

# JOB PERCEPTION OF SPANISH QUALIFIED CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS

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The importance of job satisfaction and motivation to the wellbeing of the construction industry has been highlighted. In fact, attention has been paid to job satisfaction and motivation of construction managers and white collar professionals while empirical research has been carried out in different countries (USA, UK, Thailand, Australia, South Africa, Nigeria, Canada and Iran), but so far this subject has not been studied in Spain. Most of the published studies are quantitative in nature, use survey questionnaires to collect information and analyse it with standardized tools. In light of the growing understanding of sociological and behavioural issues some authors suggest a more balanced methodological approach. Thus, qualitative methods are becoming increasingly acceptable and attractive to researchers. The purpose of this study is to find out how these Spanish professionals live, feel and perceive their work activity, to analyse whether they are satisfied with their daily work routine and to describe those aspects that generate greater satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Data were obtained via semi-structured, in-depth interviews to forty construction technicians, architects and building engineers of different age, sex and professional experience. This allows perceiving details and nuances expressed through the language and feelings of the participants. The results reveal that the professionals interviewed enjoy their job, are satisfied with it and also describe their overall work experience in positive terms. The most important satisfaction factors are those related to the nature and content of the job whereas dissatisfaction has an extrinsic nature related to job context. The findings provide valuable suggestions that could help to maintain and improve these professionals' wellbeing at work.

Keywords: construction professional, job dissatisfaction, job satisfaction, Spain.

## INTRODUCTION

Currently there is no universally accepted definition of job satisfaction (Bowen and Cattell 2008). Moreover, each author often creates and develops their own. For a first group of authors, job satisfaction refers to an emotional state or to affective responses. Locke (1976: p. 1300), for example, defines it as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experience”. For another group of authors the concept goes beyond emotions and is described as a general attitude towards work. Bravo *et al.* (2002: p. 347) consider it “an attitude or set of attitudes developed by the person towards his work situation”.

Job satisfaction is related to behaviours and outcomes of great significance for individuals, enterprises and society in general (Spector 2006, Gamero 2005, Bravo *et al.* 2002). At an individual level, psychological literature notes consequences of job

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satisfaction relating to physical and mental health, longevity, adoption of escape or withdrawal behaviour, and work-life balance. At an organizational level, it can have a strong impact on production through its effects on turnover, absenteeism, protest activities, civic behaviour in the organization, counterproductive work and task performance. Finally, job dissatisfaction may have implications for society as a whole given the possible drain of national resources, the lesser contribution to GDP, increased costs and reduced quality. These consequences justify the significance of issues relating to job satisfaction, explain why their analysis is so important in industrial societies, and justify their having become a topic of great interest to researchers, besides being one of the main priorities of companies (García-Bernal *et al.* 2005).

Based on the foregoing, it can be concluded that job satisfaction cannot be ignored, especially in the construction industry, which remains one of the industrial sectors most dependent on the human factor (Dainty *et al.* 2007). Recall that construction is one of the economy's most labour intensive production activities and that human resources account for much of the cost of most construction projects (Seung *et al.* 2008). Any reduction in labour costs might lead to direct savings for organizations.

Moreover, Spain has not often been the setting for research studies in the construction industry. In fact, most work has been carried out in English speaking countries. The components of the cultural environment – generally beliefs, values and customs – which an individual holds are often generalized to employment situations and consequently affect employees' attitudes to work and job perceptions (Adigun 1995, Moilwa and Langford 1990). Therefore, what is important in determining the amount of positive or negative attitudes toward work in one society may be of relatively trivial consequence in another culture. According to Hofstede (2001), the Spanish culture is characterized half way between collectivism and individualism, scores higher Power Distance Index than English speaking countries, is more feminine than Anglo countries and scores high in Uncertainty Avoidance.

