

THE IMPACT OF SELF-EMPLOYMENT ON ARCHITECTS' JOB SATISFACTION

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The UK construction industry has been characterised as fragmented due to the high numbers of self-employed. Self-employment has been linked to many of the ingrained problems suffered by the sector, including the lack of investment in skills training, poorly integrated human resource policies and the poor treatment of workers. Accordingly there have been calls for a return to direct employment and a move away from the reliance on a self-employed workforce. Research within other sectors has suggested that the self-employed experience greater job satisfaction and work-life conflict than those in employment, although there is a paucity of research exploring this issue within the construction sector. This paper explores the experiences of those working within the architectural profession, where approximately one third are self-employed. It reports on two phases of data collection, namely a questionnaire of architects, and semi-structured interviews with practicing architects. The questionnaire explored issues of job satisfaction, affective well-being, job demands and decision latitude, work-life balance and turnover intentions. The results reveal that self-employed architects appear to experience greater job satisfaction, greater turnover intentions and greater work to life conflict. The semi-structured interviews revealed that self-employment enabled architects to express the creativity and autonomy which were key drivers for entry into the profession. These findings suggest that the relationship between employment status and job satisfaction is complex. Further work is needed with larger samples to fully understand the impact of self-employment on those working within the construction industry, and the consequences for workers and the sector.

Keywords: architecture, job satisfaction, organisational psychology, stress, work-life balance,.

INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 30, 500 architects working in the UK (ARB, 2004). The Labour Force Survey, undertaken quarterly in the UK estimates the number of architects working in the UK as approximately 50 000, with 18 000 self-employed (ONS, 2007). In contrast, it has been reported that the majority of practicing architects are self-employed (Fowler and Wilson, 2004) however it would seem that the exact number of architects working in the UK and the proportion who are self-employed is unknown. Given the apparently high proportion of self-employed architects, issues relating to self-employment are likely to affect the majority of the architectural workforce.

Evidence from the general working population suggests that those who are self-employed report greater job satisfaction than those who are engaged in direct

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employment (Bradley and Roberts, 2004). Self-employment enables the individual to exercise greater control over their work (Hughes, 2003), and greater job satisfaction is the result of increased autonomy, the absence of hierarchy and the opportunity to control working hours (Andersson, 2008). Self-employment may also be harmful to the individual, in terms of poor job security (D'Souza *et al.*, 2003). Kaufman (1999) posited that self-employed individuals experience greater stress due to job insecurity, which may negatively impact their work-life balance causing stress amongst family members.

Literature examining the experiences of self-employed architects is sparse, however, there is a body of literature exploring the experiences of female architects who have chosen self-employment. Whitman (2005) reported that self-employment enabled female architects to cope with a male dominated working environment and was the main goal of trainee architects. When this finding was reported back to sole practitioners they expressed disbelief, noting the pressures of self-employment. Caven (2006) has argued that female architects choose self-employment in order to accommodate childcare needs and other lifestyle factors. Female sole-practitioners in the UK reported stressors associated with the high costs of professional indemnity insurance, usefulness of RIBA practice updates, concerns that the formal educational process does not cover working as a sole practitioner and concerns over the costs of attaining RIBA accredited CPD for sole practitioners (DeGraft-Johnson *et al.*, 2004). Despite these useful insights, there is a need to determine the extent to which these issues affect all architects, regardless of gender.

Given that architects are an integral part of the building process (Salisbury, 1998), it is probable that they are exposed to similar stressors as those working in other areas of the sector such as; long working hours, high workload, job insecurity, poor professional worth and poor work-life balance (Sutherland and Davidson, 1993; Lingard and Sublet, 2002; Haynes and Love, 2004). In addition architects may experience additional stressors, namely lack of opportunity to use their creative skills (Blau, 1984), responsibility for tasks beyond the ability of the individual, unsupportive practice managers and dissatisfaction over career prospects (Cox and Hamilton, 1998). Self-employment may enable individuals to exercise greater control over their working lives, allow for greater use of creative skills and reduce stresses associated with practice management. Therefore self-employed architects may report greater job satisfaction in relation to autonomy and opportunity to use their skills.

The relationship between self-employment and occupational stress is complex. Individuals who are self-employed benefit from 'being their own' boss however, there are also stressors associated with self-employment. Steps have been taken to explore self-employed architect's reasons for this career choice, through discussion of the experiences of female architects. However, further work is needed to understand the role of self-employment in occupational stress amongst architects. The research presented in this paper will address the following research propositions:

1. Self-employed architects will report greater job satisfaction than employed architects, in relation to autonomy and opportunity to use a range of skills including creativity.
2. Self-employed architects will report greater concerns than employed architects in terms of their job security.
3. Self-employed architects will report greater concerns over their work-life balance than employed architects.

