THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'FAMILY FRIENDLY' EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES AND THE WELL-BEING AND SATISFACTION OF WHITE COLLAR EMPLOYEES IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY.

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The construction industry is a demanding work environment. Work hours in construction are long and sometimes irregular. Research suggests that employees' participation in work, reflected in work hours, is negatively related to family participation and positively related to divorce rate (Aldous et al 1979). Irregularity of work hours has been identified as the most important variable affecting low marital quality among shift workers (White and Keith 1990). Low profit margins, time and budget constraints and the adversarial nature of the industry place construction industry participants under extreme pressure. The industry is project-based and job security may be lower than in repetitive process industries since continued employment is conditional on successful tendering for new projects in a highly competitive environment. Previous research has found job insecurity to be negatively related to marital and family functioning (Larson et al 1994). Continued employment may require frequent relocation. Given the increasing number of dual career couples (Kamerman and Kahn 1981), commuter marriages are not uncommon. People engaged in commuter marriages have reported significantly less satisfaction with partner and family life than people in single residence families or relationships (Bunker et al 1992). Research is under way to investigate the extent to which male and female white collar construction industry employees in Australia experience conflict between their work and their family life. The relationship between employees' work practices and their perceived quality of work and family life is being investigated. The impact of job demands on psychological distress is also being explored. The rationale for this research and the methodology, including scales to be used in measurement of independent and dependent variables, are presented. Options for making the construction industry a more 'family-friendly' work environment are considered.

Keywords: employment, family, human resource management.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of job demands on the family functioning and well-being of people employed in the construction industry is not well understood. Research is currently taking place in Australia to investigate a sample of construction industry professionals' experiences of work and family life. The rationale for this research and the methods being employed are presented below. It is hoped the research will provide a better understanding of work and family issues in the construction industry and identify practical recommendations as to how construction firms can provide a productive workplace that is supportive of employees' family lives.

ISSUES IN THE WORK AND FAMILY INTERFACE

Kanter (1977) suggests that the fate of both men and women is inextricably bound up with workplace structures and processes. Research has demonstrated that workers' occupational contexts influence parenting behaviour (Grimm-Thomas and Perry-Jenkins 1994), the level of perceived conflict between work and family (O'Neil and Greenberger 1994) and marital quality (Hughes et al 1992). Little research has been conducted on the availability or impact of family friendly work practices in Australian workplaces and no research has addressed this topic in the construction industry. The construction industry is a demanding work environment. Work hours in construction are long and sometimes irregular. Research suggests that men's participation in work, reflected in work hours, is negatively related to family participation and positively related to divorce rate (Aldous et al 1979). Irregularity of work hours has been identified as the most important variable affecting low marital quality among shift workers (White and Keith 1990). Low profit margins, time and budget constraints and the adversarial nature of the industry place construction industry participants under extreme pressure. The industry is project-based and job security may be lower than in repetitive process industries since continued employment is conditional on successful tendering for new projects in a highly competitive environment. Previous research has found job insecurity to be negatively related to marital and family functioning (Larson et al 1994). Continued employment may require frequent relocation. Given the increasing number of dual career couples (Kamerman and Kahn 1981), commuter marriages are not uncommon. People engaged in commuter marriages have reported significantly less satisfaction with partner and family life than people in single residence families or relationships (Bunker et al 1992).

WHY SHOULD CONSTRUCTION FIRMS CARE ABOUT WORKERS' FAMILIES?

Arguments for providing a workplace that is supportive of workers' family lives are numerous. They include:

Social policy commitments

In 1990, Australia ratified ILO Convention 156. This obliges Australia to aim to enable people engaged in work with family responsibilities to work without being subject to discrimination and without conflict between work and family (Cass 1993). Depite this commitment, Cass (1993) asserts that in some aspects, such as maternity or parental leave, Australian policy and practice lags behind that of other OECD countries.