Since the subject seems to be unexplored, the general aim of this research is to empirically study job satisfaction among technical professionals working in the building industry in the Spanish city of Valencia, from the standpoint of the professionals themselves, and using a qualitative approach. It seeks to discover how they live, feel about and perceive their work activity; to analyse whether they are satisfied with their daily work routine and describe the aspects leading to greater job satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

## **PROFESSIONAL'S JOB SATISFACTION IN CONSTRUCTION**

A review of the literature suggests that the first empirical studies on the subject date from the beginning of the 70s (Borcherding and Oglesby 1974) and focused on blue collar workers' motivation, while white collar professionals have been studied more recently, after the 90s (Bowen and Cattell 2008, Navarro 2008). Furthermore, the countries under study have been Australia (Gilbert and Walker 2001, Smithers and Walker 2000, Chan 1993), Great Britain (Caven 2009 and 2006, Sang *et al.* 2008, Asad and Dainty 2005, Cohen 2005, Barrett 1993), Canada (Zhou 2004), USA (Halvorsen 2005, Borcherding and Oglesby 1974), Iran (Yisa *et al.* 2000), Jordan (Attar and Weiss 2010), Korea (Park *et al.* 2008), Sweden (Styhre and Josephson 2006), South Africa (Bowen *et al.* 2008, Bowen and Cattell 2008), Thailand (Ruthankoon 2005) and India (Venkatesan *et al.* 2009), although Great Britain and the USA have been most prolific. No empirical work has been found for the Spanish case.

In most cases, the methodology used was quantitative, postal questionnaires being used as the basic technique for data gathering. As in the case of blue collar workers, the theoretical models most used as the basis for research are Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943), the two-factor theory of Herzberg *et al.* (1959) and Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) (Navarro 2008).

Among the results of these studies it is worth mentioning that IT adoption rates affect the level employees are satisfied with their supervisors, company policy, compensation and recognition (Attar and Weiss 2010). Others point out that in Korea, civil engineers high in need for cognition were most satisfied with their jobs when they perceived their tasks to be complex (Park *et al.* 2008). Bowen *et al.* (2008) researched quantity surveyors in South Africa and concluded that most appeared to be satisfied with their jobs and outlined the following significant dimensions: personal satisfaction in doing the work, a low degree of supervision, participation in decision making, undertaking challenging work and receiving recognition for achievements. Furthermore, they found females reporting an average higher level of job satisfaction than male counterparts (Bowen and Cattell 2008).

According to Sang *et al.* (2008), self-employed UK architects appear to experience greater job satisfaction, greater turnover intentions and greater work to life conflict than those on direct employment. Halvorsen (2005) discovered a statistically significant correlation between satisfaction and empowerment of on-site supervisors in the USA residential construction industry. Additionally, Asad and Dainty (2005) found that British professional staff are more motivated than operatives by intrinsic rewards such as satisfaction with the work performed, the challenge of the tasks and the feeling of accomplishment.

The relationship between motivation and productivity of Canadian professionals has also been analysed, and it was concluded that the factors of the highest valence for these professionals were: "safety on the construction site", "the team spirit of the people you work with", "opportunities to learn new things" and "seeing good results from your work" (Zhou 2004).

Gilbert and Walker (2001) examined the relationship between motivation and gender and found no significant differences but highlighted differences with regard to the perceived attractiveness of certain workplace and job characteristics. Smithers and Walker (2000) investigated the effect of workplace environment on the motivation and demotivation of construction professionals. Variables found to be significant factors included long work hours, non-recognition of work done, and colleagues' aggressive management styles.

## **METHOD**

Historically, most published construction management research has been based on quantitative methods (Harty 2008). In light of the growing understanding that conformance to a rationalist paradigm results in simplistic understanding of sociological and behavioural issues, some authors have suggested a more balanced methodological approach (Dainty 2008). Furthermore, following the methodological debates within the field during the 1990s (Raftery *et al.* 1997, Seymour *et al.* 1997), a pluralistic research paradigm is emerging in which qualitative methods are becoming increasingly acceptable and attractive to researchers.

Given the fact that the goal of this research is not to generalize to a population but to obtain insights into the job satisfaction phenomenon, purposeful sampling was

undertaken. Additionally, pragmatic considerations relating to accessibility and available resources were made and heterogeneity criteria were considered. The snowball technique was used to create a sample of 40 technical professionals in the construction industry. To calculate the sample size, the theoretical saturation criterion was followed, and respondents stopped being interviewed when no longer contributing anything new.

