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THE CASE FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORK PRACTICES IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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INTRODUCTION

Kanter (1977) suggests that the fate of both men and women is inextricably bound up with workplace structures and processes. The construction industry provides a hard and demanding work environment. Companies operate in a highly competitive market with relatively low profit levels and pressure to complete construction projects within tight dead lines. With the threat of significant penalties for time overruns, professionals and managers need to ensure their availability while work on site continues. Thus, work hours are often long and sometimes irregular. Research suggests that participation in work, reflected in work hours, is negatively related to family participation and positively related to divorce rate (Aldous et al., 1979). Irregularity of work hours has also been identified as the most important variable affecting low marital quality among shift workers (White and Keith, 1990).

Construction industry professionals are also responsible for the delivery of projects that could cost lives or their company's reputation should the requisite quality, planned budget or specified completion date not be met. Negative work experiences, such as stress, are associated with marital and family dysfunction (Barling, 1990). Each project poses unique challenges and may involve the use of new construction techniques and methods. Continuity of employment is dependent upon successful tendering for new projects in a highly competitive environment. In this context, employees may feel concerned about their long-term job security or may be required to relocate frequently in order to remain in employment. Previous research has found job insecurity to be negatively related to marital and family functioning (Larson et al., 1994) and frequent relocation is likely to place pressures on the increasing number of dual-career couples (Kamerman and Kahn, 1981).

Research evidence suggests that employees' work experiences can have a detrimental effect on aspects of their family life, including parenting behaviour (Grimm-Thomas and Perry-Jenkins, 1994), perceived conflict between work and family (O'Neil and Greenberger, 1994) and marital quality (Hughes et al., 1992). There is growing evidence that having a supportive close relationship is positively associated with life expectancy and negatively correlated with experience of psychological distress (Cramer, 1998).

Many employees today are finding it increasingly difficult to balance family and work commitments, particularly when long hours and unresponsive organisations are involved. Managers may feel that balancing family and work should be a private matter for the individual employee. However, families are a fundamental part of society, and traditional management theory, which presupposes a lifestyle which segregates family and work spheres, is being challenged in many industries and by legislation. Societal attitudes and work values are changing. We now have higher expectations of family relationships and parenting.

For organisations to succeed they need to be cognisant of the needs of workers with family responsibilities. They will be compelled to from two standpoints. Firstly, by changes in legislation, which stem from a social justice base, and secondly, from an organisational effectiveness perspective. This paper explores changing demographic trends and societal attitudes and discusses issues occurring at the work/family interface. Some suggestions as to how the construction industry could begin to tackle these issues are provided and the paper concludes that construction companies need to change in order to recruit and retain an effective and motivated work force in the future.

CHANGING WORKFORCE CHARACTERISTICS

One major reason for the need for change is that the nature of the Australian workforce is changing in several ways.

Increased number of women in the workforce

Over the past 30 years the employment participation rates of men and women in Australia have converged (ABS, 1997 and 1994). The extent of this trend is indicated in Table 1. This convergence has substantially changed the profile of the Australian workforce, with many more employees now fulfilling family responsibilities in addition to working. In Australia, at present, in 59% of two-parent families, both parents are in paid employment (ABS, 1998). There has also been an increase in the number of lone parents in the workforce. In 1999, 47% of all female lone parents and 63.1% of all male lone parents were in the paid workforce (ABS, 2000a).

Family responsibilities influence an individual's participation in the work force and the employment participation rate of women increases dramatically when the youngest child reaches school age (Glezer and Wolcott, 2000). However, many young married women, who may be considered in the child bearing and early child rearing age group are also now in employment. For example, employment among women in the 25 to 34 years of age group has risen from 30% in 1960 to 66% and is predicted to rise to 79% in 2011 (ABS, 1994, 1995 and 1998). Many mothers work part-time in order to better manage work/home issues, particularly when children are young, however, mothers are found to work less overtime than their male counterparts, reflecting their preference for part-time work. Half of all fathers and one third of all mothers, however, regularly work overtime (Glezer and Wolcott, 2000).

Women are also more available for employment due to declining birth rates, which currently averages 1.75 (ABS, 2000b).