Mental health of participants

Research suggests that the quality of family and marital life moderates the impact of job role quality on psychological distress (Barnett *et al* 1992). Thus, workers with positive subjective experiences of family and marital life are less likely to suffer mental health problems as a result of work-related stress. Providing a work environment that is supportive of workers' family roles can therefore help to alleviate work-related mental health problems.

Organisational performance

Both men and women have been found to experience home-to-work 'spillover' effects, whereby subjective experiences in one context impact upon performance in the other arena (Barnett 1994, Eckenrode and Gore 1990). The impact of home events on behaviour in the workplace has implications for organisational performance.

Research suggests that the implementation of family-friendly work policies and practices lead to enhanced organisational efficiency, morale and productivity (Cass 1993, Butruille 1990, Fernandez 1986; Baden and Friedman 1981).

Changing workforce characteristics

Dual-income couples are increasing in number (Paden and Buehler 1995). With this change, traditional management theory, based upon homogeneity of workforce, is becoming less relevant and there is a need to manage diversity (Bruce and Reed 1994). Given these changes, the separation of work and family is no longer tenable (Kamerman and Kahn 1981) and family-friendly work practices are increasingly valued and used by men as well as women (Pleck 1993, Butruille 1990; Fernandez 1986).

Equity

Women are under-represented among construction industry professionals (Court and Moralee 1995, Agapiou *et al* 1995). Increasing the numbers of professional women in the construction industry is consistent with policies on equal opportunity but is also recognized to be an important facilitating factor in changing the construction industry's traditional adversarial culture (Court and Moralee 1995). Furthermore, there is evidence that the construction industry will need to recruit more women if its future labour demands are to be met (Agapiou *et al* 1995). Research suggests that, regardless of employment status, women perform two to three times more household work than their partners (Demo and Acock 1993). Therefore it is likely that women will be more likely to remain in employment that is supportive of their family responsibilities.

Requirements of legislation

Laws exist at the federal level and in most Australian States and territories which impose requirements on employers in respect of the family responsibilities of employees. Such laws fall under the categories of industrial relations laws, anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action laws (Napoli 1994). They present a compelling reason for organisations to address the concerns of employees with family responsibilities.

Gap in the Body of Research

Despite the intuitive appeal of 'family-friendly' policies and programmes, there is little evidence that they have their intended effects of being supportive of workers in their family roles or enable employers to compete more effectively for skilled workers (Crouter and Manke 1994). In particular, these issues have yet to be explored in the Australian construction industry context.

The Australian research

Research is under way to assess the need for family friendly policies by Australian white collar construction industry employees. Information sought will cover three broad areas. Firstly, the demographic characteristics of employees eg average age of employees, how many children employees have, whether there are single parents etc will be ascertained. Secondly, a number of variables will be measured to determine the relationship between 'family friendly' workplace practices and the well-being and satisfaction of white collar employees of Australian construction firms. Finally the research will determine what family-friendly policies employees are currently using, whether they are satisfied with services available to them and what additional family friendly initiatives they would use if available.

METHODOLOGY

The research utilises a two-stage approach. In the first stage data will be collected using a self-administered questionnaire. In the second stage, follow-up interviews will be held with a sample of respondents.

Questionnaire survey

Purposeful sampling has been used to identify construction firms suitable for study. Criteria include the size of the firms. Firms at the larger end of the construction industry were targeted for involvement since these firms are more likely to have formal family-friendly work policies in place (MacDermid *et al* 1994). According to ABS Business Register data, only 12 businesses classified as General Construction (ANZSIC code 41) employ 500 or more employees (ABS 1997). These firms were identified and their involvement has been sought. Stratified random sampling is being used within firms to identify individuals to whom questionnaires will be sent. Disproportionate samples assist in focusing on sub-groups of particular interest (Neuman 1994). Since women are a sub-category of employees that is of particular interest in the study, the proportion of women included in the sample will be greater than their proportion of the total workforce.