METHOD

The current study combined a mixed methods approach utilising a self-completion questionnaire with semi-structured interviews. Mixing methods offers a number of advantages to the researcher, namely a greater understanding of lived realities which can be too complex to be understood through one method of data collection (Mason, 2006).

Questionnaire

In order to determine levels of occupational stress experienced by architects a self completion email questionnaire was used. Table 1 shows details of the data collected by the questionnaire and the reliability of each measure (co-efficient alpha, α). The co-efficient alpha determines if the items on a test represent one construct (Salkind, 2004). In other words, is the test internally reliable. Administering a questionnaire enables a large amount of standardised information to be collected, thereby increasing internal validity (Robson, 2002) and reducing bias (Coolican, 1999). In addition, questionnaires allow for quantitative comparisons to be made between groups. Demographic information was collected. The instrument explored five measures of occupational stress; job satisfaction, affective well-being, work-life balance, job demands and control and turnover intentions.

Questionnaire Sampling

In order to refine the questionnaire it was piloted with approximately 200 architects and architectural management students. In addition, representatives of Architects for Change, an Equal Opportunities Special Interest Groups, reviewed the questionnaire. Pilot respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire, provide feedback and indicate the length of time it took to complete. Following feedback, the questionnaire was reduced in length and questions were reworded to make them architecture specific (for example, changing 'office' to 'studio'). The questionnaire was distributed to 1200 architects working in different areas around the UK (London, East Midlands, Norfolk, Suffolk, Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Dundee and Belfast). Contact details of architects were found using the websites of RIBA and the Architects Registration Board (ARB). All architects registered in the areas detailed above that had email addresses were emailed a copy of the questionnaire which could be completed online or printed and then returned via the postal system. Using the websites of ARB and RIBA limits the sample to those who have achieved registration or chartered status.

Interview sampling and procedure

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 23 practicing architects who had completed the questionnaire and had indicated interest in participating in further research. Interview questions were developed from the extant literature and from the questionnaire which had highlighted areas of interest. In addition, the interview schedule was flexible enough to allow issues salient to each respondent to be explored. Topics covered in the interviews included; reasons for choosing the architectural profession, future career plans, issues relating to self-employment practice management, job satisfaction and work life balance.

Interviews were analysed using a technique called 'Template Analysis', which has been widely used in similar research (Daniels, Harris and Briner, 2002). This allows for textual data to be thematically organized and analysed according to a set of codes developed a priori (King, 2004). Like grounded theory, template analysis makes use

of codes to order textual data. A code is a label attached to a portion of text, and can be descriptive or analytical in nature. The initial step in template analysis is to develop the initial template. Often this will be based around the interview schedule. For the research presented here, the interview schedule was used as the initial template, but salient issues were incorporated into the template during the course of analysis.

Table 1: Details of the data collected by the questionnaire

Measure	Aim	Co-efficient alpha (reliability)
Job satisfaction (Warr <i>et al.</i> , 1979) 7 point Likert scale (Extremely dissatisfied to Extremely satisfied) with 15 items	To measure levels of job satisfaction	$\alpha = .9104$
Affective well-being (Warr, 1987). Records frequency of experiencing positive and negative affect (e.g. tense, calm, depressed) in the previous 30 days, both in work and outside of work	To measure frequency of positive and negative affect.	Job related affective well-being $\alpha = .895$ Non job related affective well-being $\alpha = .909$
Work-life conflict (7 item Likert scale based on existing tools, Small and Riley, 1990 & Bacharach <i>et al.</i> , 1991)	To measure levels of work-life conflict	$\alpha = .8967$
Job demands and decision latitude scale (Karasek, 1979).	To measure levels of job demands and autonomy	$\alpha = .779$
Turnover intentions. 4 items scale rating agreement (strongly agree to strongly disagree) with items relating to desires to leave current job and to leave the profession	To measure turnover intentions.	$\alpha = .8349$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire sample characteristics

A total of 120 questionnaires were returned, 110 of which were fully completed. Although this response rate is lower than hoped for, the return rate is comparable to similar studies (McDermott *et al.*, 2007). The questionnaire sample consisted of 75 males and 35 females. The age of respondents ranged from under 25 to over 60 with a mean age of 35 to 40 years ($SD = 2.234$). The majority of respondents identified themselves as White British or Caucasian (78%). 61% of respondents were either married or living with a partner. The majority of the sample had no dependents (57%). The majority of respondents had achieved chartered architect status (65%), a further 26% were registered with the ARB. The number of years at the highest level of qualification ranged from 2 months to 45 years, with a mean of 8.6 years ($SD = 10.06$). 9% were self-employed and 96 % worked full time. Organisational size ranged from one employee (sole practitioners) to 900 employees. 71% of respondents had managerial responsibilities, supervising between 1 and 56 employees. The overall mean working week was 42.23 hours.