My position as lecturer at the School of Construction Management and Engineering of the UPV gave me direct access to a number of technical professionals in the construction industry. Participants were contacted via e-mail, and were sent a letter of introduction explaining the objectives and interest of the research. Most were interested in participating in the project. Interviews were conducted in their offices at work. The respondents are identified in the transcripts below by means of a number.

The sample consisted of 27 males and 13 females. The age of respondents ranged from under 25 to over 60. 20, 30, 5, 25 and 20% participants were aged from 20 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59 and over 60, respectively. Under half of the participants reported not having children, while 55% had either two, three or four children and 12.5% had one child. In terms of educational background, 6 professionals were found to be architects and the rest building engineers. 62% of the interviewees worked as liberal professionals in construction project management teams while the rest worked for contracting organizations as site/construction project managers or as team directors.

Qualitative research interviews, also called “in-depth”, “exploratory” or “unstructured” interviews were conducted with participants (King 2004). According to Kvale (1983: p. 174), the qualitative research interview is “an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena”. In other words, the qualitative research interview enables participants to relate their stories regarding job satisfaction within the context of their personal values and experiences in a way that a more structured interview format may constrain. To meet this goal, the interviews had a low degree of structure imposed by the interviewer, a preponderance of open questions, and a focus on “specific situations and action sequences in the world of the interviewee” rather than abstractions and general opinions (Kvale, 1983). Interviewees were seen as “participants” in the research, actively shaping the course of the interview rather than passively responding to pre-set questions. In fact, due to this approach, the original outline of open questions evolved exploring a range of issues including, for example, reasons for studying their chosen degree, the work-family balance or sources of job stress. Interviews typically lasted between 50 to 105 minutes, averaging 66 minutes, and were tape recorded.

The transcribed interviews were analysed using “content analysis” (Flick 2004), which in practice, gave rise to the use of categories to reduce the large amount of material in text form. In summary, the process consisted of the following steps: 1) reading and re-reading of each interview transcribed, 2) initial selection of textual fragments corresponding to each section of the interview script, 3) joining of all fragments of the same section, 4) comparison of the information obtained, in order to attempt to codify a set of different interview fragments sharing the same idea, 5) determination of the frequency of the identified categories 6) comparison of responses among different groups of respondents to find similarities and differences and make conclusions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In response to whether they are generally satisfied with their job in the construction industry, participants were clearly affirmative and included many positive descriptive terms. Almost all of them reported being satisfied and many were even more positive, using terms such as “very”, “very satisfied”, “I wouldn’t change for anything”, “totally”, “of course” and “I like it a lot”. This means that although the interviewees recognize and point out certain negative aspects, they generally enjoy their jobs, have positive attitudes towards them and describe their overall work experience in positive terms.

Their accounts allow us to identify different job satisfaction dimensions expressed in their own words as follows.

### Identity

Having an overall picture of the work performed is a motivating factor to people in general and to the construction professionals, since they contribute to the construction of a clearly visible tangible structure they are proud of (Venkatesan *et al.* 2009, Styhra and Josephson 2006, Ruthankoon 2005, Borchering and Oglesby 1974). The identity of the work performed fosters feelings of accomplishment and satisfies self-actualization needs, which in turn positively influences job satisfaction. In this study, half of those interviewed confirm this factor categorically stating that what makes them most satisfied is “seeing the successfully completed construction project”, and some accompany this statement with a sense of ownership and possession of the structure built, even referring to the finished projects as their own children.

In the words of a 39 year old building engineer working as a superintendent: “... they are your children; I have no children and don’t know what having children is like, but for me each project is a child of mine that has grown with me and was born in my head” (No. 12).

This personal excitement is clear in the words of another 68 year old building engineer who had a passion for his profession, felt a sense of accomplishment and talked about how self-actualizing his work was: “I’m creating a lot where there is nothing, when I am done there is something, and a small portion of that something is mine. It is my contribution ..., you realize that technicians tend to use their cameras a lot because it is impressive to see how a construction project comes to life and takes shape... and that means that the project belongs to you in a sense and that you belong to the project. You leave your mark on each construction project, a part of your personality remains, and a little bit of yourself is left in each work...” (No. 23).

