

# THE ATTITUDE OF CONSTRUCTION EMPLOYEES TOWARDS AUTHORITY AND EMPLOYERS

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Employee attitudes constitute an important part of the employee-employer relationship in every organization and have a significant effect on the success of the relationship and of the organization as a whole. Developing a non-confrontational attitude amongst employees has been recognized as an essential part in the development of employee commitment and provides the basis for effective workplace relations that enable firms to compete and survive in competitive business environments. In the construction industry, employee commitment has also been recognized as a necessary and important part in the achievement of the modernization demanded by its customers and formally initiated by Latham (1994) and Egan (1998) and the like. The initial findings from a study of employee attitudes of site-based tradesmen employed by a medium-size construction contractor, show that employees accept the authority of the employer and the authority structure in place on site. The findings also show that employees retain an independent attitude, essential for problem-solving and continuous improvement, which did not threaten the authority of the employer, but did contribute to the effective management of the work.

Keywords: authority, human resources management, labour, organizational culture, organizational psychology.

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of determining and understanding the attitudes of construction workers is because of their potential contribution to improving performance in the construction industry. Employees are central to the construction reforms instigated by Latham (1994) and Egan (1998), which set out proposals regarding how the construction industry could improve its performance and meet the increasing demands of its customers. One of the main recommendations of the Egan Report was the adoption of lean production methods, such as total quality management, supply chain management, integrated working, etc. (Womack and Jones 1996). These techniques require the positive involvement of the workforce, a point confirmed by Dainty *et al.* (2002) who established that all the techniques used in lean construction require the increased participation and autonomy of employees, which is a necessary component for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations. Participation by employees only occurs voluntarily, which means a positive attitude on the part of employees is essential, which in turn means that their attitude towards authority and the employer will be crucial factors. The importance of a participating workforce is reflected in the broader experience of post-modern organizations, who faced with the

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challenges of changing technology, increasing global competition, more demanding customers, plus changed social and industrial relations have sought to develop a strategic approach to human resource management; including commitment from their workforce (Goss 1994).

The employment relationship forms the core of most organizational activities and much has been written about the employment relationship, mostly from the employers perspective, which has produced a considerable amount of knowledge about the management of the relationship, less is known about the employee perspective and their contribution to the relationship. The employment relationship is a complex and multi-faceted construct, one of whose facets is authority, which is based upon power and the exercise of power. The nature, use and sources of power in organizations have been extensively considered by many management writers and succinctly presented in mainstream texts such as Mullins (2008) and Huczynski and Buchanan (2009) who generally concur with the concept of power established by Dahl (1957) and Weber (1978) amongst others, that power allows 'one person to get others to do what they want'. Lewis *et al.* (2003) regard power to be at the very core of the employment relationship, stating that the concepts of power, organizational justice and culture are integral to the employment relationship. Of these concepts, power pervades the employer-employee relationship to an extent that leads Rose (2001) to state that the relationship is in reality characterized by the power relationship between employer and employee.

From the employees' perspective the employer-employee relationship is a personal one between themselves and their line manager, who becomes the personification of the organization. Indeed, the significance of the line manager in the employer-employee relationship was studied by Sparrowe and Liden (1997) who argued that the prominence of the employee-line manager relationship shaped employee attitudes and behaviours, claiming that it is 'a lens through which the entire work experience is viewed'. Morgan (1970) found that in order for authority to function it must be recognized and accepted by those subject to it creating a necessity of 'acceptance' of authority in order for authority to be effective and the organization's objectives to be achieved. This acceptance of authority has been shown not to be absolute, it is conditional upon the values of the individual with regard to legality, ethical values, situational influences, culture and the personalities involved. Acceptance derives from the individual employee and their attitude towards it. McMahon (1989) identified the concept of subordination to be an important part of power and authority; he postulated that authority exists where the individual is prepared to comply with the directives of another. Subordination was categorized to occur in two ways, coerced and voluntary. Coerced subordination occurs where an individual or organization have the ability to threaten the individual in some way should they not comply, which in the modern employment situation will be largely perceived. Voluntary subordination occurs where the individual allows his or her self to be guided by someone else, for whatever reason or reasons, the authority in this situation is regarded as legitimate. Edwards (1995) showed that authority and the exercise of power by managers is contradictory, on one hand managers exercise control over the employee's actions and activities, whilst at the same time having to provide them with autonomy to allow them to make the numerous decisions that enable the work to be carried out. This is especially so in the construction industry where a number of factors oblige quite significant participation to occur as the normal way of working, albeit unrecognized. Factors such as immediacy of decisions, incomplete information,

variability of the task, remoteness from supervision and low density of supervision have been shown to demand the use of semi-autonomous decision-making (Coffey and Langford 1998).

