WORK-LIFE BALANCE AMONG ARCHITECTS

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While work-life balance is defined as enabling individuals to maintain a satisfactory equilibrium between work and non-work, within the construction industry professions this is complicated by project-based nature of work, which involves travel to and from projects, long hours to meet project deadlines and the need to demonstrate commitment in order to maintain employment security. Our research aims to investigate the extent to which work-life balance initiatives operate in the architecture profession and whether they address the needs of those employed there. This paper draws on qualitative data comprising 55 interviews with Chartered architects employed in a variety of settings from sole practitioners to large practices conducted in an overall interpretive paradigm. The data reveals significant concerns over maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance within the profession. Interestingly, it is (often) the salaried architects in practices who report the greatest difficulties in balancing their work commitments with family and other non-work commitments. The sole practitioners and principals/directors of practices/companies, while also working long hours, report much greater levels of satisfaction with their working lives with flexibility in managing this time commitment. Most employee friendly work-life balance was observed within local authority employed architects but this came at a price of a less creative and smaller jobs. Our argument is thus twofold: (i) where the existing debates on work-life balance have largely ignored the employment context this is an important variable in establishing and maintaining work-life balance within [some] professional occupations such as architecture; and (ii) while a seismic shift in industry culture is required to address the time management issues reported, this will be difficult to achieve because of the project-based nature of work in the industry. Therefore, for the concept to benefit employees work-life balance research must look into these contextual factors; innovative solutions are required to negotiate the time pressures.

Keywords: architect, long working hours, qualitative research, work-life balance.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE = EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT AND WORKLOAD PLANNING?

Work-life balance debates are gaining momentum within mainstream human resource management (HRM) literature. However, traditionally it has been considered a gendered issue which applies solely to women to enable them to combine work and childcare. The research is part of a larger study looking at work-life balance in a range of construction industry professions (see Raiden and Caven, 2010). For the purpose of this paper we are restricting the discussion to architecture. in order to examine the employment context in which work-life balance issues apply. We begin with a discussion and definition of the concept and its roots in the literature.

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Work-life balance defined

The concept of work-life balance originated during the 1960s as a response to the need to reconcile work and family and became known as 'family-friendly' working policies. As a result the concept was gendered from its inception and the focus on the male breadwinner model originally did little to redress the balance. More recently there has been a move towards the 'flexible working' in order to counter the gendered terminology (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005: 149). The definition or explanation preferred for this paper is that by Noon and Blyton (2007: 356) who argue that work-life balance should be about the

> *"Ability of individuals to pursue successfully their work and non-work lives, without undue pressures from one undermining the satisfactory experience of the other".*

This definition attempts to 'gender neutralize' the concept and remove the connection with childcare the primary reason for work-life balance initiatives. This is aided by the emergence of the 'new man' (Hearn, 1999), although the masculine nature of construction industry culture (Loosemore *et al.*, 2003) has inhibited the adoption of flexible working somewhat.

From here the literature review will draw structure from the comprehensive discussion by Gregory and Milner (2009) which identifies time management (together with inter-role conflict and care arrangements) as the core issue in the field. This will form the basis for the discussion here and also the analysis of findings to follow.

Time management

The construction industry is no exception to the majority with discussion regarding work-life balance focusing on time management and long working hours (Dainty *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, long hours culture is well-established in construction. Watts (2009) cites civil engineers working 60-70 hours per week as the norm. She describes the notion of flexibility in the professions as being

> *"an availability and willingness to stay at work as long as necessary and those who could not conform to this expectation were regarded as less loyal and certainly less committed" (Watts, 2009:45-46).*

However, it is not only the hours worked in the office or on site but additionally there is a requirement to travel long distances to and from projects at each end of the working day. Furthermore, it is necessary to balance the peaks and troughs that accompany a project-based workload in an industry which is characterized by 'boom and bust' according to wider economic factors. While long hours are considered counter-productive in terms of organizational performance, employee satisfaction and work-life balance (Gregory and Milner, 2009), in the context of our study the culture of long working hours is so engrained that it is considered the norm. This notion of 'presenteeism' is considered by many as essential in order to show commitment to the organization or job (Watts 2009) in order to attempt to counter the insecurity of employment within the industry. On the other hand Eikhof *et al.* (2007) argue that workers put in long hours because they are seeking promotion or find their work so rewarding.