### Social Environment

It is well known that people receive recognition for the work done through contact with others, and therefore, the working team is a significant extrinsic motivator and a way to satisfy social needs. Accordingly, the Spanish professionals suggested that human relationships and everyday social contact at work was another aspect leading to greater job satisfaction. Their descriptions are illustrative and highlight the personal enrichment gained from the large variety of people they work with: customers, other technical professionals, subordinates of different ranks working on-site, members of public administrations, material suppliers, subcontractors, etc.: “It is personally fulfilling because it enables me to interact with all kinds of people. You talk to people who cannot read or write ... You have to talk to architects ... You talk to people from the highest and the lowest social scale. You meet such a large variety of people, and

they give you a broader view of the world as you see it and the way in which you live, and you find out that there are hundreds of ways of looking at life. This fulfils me and makes me completely satisfied” (No. 12).

In this sense, the results accord with those found for some British (Barrett 1993), USA (Borcherding and Oglesby 1974) and Canadian (Zhou 2004) construction professionals.

### **Interest**

An interesting activity or job is one that a person likes and values. In fact, interest is one of the motivating characteristics of tasks in general, an intrinsic motivator also identified by Venkatesan *et al.* (2009) for Indian construction engineers.

In our sample most of the participants also seem to be attracted to and very satisfied with the work they do because they like it, enjoy it and feel lucky to have it. At the same time, they speak of an occupation they love and are passionate about, a job which fulfils them and is what they have always wanted to do. A few even point out that it is a profession they have chosen and fully identify with, a beautiful and passionate profession, “which is my life” (No. 34) and even more poetically, they refer to the old master builder trade, of which they feel they are heirs (No. 12). Based on Maslow’s Theory (1943), all these expressions suggest they feel on top of the pyramid: self-actualization.

### **Variety**

Consistent with the findings of Sang *et al.* (2008) and Styhre and Josephson (2006), variety is outlined as an intrinsic source of motivation stemming from the work itself. Variety not only refers to the tasks to be performed, but also to the fact that since each construction project is unique, the problems to be solved are also different. The tasks are not tiresome, they make you think, and are a continuous source of personal enrichment and knowledge given the constant recycling and updating required. In conclusion, participants refer to variety as the opposite of monotony, inertia, boredom and routine, which are the consequence of performing a single task: “Each day is different from the one before and from the next ... it is very varied, you don’t have time for boredom or tiredness” (No. 18).

### **Learning**

Zhou (2004) identified “opportunities to learn new things” as one of the factors of highest valence for Canadian construction professionals. Additionally, Ruthankoon (2005) concludes that the possibility of growth is a motivating factor for Thai professionals and that they are happy when learning new construction techniques and gaining experience. In this study, learning is also among the factors most frequently mentioned. In fact, some respondents eloquently describe what it means to them: enrichment, recycling, constant renewal, continual updating and always advancing forward. In summary, the respondents speak of a job which enables them to increase their knowledge and excel, i.e. feel a sense of personal accomplishment.

### **Feedback**

Feedback relates to the amount of information received by employees regarding the quality and quantity of work performed and it may come from other people or from the work itself. Moreover, according to Maslow (1943), recognition is one of the means by which people satisfy their self-esteem needs. In this study several respondents stress the significance of recognition coming from others. More specifically, some focus on the recognition received from satisfied customers which might be the local authority in the case of public construction projects or the developer

in the case of residential units for sale. Reference is also made to the importance of recognition from superiors within the company, or architects from the management team who bring people to “show them my work”.

Our results are confirmed by other researchers, who also identified this factor for self-employed architects (Sang *et al.* 2008), South African quantity surveyors (Bowen *et al.* 2008, Bowen and Cattell 2008), Thai project engineers (Ruthankoon 2005) and the owners of construction companies and US project managers (Borcherding and Oglesby 1974).

### **Significance**

Despite being a sector characterized and criticized in Spain, among other reasons, for the speculation and lack of ethics and morality of developers and builders, there are still professionals who find satisfaction in the positive impact their work has on the lives of other people or on the physical environment. More specifically, this relates to the concept of significance, which was mentioned by several respondents.

