerned with the affect working within the construction industry has on family life, the families of the construction employees taking part in the research will also be sent a questionnaire. This questionnaire will elicit information on the experience of being the partner of a construction worker.
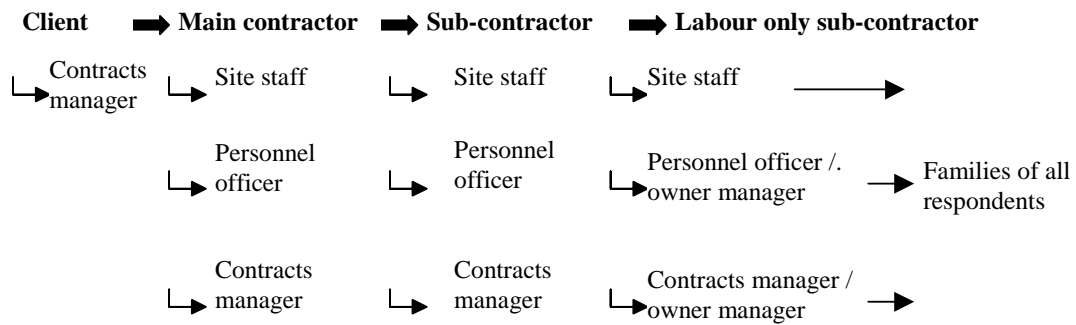
Client ➡ Main contractor ➡ Sub-contractor ➡ Labour only sub-contractor

Contracts manager ↳ | Site staff ↳ | Site staff ↳ | Site staff ↳ | ⟶

| Personnel officer ↳ | Personnel officer ↳ | Personnel officer /. owner manager ↳ | ⟶ Families of all respondents

| Contracts manager ↳ | Contracts manager ↳ | Contracts manager / owner manager ↳ | ⟶

Figure 1: Construction process

Additional documentation will also be requested from personnel officers and contracts managers, this documentation is to include copies of equal opportunities policies and any workforce data collected as a result of ethnic and gender monitoring.

Dissemination of research findings
Information collected from the research will be used to draw up guidelines, in partnership with construction industry human resource managers, for construction firms on the implementation of work life policies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The overall conclusions are that although there is a lot of work to be done on the issues of equal opportunity and family-friendliness within the construction industry, there was a clear resistance to change. This is going to be difficult to overcome.

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