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"Growing pains:" Work-life impacts in small-to-medium sized construction firms

Professor Helen Lingard[1]

Dr Michelle Turner[2]

Professor Sara Charlesworth[3]

Abstract

Purpose – The research compared the quality of work-life experiences of workers in construction firms of differing sizes and explored the work conditions and circumstances that impact upon the work-life experiences of workers in small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Australian construction industry.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected in two stages. First, data from a sub-set of construction industry workers were extracted from a large scale survey of workers in Victoria, Australia (the VicWAL survey). The survey measured work-life interference using the Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI). Next a subset of survey respondents was identified and interviewed to gain more detailed explanatory information and insight into work-life experiences.

Findings – The survey results indicated that respondents who reported working for a construction firm with between 16 and 99 employees reported significantly higher AWALI scores (indicating high work-life interference) than workers in organisations employing 15 or less or more than 100 workers. The follow-up interviews revealed that workers in small construction organisations were managed directly and personally by the business owner/manager and able to access informal work-life supports that were provided on an "as needs" basis. In comparison workers in medium-sized firms perceived higher levels of work pressure and an expectation that work would be prioritised over family life.

Research implications – The research shows that the findings of work-life balance research undertaken in large construction organisations cannot be generalised to SMEs. Organisation size should also be treated as an important variable in work-life balance research in construction.

Practical implications – The research suggests that a better understanding of how workers in SME construction firms experience work-life balance is important in the design and development of work-life balance programs. In particular the challenges faced by workers as companies grow from small to medium-sized enterprises require careful consideration and management.

Originality/value – Previous research has focused on the work-life balance experiences of employees in large construction firms. Little was previously known about the experiences of workers in SME construction firms. The research provides new insight into the work-life experiences of construction workers in organisations of varying sizes.

Keywords: work-life balance, small-to-medium sized enterprise, company size, work-life programs

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[1] School of Property, Construction and Project Management, RMIT University
[2] School of Property, Construction and Project Management, RMIT University
[3] School of Management, RMIT University

Introduction

Work-life balance in construction
The construction industry is a high risk industry for work stress associated with excessive workloads, time constraints and deadlines (Sutherland and Davidson 1989; Leung, Skitmore & Chan, 2007). Work stress has been linked to lower levels of performance in construction project managers (Djebarni 1996; Leung, Chan & Olomolaiye, 2008). Ng, Skitmore & Leung (2005) identify work-family conflict as one of the least easily managed work stressors experienced by construction professionals. Similarly, Haynes and Love (2004) identify long hours, workload and insufficient time spent with family as the three most significant stressors experienced by construction managers in Australia. Lingard, Francis & Turner (2010) report that time- and strain-based work interference with family are higher among Australian construction workers than among other occupational groups in international research.

However, research into work-life balance in the construction industry has almost exclusively focused on the experiences of workers engaged by large firms. Little is known about the work-life experiences of workers in small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs).The present research addresses this gap by exploring the work-life experiences of workers in SME firms operating in the Australian construction industry.

The prevalence of small-to-medium sized enterprises in construction
There are various definitions of a small business. The Australian Taxation Office defines small firms as those with an income below AU$10 million and the Australian Bureau of Statistics classifies firms employing fewer than 20 workers as small and those employing up to 199 workers as medium. However, in an analysis of human resource management practices, Kotey and Sheridan (2004) further differentiate between "micro firms" defined as those employing fewer than five workers and "other small firms" employing between five and twenty workers.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), at the end of June 2012, there were 209,783 businesses in the Australian construction industry. Of these, 97.7% (or 204,949) are classed as small, i.e, employing between 0 and 19 people. In contrast, large construction businesses (employment range of 200 or more) accounted for 0.1% (or 186) of all construction businesses. Small businesses also employ the majority of construction industry workers, 590,000 workers or 62.1% of the industry's workforce. Businesses employing between 20-199 workers employed 183,000 workers (with 19.3%) and 177,000 (18.6% of the industry's workforce) are employed by businesses employing 200 or more people (ABS, 2013).

Work-life balance in SMEs
Few researchers have directly investigated the work-life experiences of workers in SMEs. However, the research evidence that is available indicates that SMEs tend not to provide formal work-life policies or programs even though they might respond to employees' needs on an "as needs" basis (Dex and Scheibl 2001; Barrett and Mayson 2008). Reasons for this include: (i) difficulty in getting SMEs to participate in research; (ii) the expense of collecting data from a sufficiently large sample of SMEs in traditional survey-based research; and (iii) an often low level of interest by large organisations that fund research, in the experiences of SMEs (MacDermid et al. 1999). It is unclear whether findings from work-life research in large corporate organisations can be generalised to workers in SMEs.