Authority was identified by Bachrach and Baratz (1970) to be a type of power and defined in terms of 'where one person recognizes another's instruction as being based on some form of legitimacy and procedural reasonableness'. This definition directly links power and authority; it also identifies the issue of recognition and introduces the concept that power should be legitimate. Simon (1951) and Jennergren (1981) established the principle that in a work situation employees accept authority as part of the psychological contract that exists as a result of employment.

There is also a relationship of power to participation which was established by Schattsneider (1960), Bachrach and Baratz (1962) amongst others, who showed that participation occurred in the decision-making exercised by the authority, only where the authority was not disadvantaged by participation was it allowed to occur. Power was shown to be used by those in positions of authority to exclude those who they do not wish to participate in decision-making; it preserves control and prevents challenge to the legitimacy of the authority is central to the employee involvement and participation that are inherent to construction, albeit informally and unrecognized. The issue of power and its use was also considered by Lewis *et al.* (2003) who concluded that those who control decision-making (or non-decision-making) are able to maintain the status quo within the organization through the exercise of power. With respect to employees, authority is at the centre of the employer-employee relationship, providing order and certainty to the interactions that occur between employer and employee. Authority and the acceptance of authority by employees are regarded as fundamental part of employment and central to the success of the employment relationship (Marchington and Wilkinson 2005).

Aghion and Tirole (1997) identified a number of factors that increase the subordinates' real authority in a formally integrated structure, namely overload, a wide span of control, lenient rules, urgency of decision, reputation, performance measurement, and multiplicity of superiors. Many of these are recognizable features of the construction industry; they exist to a significant extent in the operation of the organizations on construction sites in the UK. These factors that are conducive to participation and decision-making by employees have been shown to a significant extent in the day-to-day working practices on site (Coffey and Langford 1998) Dainty *et al.* (2001) Loosemore *et al.* 2001) the effect is to require employees to assume extensive amounts of authority in order to carryout their work within the time constraints placed upon them. Time assumes a major part in the employment relationship of most construction workers because of the way in which they are employed, rewarded and incentivized. The extensive use of labour only sub-contractors, self-employed and agency workers and the use of production targets linked to pay is the normal basis for performance management and motivation serves to exacerbates the situation.(Langford *et al.* 1995, Loosemore *et al.* 2003).

The assumption of authority and the extent to which it will be exercised potentially challenges the authority structure that exists on site, it also threatens the authority of the managers involved, consequently the study sought to determine the basis upon which employees, as subordinates, will assume authority and the extent to which they are prepared to exercise it in the work situation. The acceptance by workers of the authority of the firm and the authority structure in place is an important part of the

employer–employee relationship. A positive attitude towards the employer and the authority structure on site would indicate a healthy and functional employment relationship. A negative attitude towards the employer and a negative attitude towards authority could indicate that a dysfunctional employer-worker relationship exists that would impair the ability of the project to succeed.

Guest and Conway (2004) showed that the psychological contract forms the basis of the employment relationship, which is in turn built on trust, fairness and the delivery of what is promised in the contract. Trust forms an important constituent of the employer-employee relationship, power and authority. Fox (1974) however considers that the exercise of power and authority in the employment relationship is based on distrust, firstly distrust on the part of the employer, which in turn is reciprocated by the employee. Trust is a central requirement of the employment relationship and an important influence on its success, particularly the employee's trust of the employer. The contribution of trust of the employer to the success of the employment relationship is reinforced by Dan-Asabe and Radosavljevic (2009), who posited that where employers met the expectations of their employees, improved performance occurred and that not meeting these expectations through renegeing had a negative effect on performance. They used the definition of renegeing developed by Morrison and Robinson (1997), which stated that renegeing is when agent(s) of the organization recognize that an obligation exists toward employees, but knowingly fail to meet that obligation, either because the organization is unable to or because it is unwilling to do so. In a construction context these obligations are perceived to reside with the manager, to whom the employee engages in the employment relationship and from whom employees expect their fulfillment. The on-going employment relationship will be a series of obligations and expectations whose fulfillment will be judged by employees as to whether they have been delivered or not and where not fulfilled, whether this was deliberate or an inability to deliver. The level of trust and the success of the employment relationship will be determined by these judgements.