In this respect, they outline the importance or social projection of their work, above all in the case of home building, since their work improves the quality of people’s lives. In short, a job which creates cities and houses, a “habitat” for humans, a profession on which even depends “the happiness of those who are going to live there”. This depiction motivated by social values echoes Halliday’s argument that professionals’ interests, in search of the collective good, extend beyond personal gain, financial remuneration and reputation (Halliday 1987).

Another aspect of significance related to self-actualization is associated to the building’s “permanence” over time. The activity carried out by these professionals to build the project transcends because it lasts a long time, and helps in physically shaping the spaces on which we live and which we call our own. In particular, some participants pointed out “these things last”, “seven years later you pass by and your building is still there”. Specifically, they refer to the immortality of the building, which outlasts its own creators: “You leave a print, a small print. ... I’m looking at my grandson, my grandson’s photo, and some day he will pass by there and they will tell him, “look, your grandpa built that”. And that will last” (No. 19).

### **Challenge**

Another interesting feature that emerged from interviews with Spanish construction professionals is that they were satisfied with the challenges involved in their daily work routine: the challenge of tackling a technical problem and attempting to solve it, of carrying the construction project forward with the collaboration of the whole team, the challenge of detecting errors, of negotiating with management; and even more strikingly: “making the impossible possible, what I call raising the dead” (No. 21).

According to Maslow (1943) carrying out difficult and challenging work can contribute to the satisfaction of self-actualization needs in the working world. In fact, some studies have also identified the challenges faced by construction professionals in their work as an aspect leading to intrinsic satisfaction (Bowen *et al.* 2008, Asad and Dainty 2005).

### **Dissatisfaction factors**

During the course of the interviews participants were also asked about dissatisfaction factors. They complain about having to quarrel all the time because of deeply ingrained adversarial attitudes and the tendency to conflict. Many participants share this view referring to discussions, persecutions, conflicts, unpleasant situations, lack

of understanding among the parties, struggles, give and take, etc. So they acknowledge the construction industry as an aggressive environment due to opposing economic interests: “you don’t like arguing, nobody likes that, but that is a very important task” (No. 15). This employment relations climate has also been recognized for UK by Dainty *et al.* (2007).

Another dissatisfaction factor refers to health and safety issues because of the consequences they have on civil and penal liability. They consider safety something unpleasant and a source of stress, and they also feel pessimistic and helpless because of the difficulty of fighting against the site worker’s negligence and recklessness.

Stress and critical stressors such as time pressure, quantitative work overload, working long hours and sense of responsibility also emerge from their discourses as dissatisfactory. Finally, among the most mentioned dissatisfactors there is the lack of professionalism of some participants in the construction process: the workforce, the building contractors and even other technical professionals.

Unlike with satisfaction factors, here all factors are of extrinsic nature and are related to work context. In many cases they accord with previous research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that the Spanish qualified professionals interviewed are satisfied with their job in the construction industry, they enjoy it and describe their overall work experience in positive terms. From their accounts emerge that the most important job satisfaction factors are related to the nature and content of the job, i.e. intrinsic factors, whereas the most common dissatisfaction factors have an extrinsic nature related to job context. Specifically, they highlight identity, interest and variety, significance of the tasks performed, recognition from customers and the daily challenges at work. “Social relationships established with all types of people at work” is the only extrinsic factor mentioned as leading to job satisfaction.

The results of this study are based on a reduced number of accounts, which provides a partial viewpoint of the experience of construction professionals, this being, perhaps, its principal limitation. Furthermore, since this was a cross sectional study, the changes in job satisfaction over time could not be explored. To better understand the complexity of this phenomenon, and for example, to analyse the influence of the economic cycle on job satisfaction, longitudinal studies should be carried out. At the same time, it would be appropriate to continue with this line of research by performing a quantitative analysis allowing for the validation of the qualitative results of this study. Although certain job dissatisfaction factors and motives for discontent have been briefly mentioned due to space limitation, they will be more thoroughly discussed in a future publication.

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