National Statistics show that average working hours are 43.6 per week which includes an average of 2.9 hours of overtime (ONS, 2008). In many cases overtime is expected by employers: 11% of those surveyed by MORI for the DTI (now BERR) said

overtime was expected by their employers; 42% reported that they worked overtime purely because they had too much work to do and a further 21% worked additional hours solely for the money (DTI, 2004). Generally men are more likely to work overtime than women, particularly men without dependent children. However, it is women who tend to work overtime because they have too much work to do to complete in a standard working day whereas men are more likely to work overtime for the additional money. Emslie and Hunt (2009) report men are more likely to reconcile this by reasoning that the financial gain was of higher importance than spending time with their families.

On the other hand, Drew and Murtagh (2005) find that senior managers find themselves also unable to achieve work-life balance due to the long hours culture, and for fear of being perceived as not fully committed and 'not up to the job'. Male senior managers thus commonly adhere to the traditional 'male breadwinner' model with responsibility for the care of children and elders on their partners. This is one of the key difficulties in shifting the long hours culture; Drew and Murtagh (2005) argue that senior managers need to be seen as role models of good corporate practice in order to ensure that all employees can ultimately benefit from work-life balance. This is also the case in construction: fielden *et al.* (2000) report that the reluctance to change from inflexible working practices has meant firstly, that women are not attracted to the industry but secondly, that

> *"these traditional working practices act as an indirect form of discrimination for [all] workers" (Lingard and Francis, 2005).*

Despite legislation being introduced to encourage fathers to play a greater part in their children's upbringing, uptake has been slow possibly due to company culture (Stevens and Phillips, 2009) and cultural barriers where it is regarded as 'special treatment' (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Gregory and Milner 2009). In the construction industry there is also a "stigma attached to working sensible hours" (Watts 2009:47).

Meeting the needs of the employer and/or employees

It is perhaps unsurprising that work-life balance initiatives have been shown to exist primarily to meet the needs of employers rather than employees (Fleetwood, 2007; Taylor, 2008). Flexible working was originally introduced to meet organizational needs, or as a response to labour market conditions rather than as a mechanism of employee support. Initially many initiatives were introduced as a means of recruiting women returners to meet labour shortages rather than as a means of improving working life. Fleetwood (2007) argues that many of the proposals developed to serve the caring responsibilities of women returners and their partners and families were purely employer-friendly (for example weekend working) and that true employee-friendly working patterns are largely overlooked as they are less effective in meeting organizational needs. The argument develops to acknowledgement of the fact that many of the problems workers experience in their attempts to balance workloads are simply due to poor planning by employers; and hence employees are overburdened (ibid).

Only relatively recently the focus has moved to employee wellbeing as organizations have realized the high costs of employee burnout, absenteeism and/or withdrawal.

According to Taylor (2008: 64-65) there are four main types of work-life balance initiatives introduced under 'employee support': (i) flexible working, (ii) leave and

time off, (iii) childcare facilities and (iv) health and well-being. Flexible working comprises 'atypical' working time patterns; for example, part-time work, compressed hours, term-time working, job sharing, flexitime and homeworking. These arrangements may be set for a temporary period of time or on a permanent basis. In terms of leave and time off, it is now a requirement in law that an employee is allowed to take few days off at a short notice to make arrangements for a care of dependants (in addition to maternity and paternity leave and other such provisions). In practice vast majority of employees rarely take advantage of the opportunities available to them (Taylor, 2008: 65) so many organizations offer voluntarily more generous entitlement to support their employees. Beyond leave to accommodate for caring responsibilities, some employers offer career breaks or sabbaticals to established members of staff. Childcare facilities usually refer to larger organizations' provisions of nursery places for pre-school children or after-school and holiday clubs for school age children. Finally, 'health and well-being' embraces broader provision of support services with the primary aim of assisting employees themselves to reach a better work-life balance. Occupational health services are a well established example of this type of support.

In reality however, many organizations find it difficult to accept and manage the requirement for the much higher level of trust the employee-friendly working arrangements demand the managers and organizations afford their employees (Felstead *et al.*, 2002). This often makes implementation of policy challenging.