Interview Sample characteristics

23 practicing architects were interviewed, 10 of whom were female. 15 of the sample were registered with the RIBA, six more registered with ARB and 2 were Part II qualified. Respondents ranged from 25 years to 60 years plus. The majority (18) identified themselves as white British, 6 were self-employed and all but one worked full time. Practice size ranged from one employee (self-employed) to two hundred and eighty employees. 14 did not have dependents and 14 were married or in a relationship.

Job satisfaction, job demands and decision latitude, and affective well-being

Descriptive statistics from the questionnaire for items on the job satisfaction scale, revealed that the majority of respondents were satisfied with their work. However, a proportion expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of their work. In the region of 40% expressed dissatisfaction with their pay. Between one quarter and one third expressed dissatisfaction with issues relating to organisational issues, namely, practice management, recognition for work, job security and industrial relations. Additionally, one quarter expressed concern over the opportunity to use a range of skills and one fifth were dissatisfied with the amount of variety in their work. A comparison of mean values revealed that self-employed architects expressed greater job satisfaction with freedom to choose their own working methods, responsibility, the attention paid to their suggestions and the amount of variety in their work (Table 2), findings which support our first research proposition.

These findings are supported by the interview data which revealed that self-employed architects had chosen to leave direct employment in order to use their full range of skills, to gain greater recognition for their work and to express their creativity.

It was stated that self employment;

'allows you to do modelling, drawing, be on the computer, use your skills to get work, develop your relationships with clients...I was a consultant for a practice down in London and I was winning loads of awards and they [employers] just don't mention you at all'.

Self-employed architect

Table 2: Significant differences between employed and self-employed respondents.

Item	Mean (Self-employed)	Mean (Employed)	t	Significance (2 tailed)
Freedom to choose your own method of working	6.19	4.85	3.968	.000
The amount of responsibility you are given	6.65	5.19	5.515	.000
The attention paid to suggestions you make	5.63	4.39	3.435	.001
The amount of variety in your work	5.57	4.84	2.191	.031
Your job security	4.29	5.15	-2.597	.011
Mean job satisfaction	5.24	4.81	2.085	.039
Mean job related well-being	2.71	3.19	-2.195	.030
Skill discretion	3.86	3.39	3.219	.002
Decision authority	3.85	3.15	1.140	.000
I come home from work too tired to do household chores	3.00	2.47	1.966	.052
I often think about leaving my job	4.05	2.90	3.878	.000
I often think about leaving the architectural profession	3.95	3.18	2.508	.014
I will be actively searching for a new job over the next 12 months	4.14	3.09	3.441	.001
Number of hours spent on site	8.76	4.15	2.209	.029
Hours spent working at home	9.67	2.35	4.090	.000
Hours spent working at the office	27.19	37.47	-3.603	.000

This quote illustrates a number of reasons for choosing self-employment, namely, the opportunity to use a range of skills, recognition for work that is undertaken and autonomy. This is supported by the questionnaire data which revealed that self-employed respondents reported statistically significantly greater skill discretion and decision authority (see Table 2). Both of these items relate to the job demands and

control model and indicate that self-employed architects report greater autonomy over their work than those in direct employment, findings which support our second research proposition. This is supported by current knowledge which argues that self-employment results in greater autonomy and therefore increased job satisfaction (Andersson, 2008).

One self-employed architect who ran a specialist multi-disciplinary design practice stated that he and his partner has established their own practice in order to express creative freedom, suggesting the importance of creative freedom and autonomy.

Previous research has identified a lack of creativity (Blau, 1984), and poor practice management (Cox and Hamilton, 1998) as sources of stress for architects. If self-employed architects are able to exercise greater autonomy and use a range of skills then they may be able to alleviate some of the stresses of working as an architect. These findings are supported by the literature which reports that those who are self-employed experience greater job satisfaction than those who are employed (Benz and Frey, 2007; Chandola and Jenkinson, 2000). Hamilton (2000) argued that individuals choose self-employment for non financial rewards such as ‘being your own boss’.

As Table 2 shows, self-employed architects expressed greater concerns over their job security a finding which was also verified during the interviews.