However, MacDermid et al. (1999) suggest some features of SMEs that differentiate them from larger organisations, and which could produce different work-life experiences for workers. For example, smaller organisations have less complicated 'flatter' organisational structures and decision-making is more centralized. Work in small businesses is less routinised and specialised and is often characterised by greater autonomy than in larger organisations. However, the opportunities for career development and advancement may be fewer in small organisations (Loan-Clarke et al., 1999) and formal mechanisms for the resolution of disputes are often lacking. Human resource management in small firms tends to be informal (Wiesner and McDonald, 2001; Mazzarol, 2003) and the absence of formal policies can reduce

workers' protection against discrimination and raise questions of fair treatment (Bird, 1989). Some research indicates that working for a small business can be deleterious to workers' health and safety due to poor working conditions, autocratic management and difficulty controlling risk (Wilkinson, 1999; Hasle and Limborg, 2006). Loosemore and Andronakis (2007) report that pyramid contracting, implementation costs, capability and awareness issues and fear of change all impede the improvement of OHS in small construction firms. Lingard and Holmes (2001) report that workers in small construction firms feel powerless to improve their work conditions and express a fatalistic acceptance of the need to sometimes work in unsafe and unhealthy ways. MacDermid et al. (1999) also suggest smaller organisations pay less and provide fewer benefits, such as dependent care assistance, than larger organisations.

Writers have distinguished between formal work-life supports and informal adjustments to work patterns made to balance work and personal life. These informal adjustments are temporary modifications of where, when or how work gets done but do not constitute permanent changes to work arrangements (such as part-time work, regular tele-working or flextime). Informal supports do not change the number of hours worked or the output required of a job and do not require that employees' terms and conditions of employment be modified. Behson (2005) reports that informal organisational work–family supports have a greater positive impact upon employee satisfaction, and are more strongly related to reduced levels of employee stress, work-family conflict and turnover intention, than the provision of formal work-life supports. However, issues of equity in the granting of informal supports can also arise (Hornung et al. 2008).

There is evidence that, in smaller firms social groupings are less rigidly formed and there is reduced social distance between members, creating closer working relationships and a more supportive organisational environment than exists in larger companies (Bird, 1989). Practical support from co-workers and supervisors is linked to positive work-family interaction in large construction firms (Lingard et al., 2010). Social networks and management practices change as small businesses grow, with a heavier reliance upon informal relationships in the initial start-up stage and a heavier reliance upon formal relationships as the business grows (Peltier and Naidu, 2012). However, little is presently known about the work-life experiences of workers as companies grow and human resource management practices become more formal.

Aim
The research combined two data sources to explore the work-life experiences of workers in SME construction firms. Specific objectives were:
(i)   To compare the quality of work-life experiences of workers in construction firms of differing sizes; and
(ii)   To explore the work conditions and circumstances that impact upon the work-life experiences of workers in SME construction firms.

Research Methods

Data collection
Data were collected in two stages. First, data from a sub-set of construction industry workers were extracted from the VicWAL survey sample. The VicWAL survey was conducted in July 2009 with 3007 employees living and working in regional, rural and metropolitan Victoria. The target group for the VicWAL survey was employees (that is, people working for salaries or wages) living in Victoria who were aged 18 years and over. People who were self-employed were only included if they also held another job as an employee. The sample was weighted for age and sex using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Labour Force data (ABS 2009) for Victoria, Australia's second largest state. While the weighted sample closely resembles the ABS employed population data in terms of age and sex, there were some differences in the representation of specific industries and occupations (see Haynes et al. 2010).

The ABS ANZSIC classification comprises 19 main industries of which construction is one (ABS 2006). The construction industry division comprises three sub-divisions, building construction, heavy and civil engineering construction and construction services. The construction industry was under-represented in the VicWAL survey, comprising 6.1% of survey respondents compared to 9.1% of employed persons as estimated by the ABS. However the gender distribution (91% male) within the VicWAL construction industry sample is similar to that in the ABS construction industry data (89% male). Further the occupational distribution within the VicWAL construction industry sample is broadly similar to that in the ABS construction industry data, with technicians and trade workers and labourers forming the largest occupational groupings (ABS 2009).

The VicWAL survey included five questions asking respondents to ascertain the degree of work-life interference they experienced. These five questions (gauging work interference with activities outside work, work interference with time with family and friends, work interference with community connections, satisfaction with overall work–life balance and a feeling of being rushed or pressed for time) comprise the Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) (see Pocock et al. 2007, 2009; Skinner and Pocock 2008).