At the same time, poor take up of government-led initiatives like the paternity leave (CIPD, 2004) have been explained as being a result of industry specific cultural issues together with the abovementioned suggestions that men are reluctant to adopt work-life balance initiatives. Gregory and Milner's (2009: 9) work lends some support for this in that numbers of men that prioritize family over their careers is small, but there is not enough data available to draw exhaustive conclusions. As noted above, cultural issues are at the heart of this – still, it should not form a barrier to moving forward.

Next, we briefly outline the research methods used for collecting data from the 55 architects and discuss the results and findings of the study.

METHODS

In order to examine a traditionally female concept within a male dominated environment in-depth, inductive qualitative methodology was found most useful approach for the study. The key benefit here was the ability to let the important themes arise out of the data set together with the facility to probe into the nuances in each respondent's answers. The research comprises semi-structured interviews with 55 Chartered Architects employed in the East Midlands region of the UK. They were selected at random from the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) Register of Members and include a wide range of employment settings and contexts to provide a broad overview of employment and careers within the profession. Thus the respondents include partners/directors of practices/companies, salaried staff (both in the public and private sector), self-employed, labour-only sub-contractors and one academic from a School of Architecture. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was carried out using NUD.IST software.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In brief quantitative terms, all 55 architects interviewed mentioned long working hours as a problem although many of those who were self-employed mentioned it in

the context of their previous employment as salaried practice staff rather than as an aspect of their current working situation. The main themes arising from the interviews were long working hours; lack of flexibility/control over working time; and, to a lesser extent, travel. These three themes will now be used to structure the research findings below.

Long working hours

In line with the literature review, the respondents identified long working hours as an accepted part of the culture of being employed as an architect, particularly in order to demonstrate elevated levels of commitment. The periods of economic and employment uncertainty which prevail in the construction industry, and thus architecture profession, have created a climate where it is necessary to demonstrate high dedication in order to retain one's job. Many mention working at home in the evenings and at weekends in order to feel they can keep up with the workload. The average daily working time was regularly around 10 hours; similar to Watts' (2009) findings on the working hours of civil engineers, both over the national average (ONS, 2008). One salaried architect reported that an easy week would be 40 hours whereas another stated that:

> *"You're always expected to do overtime, always ... unpaid but expected, it's general for everybody, it's not whether you're male or female ... you just do it".*

In contrast with Fowler and Wilson (2004: 114) who found many more men in the industry viewing overtime as essential, no difference was evident between the men and women in the sample.

The project based nature of the work means that there are peaks and troughs which have to be managed. Practices are reluctant to take on extra staff during the peaks in fear that they may not be able to provide work for them during the troughs. It is almost impossible for practices to predict staffing requirements far enough ahead and thus the outcome often means weekend working. The longer working hours can lead to ill-health and family problems as the following quote from a salaried architect illustrates:

> *"Before I went on holiday I was nearly losing my mind, I'd worked 18 days on the trot, we worked two whole weekends and three whole weeks before I collapsed with a bad neck and since then I've realized it's just not worth it ... before I'd be there 'til nine at night ... we'd not even get a proper lunch break ... I worked it out 'cos I had a dispute with the partner and last year I worked out I did 300 hours overtime, unpaid... I made myself ill as well but that was very much because they wouldn't appreciate we were overworked, they just thought we'll just get on with it and they didn't seem to appreciate [it], there was just no reprieve."*

In another firm:

> *"We've just had one guy at the office that has been stressed...to the point where he's divorced because of the workload, the strain".*

Local authority architects are prevented from overworking to this extent as having to 'clock in' and out makes for greater transparency in working time coupled with tighter restrictions on numbers of hours worked. One local authority employed salaried architect said

> *"It's fantastic, you're thrown out of the building at 6.30pm!"*

However, another respondent from a local authority admitted that she still took work home in the evenings. There is a trade-off in terms of the type of work: the projects tend to be less creative and smaller but this can be countered by relative job security and clearly defined working hours and flexi-time.