‘There is a good deal more insecurity in terms of the sustainability of work, the sustainability of cash flow and income’

Self-employed architect

For those who are self-employed there appears to be a considerable degree of insecurity and pressure associated with bringing in work, a potential source of stress. This is a finding which find support in the literature, for example, Kaufman (1999) who has argued that the self-employed are vulnerable to stress as a result of job insecurity. Another pressure associated with self-employment was managing employees.

‘It’s [managing staff] what I like least about working for myself. The buck stops with me, you have to deal with people you want to sack. I have never sacked anyone and I don’t want to.’

Self-employed architect

The interviews revealed that being self-employed could be stressful due to concerns over securing and getting paid for work, in addition to carrying out the work:

‘You have got to be strong in different areas... number one is to get the work in, and two is you have to get paid for it and three is you have got to do the work’

Self-employed architect

However, self-employed respondents indicated greater concerns over job security, a finding supported by the extant literature, supporting our second research proposition. Both Hundley (2001) and D’Souza et al (2003) assert that self-employed individuals are at increased risk of occupational stress and adverse health outcomes due to high job insecurity. Warr (1990) considers job security to be essential for occupational well-being. Concern over this area may account for the higher turnover intentions, and poorer job related affective well-being of self-employed respondents, although further work would be needed to test this proposition.

Work-life conflict and turnover intentions

A majority of respondents reported that work made them too tired to carry out household chores (61%) and that they found it difficult to switch off after work (54%), approximately one third felt that work made it difficult for them to meet family responsibilities (32%), negatively affected their marriage (33%) and their relationship with their children (31%) and their social life (34%), but only 14% reported life to work conflict. Work-life imbalance has been identified as a source of stress for those working in the construction professions (Lingard and Francis, 2006), and it would appear that a similar situation exists for architects. Approximately one third of informants considered leaving both their jobs (37%) and the profession (37%), and were actively searching for a new job (31%) although, only 10 % were actively searching for an alternative occupation. These figures indicate that issues relating to work life balance and occupational turnover are of concern to an important proportion of the sample. Self-employed architects reported similar concerns with work-life balance as employed architects, for example, long working hours. However, there may be additional burdens for self-employed architects;

'If you work for yourself in architecture you grab time when you can for social things, because pretty much you are working most of the time. Either to market the practice or to think ahead, introductions, going to work, then you are concentrating on doing the work, then concentrating on learning the jobs and then I have got 2 or 3 jobs on site at the moment, so I am running round keeping them in the right direction'

Self-employed architect

These findings lend support to our third research proposition, that self employed architects would report greater concerns over work life balance. Self-employed architects reported spending their working day securing work and undertake administrative work at evenings and weekends. Baines et al (2005) recorded similar concerns amongst small business owners in the UK. Kaufman (1999) argues that self-employment can cause work-life imbalance due to the increased stress resulting from concerns over job security. This assertion partially supports the data presented here, in that, those with employees experienced stress as a result of managerial responsibilities. However, the longer working hours were associated with the dual pressures of securing and then carrying out the work. One of the self-employed architects who participated in the interviews indicated desires to leave the architectural profession, citing concerns over the status of the profession and disillusionment with working as an architect. However, none of the other self-employed participants indicated desires either to return to direct employment or to leave the profession.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The generalisability of the findings presented here is limited due to the small sample size. The sample does not reflect the demographics of the architectural profession, in that most of those who participated in the study were not self-employed. The majority of those working in the profession are self-employed or sole practitioners (Fowler and Wilson, 2004). This may be due to the method of locating the sample. Contacting those registered on the RIBA and ARB websites who had email addresses limited the sample to those with internet access. Figures produced by Bridges and Grierson (2000) suggest that many sole practitioners do not have internet access and so may not have been contactable. Further research should endeavour to survey those without

internet access, which may result in a greater response from the self-employed and sole practitioners.

CONCLUSIONS

Current literature has argued that self-employment may lead to greater job satisfaction through increased autonomy, but greater stress due to job insecurity. These issues have been paid little attention in relation to the architectural profession, a high proportion of whom are self-employed. Consequently, this paper aimed to explore the impact of self-employment on architects' job satisfaction. Through a combination of questionnaire and interview data, issues of job satisfaction, autonomy, creativity, job security and work-life conflict were investigated. The data presented here indicates that the role of self-employment in job satisfaction of architects is complex. Self-employed individuals reported greater autonomy and opportunities for using a range of skills, aspects of work which are associated with greater job satisfaction and reduced occupational stress, providing support for our first research proposition. Our second research proposition stated that self-employed respondents would report greater job insecurity, an assertion supported by the data presented here. Self-employed respondents also indicated greater work-life conflict, supporting our final research proposition. It would seem that there are disadvantages and advantages to self-employment for architects.

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