## **METHOD**

The study has sought to determine the attitude of workers on site towards three main issues, firstly their attitude towards authority and the authority structure that exists on site. Secondly, the workers' attitude towards, their employer, particularly with respect to the regard in which they hold the employer and to what extent they trust the employer. The focus of the study was to elicit worker's attitudes a questionnaire administered as a structured interview with individual workers. Interviews were carried out at the individual's place of work to ensure confidentiality and to maximize the relevance of the responses, it also served to minimize any peer or group bias in the responses and to maintain the respondent's territorial comfort. The survey used a cross-sectional sampling approach, interviewing every construction worker on the selected sites; supervisory and management staff were not included. The potential implications resulting from the different employment status of the workers were considered, but ultimately these were disregarded because although there is a number of forms of employment, the focus of the study was on their attitude to work as it existed at that time on that site. Where employment was identified to have an effect, these have been analysed and noted in the results. The issue of who was the employer did not present an issue for the workers, all regarded the line manager on-site as their employer in the context of the questionnaire. The interviews were carried out on four construction sites in the south east of England during the third/fourth quarter of 2009. The questionnaire used a range of question forms to determine key attitudes based

upon a combination of direct questions and indirect questions used in combination to triangulate the validity of responses. Where appropriate responses were quantified using a ten point Likert scale set against the recognizable verbal indicators used in the interview. The findings presented in the paper are based upon the first batch of fifty seven interviews, the first part of a larger on-going study to determine the attitude of construction workers towards a range of work and employment related issues. At this stage, the aim of the paper is to present the initial findings and analysis from the first stage of the study; a more detailed statistical analysis will be undertaken later when the study is complete and the full data set available. The limitations of the sample and its analysis are recognized, but the findings present a range of current attitudes. The limitations of a small sample from a single employer from a limited geographic region are recognized and will be addressed in the completed study which will allow for the findings to be extrapolated more generally.

## FINDINGS

### Attitude towards authority

The attitude of employees to authority was shown in an earlier study to be a major factor in participation (Coffey 1996). The desired attitude is one of a balance between obedience and independence. Whilst requiring authority to function, firms also require workers to possess initiative to be creative and innovative, manifested as independence and free-thinking, thereby positively contribute to the activities of the firm. This attitude was defined as a 'semi-antiauthoritarian attitude', too much and it would threaten the authority structure of the firm, too little and workers are unable to problem-solve and make the decisions that are a necessary part of their work. The attitude is also a major concern to firms and their management, who fear a loss of authority and control, consequently an acceptable attitude of workers towards authority is an important one. The issue was explored by ring-fencing, a direct question was asked, 'the boss is the boss and must be obeyed?' together with a number of other questions to validate the response.

*Table 1: Attitude towards authority (The boss must be obeyed)*

|                 | %  |
|-----------------|----|
| Yes             | 54 |
| No              | 4  |
| Not necessarily | 42 |

The results show a substantial respect for authority in the work situation, with more than half of workers accepting the authority of the firm. Contrastingly, only 4% of workers express the attitude that they do not accept the legitimate authority of the firm to make decisions in the work environment; it remains to be determined in what circumstances these workers would exercise their refusal, if at all. The results reveal that construction workers generally accept the authority structure that exists and they do not pose a challenge that would threaten either the individual authority of the manager or the authority structure. A significant proportion (42%) of workers who do not regard authority as absolute, is shown by the responses to subsequent questions to probably be a positive outcome. The form of employment was shown to have an influence on the responses to this question. The results reveal that the self-employed are clearly more accepting of authority than the employed, with 69% accepting unconditional acceptance of management compared to 29% of employed workers. The difference in attitude is further confirmed in the responses to conditional acceptance of authority (not necessarily) where 62% of employed workers responded not necessarily compared to 31% of the self-employed. This attitude is probably due to the inherent

insecurity of employment of the self-employed in comparison to those who are employed.