There are stark differences in attitude towards long working hours between the salaried architects' accounts reported above and the company principals and self-employed. One female company director reported working 75 hours a week; but, because "the employer" is her company she felt she was investing in her future and therefore did not resent the long hours. When she was asked about work-life balance, she replied "What's that?" Similarly, one of the male sole practitioners said to regularly work from 8am to 8pm (12 hour day) but combined work-related trips into his local town with a swim and a round of golf, or walked his dogs in the middle of the day. He describes it: "mixing business with pleasure". Another respondent described how she used to work very long hours but had cut them back after realization that:

> *"there's more to life than work".*

An intriguing paradox is apparent here. On the one hand, there is a lack of understanding on the part of the salaried architects' employers about their employees' work-life balance and the respondents highlight significant concerns regarding this. At the same time, while the self-employed work equally long hours, their attitude is notably positive. This contrast between the salaried and self-employed architects is fascinating – it is not as if there is a trade off between employment security and work-life balance with the salaried architects as keeping up with the job is a key driver for working the long hours. Cleverly many of the self-employed have developed a niche specialism, such as conservation or as an expert witness, as a mean to guarantee them an element of job security. Central to the dissatisfaction of the salaried architects thus appears to feature a lack of control over their working lives. Clearly, the [time] demands of employers take priority over the work-life balance of their employees and thus the historical view of 'flexibility' serving the employer interests prevails (Fleetwood, 2007; Taylor, 2008).

Lack of control/flexibility over working time

Flexibility in terms of working time, clearly, is more evident among those who are self-employed, sole practitioners or company principals than those who are employed by practices; a theme also noted by Carter and Cannon (1988). The abovementioned differences in attitude between them are further highlighted here. Particularly for the self-employed respondents, flexibility is attractive and important as illustrated in the following quote:

> *"I feel I ought to be able to work on it the hours that I want to. It [self-employment] has been very good for me architecturally and from the point of view of being able to organize my time".*

A practice principal echoes this:

> *"You work when the work is there and do it to suit yourself. It's very flexible being in the position that we're in. If I worked for a company it would be more restrictive … I'm probably a bit more in charge of my own destiny being in this position".*

Indeed, all the sole practitioners mentioned flexibility as an advantage, although one held a more reserved view by saying that it was impossible to plan the day because the demands of different projects may eat into the evenings too.

The local authority architects enjoy the benefit of flexitime, quite a common 'flexible working' type work-life balance initiative (Taylor, 2008), which for one helped a female respondent accommodate childcare:

> *"If you're in a local authority, it's a much better and easier environment to cope with children, I can take the children to school and still get to work".*

The other local authority architect, who had experienced long hours considered the norm in a previous private practice-based employment, now enjoys being able to

> *"be at home doing other things. That's where the flexi-time is rather nice, if I know I'm not having a busy day then I can go [in] a bit later and come home a bit … and that to me is such a relief compared to private practice."*

One of the key reasons time flexibility is possible in local authority work is because the majority of the work tends to be local and carried out within the local authority boundaries. These employees do not usually have projects or meetings which are held at considerable distances, as can be the case in private practice. As a result, it is easier to predetermine starting and finishing times and be able to operate flexible working hours. The same applies in cases with those who are sole practitioners or principals in practice and who have more discretion over whether to accept projects or not. One such respondent reflects on the beauty of flexibility:

> *"I always feel it's a silly way to organize your life to have to work so hard and not do anything else".*

This lends considerable support for Fleetwood's (2007) thesis that many problems in balancing work and life stem from poor workload planning.

In sharp contrast, many of the salaried architects employed in practices reported that even small degrees of time flexibility are frowned upon, even by their colleagues!

> *"I can ask for an hour off and I'll make it up but it's not looked upon as 'being the right thing to do consistently'."*

Another example stresses received criticism from colleagues who perceived her as working shorter hours when she was ten minutes late each morning:

> *"I think I've almost won on the flexible work hours. I had a bit of criticism at one stage because I wasn't here on the dot of half past eight and it took all the people who walked out at five a long time to realize just because they'd walked out I hadn't necessarily been right behind them! I make damn sure the practice gets their money's worth if I'm going to be lax with my timekeeping."*

Many of the sole practitioners and principals also remarked on the lack of flexibility when they had been employed in practices; one had received a written warning for arriving at work late most mornings despite the fact she stayed later in the evenings and was actually working more hours than she was contracted for. Interestingly, although flexibility regarding use and organization of time was perceived as a benefit, none of the self-employed respondents cited it as a consideration in establishing their own practice.