Professional women tend to have fewer children than non-professional women with an average of 1.6 and also bear children at an older age. The average age of the mother at the birth of their first child is 30.6 years for professionals and 27.6 years for all mothers (various sources cited in Bourke, 2000). Professional women also return to work more quickly after the birth of their first child than non-professional women. It is possible that professional couples may be forgoing or delaying child bearing in order to pursue fulfilling careers (Bourke, 2000).

Increase in the number of aged dependants

The recent change from institutional aged care to home and community-based care means that responsibility for caring for elderly relatives now rests with family members. With Australia's aging population and increasing life expectancy, the number of workers with elder care responsibilities is likely to rise. In fact it is predicted that between 1996 and 2041 the aged dependency ratio will double from 18.1 to 34.8. This means that for every 100 workers there will be 34 aged dependents (Gorey et al., 1992). Currently 70% of all providers of personal care and home help for the aged, terminally ill or disabled persons are also in the work force (ABS, 1994). This may be partly due to the fact that the employment rate of older women has increased due to increased attachment to work and for financial reasons. Furthermore, together with the trend towards delayed child-bearing and the increasing employment rate among older women, the aging population is likely to reduce the availability of grandparents to provide informal childcare.

Table 1: Employment participation rates of men and women in Australia

	1966	1998
Men's overall employment participation rate	84%	73%
Women's overall employment participation rate	36%	54%

Meeting family responsibilities

These demographic changes pose challenges for individuals who must now balance their responsibilities as employees with those of parents or carers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a recent report prepared by the ABS found that in dual income couples 70% of all mothers and 56% of all fathers reported that they always/often felt rushed or pressed for time. Only 25.2% of couples without children reportedly experienced this feeling with the same frequency (ABS, 1999a).

The changing workforce has also forced some changes to work practices to accommodate those with family responsibilities, most notably by taking time off work. It has been reported that, during 1998, 58% of people with dependent care responsibilities took time off to meet family responsibilities. The average duration of this absence was 9.4 days in a 12 month period (Glezer and Wolcott, 2000). Furthermore, it appears that both men and women take time off work for this purpose. For example, a recent Tasmanian study found that 13% of all employees reported taking time off in the previous three months to care for another person, 75% of which related to the care of a sick child. Of these, 43% were men and 57% were women (ABS, 1999b).

Changing attitudes about the men's and women's roles

The roles and expectations of women and men have changed significantly over the past 50 years. One consequence has been a shift in the importance of work relative to family and leisure. More women than ever before are in the workforce, reflecting rising educational levels, changing societal attitudes and declining birth rates. Whilst we have seen wide acceptance that childless couples both work, attitudinal and institutional barriers to women's employment resurface upon child bearing (Bourke, 2000). There has been an increase in divorced, blended, defacto and single parent families which has changed the way we view family as well as the work structures that have developed from the assumption of a traditional nuclear family.

Although women now reach similar education levels to men and nearly equal men in employment participation they are still found in more supportive lower paid roles (Squirchuk and Bourke, 2000). The percentage of women managers is rising. Yet, in spite of this, few workplaces have developed adequate strategies to accommodate part-time managers with family responsibilities (Squirchuk and Bourke, 2000).

Whilst mothers have traditionally spent more time with children than fathers, their increasing participation in the workforce means the time they spend is decreasing. Although fathers are not spending any more time on family, child activities or domestic duties they are spending more time alone with their children.

While working women still do more domestic work than men (Demo and Acock, 1993), a coping strategy for mothers appears to be to do less domestic work than in the past, work part-time, have fewer children and bear these children later in life. Managing work and family responsibilities can therefore be very difficult for mothers in dual income families and for lone mothers. The trend to delay child bearing means that an increasing proportion of couples will face the additional responsibility of dependent children and care of elderly parents either simultaneously or sequentially.

Although very few studies have looked at the effect of paternal employment demands on children it would appear that work hours and job stress have an indirect effect by increasing the parenting burden on the mother and decreasing the perception of fathers in a nurturing role. However, there has been a substantial shift in the expectation of fathers' involvement in parenting. An unpublished study by Russell (reported in Russell and Bowman, 2000) showed that fathers now spend more time with and are closer to their children than they were 15 years ago. However, 68% of fathers said they did not spend enough time with their children and 53% felt that job and family interfered with each other. Interestingly, 57% of fathers identified work-related barriers, such as expectations of longer hours and inflexibility, as being the critical factor preventing them from being the kind of father they would like to be.