Dependent variables being measured include quality of working life, relationship life and family life, availability of time for family, job-family conflict and psychological distress. Role quality is being measured using scales developed and used by Barnett *et al* (1992) to identify rewarding and distressing characteristics of roles as spouse, parent and worker. These scales ask participants to rate the degree to which they find aspects of their family and working lives a reward or a concern. Reward and concern items are each rated on a scale from one (not much at all) to four (extremely). For example, reward items for relationship with partner include: having a partner who is doing (his/her) fair share at home; your partner's appreciating you; socialising as a couple; good communication; and enjoying the same activities. Concern items for relationship with partner include: lack of physical affection; arguing or fighting; your partner being too self-absorbed; having to do more than your fair share; and your partner not earning enough.

Job-family conflict is being measured using the Job-Family Role Strain scale developed by Bohen and Viveros-Long (1981). This scale requires respondents to rate the extent to which they experience certain feelings from one (always) to five (never). Items include: I wish I had more time for the family; I feel physically drained when I get home from work; My job keeps me away from my family too much; and My time off from work does not match other family members' schedules well.

Availability of time for family is being measured using Bohen and Viveros-Long's Job-Family Management Scale (Bohen and Viveros-Long 1981). This scale asks participants to rate how easy or difficult it is for them to arrange their time to perform various tasks. Tasks are rated on a scale of one (very easy) to five (very difficult). They include: To go shopping eg groceries, clothes, chemist; To take care of your household chores; To participate in community activities; To have meals with your family; and To take your children to healthcare appointments.

Psychological distress is being measured using the Anxiety and Depression subscales of an instrument developed by Derogatis (1975). This comprises twenty statements describing how people feel about themselves. Participants are asked to rate how often they have felt that way in the past week from one (rarely or none of the time) to four

(most or all of the time). Items include: I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing; My sleep was restless; I could not get 'going'; I did not feel like eating; I felt that people dislike me; and I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.

The independent variable, the availability of family-friendly work practices is being measured using the Work Conditions Scale utilised by MacDermid *et al* (1994). Seven work conditions, linked in the literature to family members' experiences of tension between work and family role, will be rated. These are: Schedule demands of work; Job demands of work; Wages; Availability and accessibility of benefits; Lack of substantive complexity; Quality of supervision; and Closeness with co-workers. Each condition will be assessed using multiple aspects. For example, Schedule demands of work will be assessed by asking respondents to rate the frequency of evening work from rarely (less than once per month) to very often (every week). Another item will ask respondents to rate the unpredictability of their work schedule from very predictable to very unpredictable. Total numbers of hours spent each week will be reported and a six item inventory measuring perceptions of the lack of flexibility in respondents' work schedules will be applied.

All of these scales have been used in previous studies and were found to have high levels of internal consistency and test-re-test reliability. The reliability of all of these scales will be determined in the Australian construction industry context.

Data are also being collected for several control variables. These include characteristics that have been found to affect perceptions of conflict or overload between work and family responsibilities, such as marital status, gender and age of youngest child (Higgins *et al* 1994). Other family characteristics such as whether a family has a single or dual income and whether a family has a single residence or is involved in a 'commuter marriage' arrangement are also being determined.

The questionnaire is being distributed through human resource managers of construction firms. Individuals have been nominated at a local level to distribute questionnaires and collect completed questionnaires. This approach has been found to yield acceptably high response rates in similar studies (Bohen and Viveros-Long 1981). Questionnaire data will be analysed using multiple regression and modelling techniques to test for main and interaction effects in the relationships between variables (Levin and Rubin 1982).

Follow-up interviews

This stage aims to overcome some of the limitations of the questionnaire survey. It seeks to explore how people feel about their work and family lives and to identify additional 'family friendly' work practices that participants would like to have access to. Interviews will seek to find explanations of survey findings. While the sample will be much smaller and the findings less generalisable than those of the survey, interview data will offer insightful explanations of the inter-relationship between the work and family life of participants.

The interview sample will be identified using independent, dependent and control variable data provided in the questionnaire. For example, respondents who expressed high levels of distress, or low levels of satisfaction will be interviewed. Of particular interest will also be respondents who report that they have a 'commuter marriage' arrangement with their partners, respondents who are parents or respondents whose partners are also employed.