Travel

Together with long hours projects which are not based locally are a regular feature of work in the construction industry and hence architecture. A practice may have clients who operate nationally and projects can be located a significant distance from where the project architect is based. Several interviewees mentioned having to travel considerable distances in order to attend meetings. For example, one salaried architect was working on a project 100 miles away and was visiting site two or three times each week commonly expected to attend 9 am meetings. In this particular case however, it was not the distance itself which she felt was a problem but the fact it was her first project after returning from maternity leave and thus she found the travel tiring. This shows limited attention to 'health and well-being' type of work-life balance initiatives (after Taylor, 2008).

Curiously, most architects said they enjoyed going out of the office on site visits as it breaks the routine. For the majority this is only once every two or three weeks. Only where the client is a national company or operates within a niche market, the contract often equates to a lot of travel. For one practice director this meant:

> *"I was in the Isle of Man on Tuesday, we've got jobs in Scotland and on the South Coast, anywhere but Leicester really, so we can be travelling an awful lot. Dealing with multiple retailers with branches all over the country, you have to go where there is a job."*

However, for the salaried staff travel to and from work was considered to be a greater problem than site visits. One architect had changed jobs to avoid the need to commute. Another said she would buy a can of wine at the station on her return journey home to drink on the train and help her relax. Yet another respondent mentioned her long commute being a problem during her pregnancy:

> *"I've been having appalling morning sickness and get very tired ... I've just had to say it's 5.30 and I can't do anything else because I'm shattered and I've got a 40 mile drive home so I've been perhaps a bit more 'Sorry that's it ...' and had to work in that. If I've had a major deadline then I've had to stay and I still have to get up at six in the morning to go on site or whatever. When the time comes I'll still be there to do my job wholeheartedly but at the same time you can't jeopardize your pregnancy."*

This example again shows no attempt to accommodate employee 'health and well-being'.

Finally, commuting was not an issue for the sole practitioners who generally worked from home; only one had separate premises away from his home. Others worked from 'study' rooms in their homes or from especially built/converted offices attached to their house. Several mentioned that they tried to keep home and work environments separate but were happy to see clients in the evenings and at weekends if necessary.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the traditionally gendered literature on work-life balance, our findings do not show a divide between the responses of men and women in the sample. At least in terms of men's wish for a balance between work and life (reflected primarily in their dissatisfaction for the long working hours and inflexibility in organizing their working time) and the aspirations and actions of women in terms of their professional status and advancement no support for the traditional gender roles were found.

Instead, there is a stark division between salaried architects and those who are self-employed or directors/principals of practices. The latter group of respondents report overwhelming satisfaction that accompanies their amount of control over their working hours.

Our findings support Fleetwood's (2007) suggestion that many work-life balance problems are caused by poor planning and organizing by employers and their expectations that employees will work (any number of) extra hours and travel considerable distances to meet workload demands. This is a theme that was raised by many of the salaried architects and is culturally embedded in the profession. At the same time, reference was made to the peaks and troughs that affect the construction industry together with the negative impact of the project-based nature of work in the industry.

However, it appears that all the problems in time pressure and lack of work-life balance are countered by the satisfactions that the architects achieve from the creative aspects of their work. This aligns with Eikhof *et al.*'s (2007) suggestion that people work long hours because they enjoy their work and see it as life affirming, although we suggest that economic uncertainty and job insecurity in the profession (and subsequent pressure to appear committed in order to remain employed) contributes significantly to at least initiating this behaviour/ mindset.

There is little evidence of organizational initiatives for work-life balance in practices and even informal practices were frowned upon. Those who had worked in practices before establishing their own and including those employed in the public sector all commented on the difference in having control over working time. This is a key theme throughout the interviews and is one area that organizations should be encouraged to investigate as a means of promoting work-life balance issues. The current situation is that work-life balance initiatives, whether flexible working, leave and time off, childcare facilities or health and well-being, are virtually non-existent in the profession. Those employed by local authorities are less likely to be affected by long working hours and large distances commuting to and from sites. While this may appear to be most beneficial for the employees in terms of time management, the trade off is that they are involved with smaller and less challenging projects.

Our argument is thus twofold: (i) employment context is an important variable in establishing and maintaining work-life balance within [some] professional occupations such as architecture; and (ii) while a seismic shift in industry culture is required to address the time management issues reported by our respondents, this will be difficult to achieve because of the project-based nature of work in the industry. Therefore, for the concept to benefit employees work-life balance research must look into these contextual factors; innovative solutions are required to negotiate the time pressures.

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