With the increasing acceptance of gender equity among the current and future generations, family is being seen more as a joint responsibility. A survey of men under 35 with young children who also have partners in the work force, reported that they

were feeling more stress and were keen to change the corporate world to enable them to better balance work/life issues (Russell and Bowman, 2000). In another still to be published survey by Russell (also reported in Russell and Bowman, 2000), 63% of young men said they would refuse a job or promotion that had a negative impact on their family or their partner's career or they would refuse to transfer for the same reason. A US study of older teenagers found that 80% had mothers who work and 86% had fathers who work and 79% said they want a job that allows for personal and family activities (Family and Work Institute, 2000). It is increasingly likely that organisations will need to address these changing expectations in order to attract good graduates and retain a motivated work force.

THE NEED FOR NON-TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Traditional management theories and practices presuppose a lifestyle that segregates family and work spheres. Dual income couples, whether as spouses or parents, participate in many roles simultaneously. Managers may live with family responsibilities themselves, yet are taught that successful managers must remain detached and rational, not concerning themselves with the family concerns of employees. For example, widely accepted theories of motivation focus on employees' individualistic needs for self-actualisation, achievement and power with scant regard for employees' needs outside the workplace (Bruce and Reed, 1994). This approach was largely predicated on the view that the workforce is homogeneous, comprising males of European ancestry married to full time homemakers, who would take on the sole responsibility for child-care and domestic duties. In most developed countries this presumption no longer holds true (Popenoe, 1993), as the demographic characteristics reported earlier in this paper suggest.

In many industries the male-centred attitudes that structure the work place are being challenged and it is women employees that are driving the changes (Bourke, 2000). However as women are still highly underrepresented in the traditionally male-dominated construction industry this has prohibited any widespread reforms. Attitudes still exist that promote the image of the 'ideal' worker as a person who is able

and willing to put work first, within an ever-expanding time-frame. Male middle managers who exercise control over many of the human resources management issues at a project level have demanded that women comply with male-oriented work practices (Dainty et al., 2000). Within this context, women are forced to adopt career-focused life-styles or forego professional success. However, companies should take heed of legal precedent set in *Hickie v Hunt and Hunt* where it was found that the termination of a legal partner's contract on the basis of her part-time work status amounted to indirect sex discrimination (Bourke, 2000). The case is critical to professional women as it declares a new stage in equity – that is the accommodation of difference – without disadvantage.

However, it is not just women whose altered requirements must be met. The increasing numbers of dual income couples mean that men and women now share, to some degree, parenting and family responsibilities. Traditional management practices fail to recognise this diversity - for example, management activities, such as staff allocation, that have little regard for employees' personal needs. Changes in workforce characteristics require a shift in management approach to re-examine the values, roles and stereotypes and to meet the increasing expectation that a balance between work and family life be achieved. Peter Senge writes, "the artificial boundary between work and family is anathema to systems thinking" (MacGregor, 1999). The two must be seen as interactive in that what is positive or negative in one affects the other.

In order to achieve greater equity and diversity, there is a need to challenge career structures and work practices that favour full time workers with minimal family responsibilities. However, this cultural change will not come easily in the construction industry. Indeed, it has been noted that, however accepting of change they may be at the start of their career, male entrants to the construction industry inadvertently reinforce current attitudes and practices by emulating the behaviour of the managers who influenced their own career development (Dainty et al., 2000). Given the strength of the influences that perpetuate the status quo at middle management level, it is likely that the adoption of the non-traditional management approaches that are required

to accommodate the needs of the workforce in the 21st century will have to be driven from the top down.

WHY SHOULD CONSTRUCTION FIRMS CARE ABOUT WORKERS' FAMILIES?

Arguments for providing a workplace that is supportive of workers' family lives are numerous but can be broken down into two main categories relating to legal requirements and organisational performance.

Legal requirements

Laws now exist at the federal level and in most Australian states and territories that impose requirements on employers in respect of the family responsibilities of employees. Such laws fall under the categories of industrial relations laws, anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action laws and were stimulated by domestic and international trends (Squirchuk and Bourke, 2000). They present compelling reasons for organisations to address the concerns of employees with family responsibilities.