*Table 2: Attitude towards authority (The boss must be obeyed) by employment status*

|                 | All<br>% | Employed<br>% | Self-Employed<br>% |
|-----------------|----------|---------------|--------------------|
| Yes             | 54       | 29            | 69                 |
| No              | 4        | 20            | 0                  |
| Not necessarily | 42       | 62            | 31                 |

The issue of whether age had an influence on worker's attitude towards authority was explored. This revealed only a limited difference in the attitudes because of age, although the limited sample size at this stage does reduce how indicative the results are.

*Table 3: Attitude towards authority (The boss must be obeyed) by age*

|                 | All | <20 % | 20-29 % | 30-30 % | 40-49 % | 50-59 % | >60 % |
|-----------------|-----|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Yes             | 54  | 4     | 13      | 12      | 14      | 4       | 4     |
| No              | 4   |       |         | 4       |         |         |       |
| Not necessarily | 42  | 0     | 19      | 7       | 9       | 7       | 0     |

If the demographic mid-point age of 35 is used to distinguish between younger and older workers, the results show that 29% of younger workers and 26% of older workers accept the authority unconditionally, whilst 26% of younger workers and 9% of older workers indicated a conditional acceptance of authority. It is only possible to speculate as to the implication of this result, it appears that older workers are less likely to challenge authority; possibly experience has an influence, but further data would need to be collected to determine the reasons for this.

The final question relating to authority attempted to elicit the workers reasons for obeying their instructions by determining their attitude towards their foreman.

*Table 4: Do you carry out the foreman's instructions because?'*

|  | All<br>% | By age |      | By employment |            |
|--|----------|--------|------|---------------|------------|
|  |          | <35%   | >35% | Emp %         | Self-Emp % |
| a) you respect him                     | 9        | 13     | 8    | 10            | 13         |
| b) he knows what he is doing           | 21       | 22     | 20   | 10            | 27         |
| c) he listens and makes good decisions | 28       | 25     | 32   | 25            | 30         |
| d) he's the boss                       | 42       | 41     | 40   | 55            | 30         |

The responses to the question do not suggest a single reason why workers obey the foreman, they do indicate that there is a general acceptance of the foreman's authority. The majority of workers (58%) state that this is not because of the positional authority possessed by the foreman but is instead founded on their working relationship with the foreman. Overall, responses including the 42% of workers who obey because of the positional authority, indicate that there is a positive attitude towards authority at the interface with the management of the firm. The obvious variable is the age of the employee, but this can be seen to have a minimal effect on the responses. Employment status did not reveal any consistent or significant variations in the responses.

The work of McMahon (1989) showed that there must be sufficient disagreement with the legitimate authority's directive in order for an employee not to comply with it, this was tested in the study through questions that related to their willingness to carry out instructions. It provides an indication of the strength of the subordination relationship that exists and the extent to which workers would exercise their own authority in the

work situation. Further questions were asked that sought to reveal whether workers would use their own initiative in relation to their work or passively accept authority.

*Table 5: 'If the foreman instructs you to carry out a piece of work that you know to be incorrect, do you?'*

|   | %  |
|---|----|
| do it and say nothing                       | 2  |
| draw his attention to it and let him decide | 70 |
| argue for it to be changed                  | 18 |
| refuse to do it                             | 10 |

The responses reveal that a significant majority of workers (98%) would not unquestioningly accept authority and are prepared to challenge it where they considered it to be incorrect. The responses show that for most workers, once the challenge had been made they would then accept the decision. A small, but significant percentage of workers (10%) state that they would not comply with what they regard as an incorrect instruction. The responses to this question suggest that workers retain their independent thinking in a way that is congruous to the benefit of the firm, but does not present a challenge the authority of the firm.

To test the extent of the workers' attitude towards authority and to provide corroboration of the results given to other questions, workers were asked a question that related to their response to authority in practice. Workers were asked, 'How often do you carry out the foreman's instructions exactly, without change?'