Where possible, both partners will be interviewed as a couple to explore the viewpoint of more than one family member. Interviews will be in-depth and semi-structured. Indepth interviews are well-suited to eliciting informants' experience of social reality (Minichiello *et al* 1995). The qualitative interview data will be analysed by ethnographic content analysis, which utilises thematic analysis of narrative data to construct a coding framework of themes. The interview data are then coded and the frequency of coded responses is calculated to reveal key themes that explain aspects of the interface between participants' work and family lives.

THE NEED FOR NON-TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Traditional management theories and practices presuppose a lifestyle that segregates family and work spheres. Dual income couples, whether as spouses or parents, participate in many roles simultaneously. Managers may live with family responsibilities themselves, yet are taught that successful managers must remain detached and rational, not concerning themselves with the family concerns of employees. This approach was largely predicated on the view that the workforce is homogeneous, comprising of males of European ancestry married to full time homemakers. In most developed countries, this presumption no longer holds true (Popenoe 1993), even in the traditionally male-dominated construction industry. Furthermore, increasing numbers of dual income couples mean that men and women now share, to some degree, parenting and family responsibilities. Traditional management theory fails to recognise this diversity, basing theories of motivation on employees' individualistic needs for self actualisation, achievement and power (Bruce and Reed 1994). Changes in workforce characteristics require a shift in management approach to re-examine the values, roles and stereotypes and to meet the increasing expectation that a balance between work and family life be achieved. Peter Senge writes that "the artificial boundary between work and family is anathema to systems thinking" (MacGregor 1999). The two must be seen as interactive in that what is positive or negative in one, affects the other. There is also an increasing body of evidence to suggest that policies that facilitate stronger families lead to stronger companies, enjoying enhanced productivity and improvements in long term competitiveness.

SO WHAT CAN CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES DO?

There are many ways companies can assist employees with family responsibilities. Some of the options are presented below. The needs of individual employees will differ and change over time. It is therefore important that companies examine the needs of their employees and ensure that policies address these needs. Consultation with employees through surveys, focus groups, newsletters, notices or workshops is recommended.

Child care

Australian companies' provision of child care surpasses that available in most other OECD countries (Cass 1993) but company sponsored child care is still rarely available to construction industry employees. While it may be difficult to provide on-site child care centres due to the limited space and temporary nature of construction work, there are other options for child care provision which construction companies may be able to provide. These include:

- Off-site single employer child care centres for company employees;
- Joint venture child care centres;
- Purchase or lease of places in existing centres;
- Provision of land for a child care centre;
- Addition of places in a government funded family day care scheme;
- Provision of out-of hours child care:
- Child care information and referral service; or
- Employer contribution towards employees' child care fees (Napoli 1993).

Where there is insufficient demand within a company to warrant a dedicated single employer child care centre, companies may join together to use community resources, collaborate to support existing services or form partnerships to provide day care facilities. Needs for the care children outside school hours, during school holidays and when they are sick should also be considered. For example, one American company is reported to have provided an emergency caregiver programme which subsidises payment for in-home care of sick children by trained professionals, while another provides a summer day camp for older children (Butruille 1990).

Elder care

An ageing population will have a serious impact on the workplace. Eldercare obligations may actually come to eclipse child care obligations in the number of employees affected. If elder-care is a need then support in the form of special family leave or an information and referral service may be helpful.

Flexible work practices

Flexible work arrangements are one of the most frequently used ways to assist employees with family responsibilities (Fernandez 1986). Evidence suggests that increased flexibility lowers absenteeism and tardiness (Fernandez 1986) and can yield tangible productivity gains (Napoli 1993). Flexible work arrangements cover a range of practices including the following:

- Flexible work hours:
- Job sharing; and
- Working from home or telecommuting.