In 1979, Australia adopted the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and, in 1990, ratified ILO Convention 156, dealing with workers with family responsibilities. Both conventions have resulted in legislative reforms. The *Sex Discrimination Act* (1984) and its amendment in 1994 prohibit dismissal on the basis of family responsibility. In the past decade Australian organisations have moved from centralised wage fixing to a system of enterprise bargaining. It is possible that this has resulted in greater disparity between workplaces, with some employees of leading organisations achieving better conditions to help balance their work and family commitments. It would appear that Australian policy and practice does lag behind that of other OECD countries. This is evidenced by the fact Australia is one of the only two OECD countries that does not have paid maternity leave (Sex Discrimination Unit, 2002).

Unfortunately the reality is that even when work-family provisions exist they are often grossly under-utilised as the benefits are not accepted as part of the workplace culture (Lewis, 2001). While the female employees are "allowed" to use such provisions for family reasons, they are often then disadvantaged in their professional careers (APESMA, 1994). Furthermore, it is often considered unacceptable for male employees to use such provisions and doing so may result in them suffering severe career penalties.

Organisational performance

Both men and women have been found to experience home-to-work 'spillover' effects, whereby subjective experiences in one context impact upon performance in the other arena (Barnett, 1994; Eckenrode and Gore, 1990). The impact of home events on behaviour in the workplace has implications for organisational performance. Research suggests that the implementation of family-friendly work policies and practices leads to enhanced organisational efficiency, morale, productivity and company citizenship and lower absenteeism and staff turnover (Cass, 1993; Butruille, 1990; Fernandez, 1986; Baden and Friedman, 1981). Research suggests that the quality of family and marital life moderates the impact of job role quality on psychological distress (Barnett et al., 1992). Thus, workers with positive subjective experiences of family and marital life are less likely to suffer mental health problems as a result of work-related stress. Providing a work environment that is supportive of workers' family roles can therefore help to alleviate work-related mental health problems.

Dual-income couples are increasing in number (Paden and Buehler, 1995) and family-friendly work practices are increasingly valued and used by men as well as women (Pleck, 1993; Butruille, 1990; Fernandez, 1986; Burke, 2000). Furthermore, male managers who report working in an organization that allows them to achieve a satisfactory work/family balance also report experiencing less job stress, a greater joy in work, a lower intention to quit, enhanced career and life satisfaction, fewer psychosomatic symptoms and more positive emotional and physical well-being (Burke, 2000).

Employers should also recognise the expenses of training staff in the workplace to the point where they are sufficiently productive to generate income — US estimates suggest that, after 10 years of service, an employer will have invested a minimum of $US600, 000, in terms of salary, benefits, recruitment and training costs, for an employed engineer (Maskell-Pretz, 1997). Employers who recognise the needs of their employees are more likely to retain staff and retention is likely to yield extensive cost benefits to an organisation.

Women are under-represented among construction industry professionals (Court and Moralee, 1995; Agapiou et al., 1995; Dainty et al., 2000). Increasing the numbers of professional women in the construction industry is consistent with policies on equal opportunity but is also recognised to be an important facilitating factor in changing the construction industry's traditional adversarial culture (Court and Moralee, 1995). In addition, proponents of diversification argue it leads to a more responsive organization (Dainty, 2000) Furthermore, there is evidence that the construction industry will need to recruit more women if its future labour demands are to be met (Agapiou et al., 1995). Research suggests that, regardless of employment status, women perform two to three times more household work than their partners (Demo and Acock, 1993). Therefore it is likely that women will be more likely to remain in employment that is supportive of their family responsibilities.

SO WHAT CAN CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES DO?

There are many ways companies can assist employees with family responsibilities. Some of the options are presented below. The needs of individual employees will differ and change over time. It is therefore important that companies examine the needs of their employees and ensure that policies address these needs. Consultation with employees through surveys, focus groups, newsletters, notices or workshops is recommended. Furthermore, implementing such policies is often not enough. An organisational culture needs to be fostered within which family-supportive policies are understood to be a right instead of a benefit. Employees must feel comfortable about utilising these options without being branded as being lacking in commitment to their work.