*Table 6: Carrying out the foreman's instructions exactly without change.*

|              | %  |
|--------------|----|
| Always/often | 66 |
| Sometimes    | 30 |
| Never/rarely | 4  |

The results are consistent with the responses given previously in relation to authority.

### **Trust of employers**

Trust between employer and employee is recognized to be an essential basis for the employment relationship, with a minimum threshold level of trust being required in order for the employment relationship to function (Marchington and Wilkinson 2005). The importance of trust is also confirmed from the perspective of involvement and participation, Cox *et al.* (2009) showed that employees are more likely to be committed to their organization and satisfied with their work if they believe managers are sincere. Guest *et al.* (2008) concluded that trust lies at the heart of cooperative industrial relations behaviour, citing the evidence of Fox (1974) and Walton and McKersie (1965). To determine whether such trust exists, and if so to what extent, workers were asked to what extent they thought that companies were essentially honest in their dealings with the workforce.

*Table 7: Honesty of employers in their dealings with the workforce*

|              | %  |
|--------------|----|
| Always/often | 39 |
| Sometimes    | 39 |
| Never/rarely | 22 |

The results show that the majority of workers (78%) have a workable level of trust in their employer, sufficient to enable a healthy working relationship to exist. It is interesting to note that the results reveal a core of some 9% of workers who firmly believe that companies are never honest in their dealings with the workforce. The

implications and significance of this are not certain, as the evidence suggests that the employment relationship functions in practice. It may be due to the challenging employment environment that exists, alternatively it may be the result of deeper held attitudes towards society and authority in general. All the respondents were self-employed (self-employed made up 63% of the sample) so it may mean that their experience of being self-employed, often not by choice, has not been a satisfactory one. The level of trust of firms by the workforce is a positive aspect, particularly for workplace initiatives that require commitment and involvement of the workers.

A comparison with other surveys of trust provides reveals some interesting comparisons. The CIPD (2010) survey of employee attitudes shows 55% of employees surveyed believe their manager to be usually or always open and honest.

The survey of employment relationships carried out by Guest and Conway (2004) across a range of industries showed that 47% of workers expressed trust of their line manager, whilst 28% trusted their line manager only somewhat; 26% had little or no trust. Only 25% of workers expressed trust in their senior managers, with 41% expressing that they had little or no trust in senior managers. Analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey 2003 undertaken by Kaur (2004) showed that 49% of workers either agreed or strongly agreed that managers keep their promises to workers, 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The 2004 WERS study (Kersley *et al.* 2004) focused on the trust between managers and employee representatives and between employees and managers. The three items in the WERS 2004 survey that addressed employee trust in management were combined into a single scale, with a mean score of 3.60 on the resultant five-point scale indicating a moderately positive average response among the employees. Trust has positive implications for organizations, there is consistent evidence that various forms of direct participation are associated with higher trust, the findings from WERS 2004 confirm that direct participation is most likely to be associated with trust. Furthermore, there is evidence from other analyses of WERS 2004 that it also has a positive impact on workplace performance and on some employee outcomes (Guest and Conway, 2006). Workers' trust in management is associated with lower labour turnover, lower absenteeism and higher quality (Guest *et al.* 2008).

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that construction workers have a positive attitude towards their employer, which may be the result of expediency in the face of the circumstances that exist in the construction industry with regard to employment levels and practice. There is a workable level of acceptance of the authority of both managers and the employer and no significant threat to the authority structure of the firm or to the manager's right to manage has been identified. Workers do retain an element of independent thinking, sufficient to be critical of their work, which is important as it provides the potential for management initiatives that are more innovative and consensual. With regard to trust, in overall terms workers have sufficient trust to provide for the effective management of the organization. The trust is however, like acceptance of authority not unreserved or total, there remains a healthy amount of reservation. Workers have a pragmatic and realistic appreciation of their employer and of their relationship with them, this is essentially a positive relationship and provides the potential for the introduction of initiatives that require commitment and participation on the part of the workforce and which could lead towards more autonomous and productive forms of working, with all the benefits that this can bring



to the company in the form of innovation, improved productivity and better quality. Greater involvement and participation would almost certainly be possible; both objectives identified by Egan (1998) and CIC (2002) to be desirable for the modernization of the construction industry.

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