Flexible work hours may involve compressed work weeks, shorter works with less pay, adjusted starting or finishing times, fewer breaks to shorten the working day, the option of half day vacations and informal flexibility to accommodate needs on specific days. The needs of employees should be carefully assessed to determine which of these options would be the most beneficial. While there will always be a need to have on site management and supervision of construction work, increasing availability and use of information technology in the construction industry should increase the options for work from a remote or home site in certain tasks.

Permanent part time work

Part time work can assist employees to maintain a balance between work and family. From a company's point of view part time work can improve the retention of employees, reduce absenteeism, increase productivity, reduce overtime, provide

flexibility to cater for peak periods and make recruitment easier (Napoli 1993). Permanent part-time work differs from casual work in that employees have a "permanent" contract of employment with the company and retain benefits such as annual leave, sick leave, maternity and long service leave. The scope for introducing permanent part time work for employees with family responsibilities should be considered in the construction industry. It is important that eligibility criteria are clearly established, that part-time workers are valued, not marginalised and that they enjoy access to identified career paths.

Parental leave

Parental leave allows employees with a new child, either natural or adopted, to care for their child at home on a full time basis in the child's first year and still retain employment and accrue entitlements. Parental leave arrangements form an integral part of a company's work and family programme and employees should be clearly informed about their parental leave entitlements. Unpaid maternity leave for up to 52 weeks has been available to women employees in Australia since 1974, following the Maternity Leave Test Case. From 1990, the federal Industrial Relations Commission handed down the Parental Leave Test Case which extended the maternity and adoption leave standards to paternity leave where an employee has had 12 months' continuous service with the same employer. The decision also provided for either or both parents to work on a permanent part time basis, with pro-rata remuneration and conditions up to the child's second birthday or for two years after a child is adopted. This entitlement is only available subject to the employer's consent. The standard for unpaid parental leave has been widely adopted through legislation and awards. However, in terms of paid maternity/parental leave, the position in Australia is not among best practice in any sense in the OECD context (Cass 1993). Australia does not provide at least twelve weeks paid maternity/parental leave as is the case in all OECD countries except New Zealand and the USA. Most private sector employees do not enjoy such a benefit. Women employed on a casual or part time basis in both public and private sectors and women who do not have a sufficient period of continuous employment are similarly excluded. This includes students, unemployed women or women caring for previous children. Some private sector firms attempting to recruit and retain female employees are reported to offer between six and twelve weeks paid maternity leave (Napoli 1993). These conditions are typically only available in public sector jobs (Cass 1993). Construction firms serious about attracting and retaining female employees may consider the provision of paid parental leave or of consenting to women returning to work on a part time basis up until the child's second birthday.

Other initiatives

Companies that actively seek to support employees with family responsibilities do not limit themselves to meeting employees' immediate needs for child care and leave. Other initiatives intended to elicit commitment and loyalty from employees include:

- Salary packaging of child care costs, school fees or elder care costs to provide a tax benefit to employees;
- Providing work experience for employees' children or job seeking skills courses for children I years 10 and 12;
- Six weeks free nappy wash for employees on parental leave;
- Health and dental insurance:

- Family oriented Christmas parties;
- Family related phone calls to enable employees to check on children or elderly relatives; and
- Employee assistance programmes offering counselling for employees with personal or family difficulties.

Construction firms should identify their employees' priorities and be creative in formulating ways to respond to employees' work and family situations. This is likely to result in a committed, motivated and satisfied workforce.

CONCLUSIONS

The expected outcomes of the study include a better understanding of the extent to which tension exists between work and family demands among white-collar construction industry workers. The study will also enhance our understanding of the value of implementing 'family friendly' work practices in this environment. The extent to which these practices can be provided in the construction industry should be carefully considered. The research will identify the current needs of white collar construction industry employees and their preferences for family friendly employment practices, at present and in the future. This will form the basis of a recommendation for best practice. However, it is important to note that the provision of such practices is not sufficient in itself. A workplace culture must exist within which employees feel comfortable taking advantage of family friendly work options. Employees with family responsibilities must not be regarded as being low in commitment to their job. Sensitivity training for managers and supervisors to assist them in understanding the family needs of their workers may also be required.

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