Child care

Australian companies' provision of child care surpasses that available in most other OECD countries (Cass, 1993) but company sponsored child care is still rarely available to construction industry employees. While it may be difficult to provide on-site child care centres due to the limited space and temporary nature of construction work, other options for child care provision which construction companies may be able to provide include employer contributions towards employees' child care fees. Provision of assistance for care of children outside school hours, during school holidays and when they are sick should also be considered.

Elder care

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

Flexible work practices

Flexible work arrangements are one of the most frequently used ways to assist employees with family responsibilities (Fernandez, 1986). Flexible work arrangements cover a range of practices including flexible work hours, job sharing or working from home or telecommuting. While there will always be the need to have supervisory personnel on site, advances in the capabilities and use of information technology mean that working remotely is now feasible for many professionals.

Permanent part-time work

Part-time work can assist employees in maintaining a balance between work and family. Squirchuk and Bourke (2000) note that AMP consider their flexible work practices and part-time work options to have greatly increased their employee retention rate after maternity leave and reduced their overall staff turnover. From a company's point of view part-time work can provide flexibility to cater for peak periods (Napoli, 1994). This flexibility may help construction organizations to cope with the cyclical nature of construction demand. Permanent part-time work differs from casual work in that employees have a "permanent" contract of employment with the company and retain benefits such as annual leave, sick leave, parental and long service leave. However, it is important part-time workers are valued, not marginalised, and that they enjoy access to identified career paths.

Parental leave

Parental leave allows employees with a new child, either natural or adopted, to care for their child at home on a full time basis in the child's first year and still retain employment and accrue entitlements. In Australia, the

Workplace Relations Act of 1996, the primary legislative instrument at the federal level which regulates employee entitlements, provides employees with the opportunity to take 52 weeks of unpaid combined paternity and maternity leave, where an employee has had 12 months' continuous service with the same employer. However, Australia and the United States are the only two OECD countries that do not provide paid maternity leave (Sex Discrimination Unit, 2002). The provision of at least twelve weeks paid maternity leave is typically only available in public sector jobs (Cass, 1993). Some private sector firms attempting to recruit and retain female employees are reported to offer between six and twelve weeks paid maternity leave and a lesser amount of paid paternity leave (ILO, 2001). Construction firms serious about attracting and retaining staff may consider the provision of paid parental leave or offering part-time work to their male and female employees.

Other initiatives

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

● salary packaging of child care costs, school fees or elder care costs to provide a tax benefit to employees

● family related phone calls to enable employees to check on children or elderly relatives

● employee assistance programmes offering counselling for employees with personal or family difficulties.

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

CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between family life and work has dramatically altered over the past sixty years, however, these changes have not been reflected in the work patterns of professionals in the construction industry. In this context, the construction industry must be careful that its professionals do not leave

to pursue careers in alternative industries that provide greater benefits and more appeal. The availability and perceived quality of employment alternatives is recognised to be a key factor in job commitment and turnover. Already construction is dropping in career appeal, and shortage of skills has been highlighted as an issue (Agapiou et al., 1995). In the 1999 edition of the *Jobs Rated Almanac*, civil engineering fell from 18th to 70th position in expressed job preference and 14 construction trades were rated in the bottom ranks. Construction, above all, is a people industry and managing its human resources should be paramount if it is to remain competitive.

Alternative working patterns, such as job sharing, flexible working hours and part-time work have proved successful in other professions, both in Australia and overseas. These initiatives could benefit many construction professionals as well. Not only those employees with family responsibilities, but also those who do not wish to work full-time, for example, as a 'lead into' retirement, would benefit. The advantages to employers are likely to be seen in terms of higher productivity, increased retention rates and enhanced morale. However, the provision of benefits delivered through work-life human resources policies is not sufficient in itself. A workplace culture must exist within which employees feel comfortable taking advantage of alternative work options. In order to achieve such a culture, change must be driven from the top down and sensitivity training for middle managers and supervisors may also be required.

The authors are currently undertaking research work to develop a better understanding of the extent to which tension exists between work and family demands among white-collar construction industry workers. The study will enhance our understanding of the value of implementing work-family and work-life employment practices in this environment and also formulate recommendations to help the construction industry to meet the expectations of professional employees.

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