The AWALI is a standardized scale calculated by taking the average of responses to these five questions so that the minimum score on the index is 0 (indicating the best possible work-life interaction) and the maximum score is 100 (the worst possible work-life interference). The five-item work-life index has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α = .82) (Pocock et al. 2009). The initial VicWAL survey requested respondents to supply their names and contact details if they were willing to be interviewed at a later date. A sub-set of the construction industry respondents was purposefully selected to participate in a telephone interview. The purpose of the interviews was to explore possible reasons for differences in work-life experiences evidenced by variation in AWALI scores among the construction industry respondents to the VicWAL survey. The criteria for inclusion were that the interviewee worked for a firm employing fewer than 199 persons, and had previously provided contact details and agreed to an interview. Telephone interviews were conducted in April and May 2011 and explored how working in an SME construction firm impacts on work-life balance.

Results

VicWAL survey data
Of the 3007 respondents to the VicWAL survey, 184 worked in the construction industry, representing 6.2% of the total VicWAL dataset. The VicWAL survey data confirmed the prevalence of small businesses in the construction sector. A much larger proportion of the construction industry respondents to the VicWAL survey worked in smaller sized organisations of less than 100 employees (67.2% compared with 34.8% for the total sample). The results also indicate that construction is characterised by traditional work arrangements. A larger proportion of construction respondents were permanently employed (94.3% compared with 77.3%) and full-time workers (94.3% compared to 67.9%). The mean weekly working hours for the construction respondents (43.9 hours) was higher than that for the total sample (36.4 hours), reflecting both greater full-time employment and over-time. Construction respondents had a shorter average job tenure with their employer compared to the total VicWAL sample. The mean time worked by construction respondents with their employer was 5.3 years compared to 6.9 years for the whole sample. Also, a larger proportion of construction respondents thought it was likely or very likely that they would lose their job in the 12 months following the survey (15.7% compared to 8.5% for the whole sample). A larger proportion of construction respondents were members of a union, (32.3% compared with 26.6%), a far smaller proportion worked under a union-negotiated agreement (39.3% compared with 50.6%), which may reflect the concentration of respondents in smaller-sized firms. The mean AWALI score for the entire VicWAL sample was 40.8 and the median was 40.0 (i.e., 50% of respondents' scores are above 40.0, and 50% below). On the basis of this, scores above the average score of 41.0 were interpreted as indicating worse than average work-life interaction, and scores below this level were interpreted as indicating better than average work-life interaction (Skinner and Pocock 2009, 14).

The mean AWALI score for construction industry respondents to the VicWAL survey was 42.72, suggesting slightly worse work-life interaction than the average for the total VicWAL sample.

Differences by company size

There was substantial variation in the mean AWALI scores for construction workers who were employed by firms of differing sizes. Table 1 shows the mean AWALI score for construction industry respondents grouped by firm size. A one way ANOVA revealed that these differences were statistically significant ($F=7.610$, $p=000$).

Table 1: AWALI Work/Life Interference by Size of Employer

Number of Employees	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Less than 5	28.0	26	20.3
5-15	42.1	44	22.2
16 -99	51.9	54	22.4
100-or more	29.6	20	16.2
500 or more	46.9	40	19.0
Total	42.7	184	22.4

Construction industry respondents working in firms with fewer than five employees reported a mean AWALI score of 28.0, indicating considerably better work-life experiences than the VicWAL average. The AWALI score for construction respondents working in companies employing between five and 15 employees increased to 42.1, slightly worse than the all industry average. However, construction industry respondents working in firms employing between 16 and 99 workers reported a significantly higher AWALI score (51.9) when compared to all other employees in the construction sample. This indicates that construction workers in firms of this size experience significantly worse work-life interference than construction workers in general. Further, the AWALI score for construction workers in firms employing between 16 and 99 workers was also much higher than for the total VicWAL sample for persons employed by firms of this size (40.6). The average AWALI score for construction respondents in firms with between 100 and 499 employees was 29.6, indicating substantially better than average work-life interaction. Finally, construction respondents in firms employing 500 or more workers reported a mean AWALI score of 46.9, which is indicative of worse than average work-life interference.

Differences by occupational grouping
Further analysis was undertaken to examine whether construction respondents' work-life experiences differed by their occupation. Table 2 shows the mean AWALI score for construction industry respondents grouped by occupation. Professional employees had the highest AWALI scores (54.4). Operating and manual labourers also reported high AWALI scores (46.7). Managers, those in clerical and service roles and craft and related manual workers all had AWALI scores below the threshold of 41.0, indicating better than average work-life interference. A one way analysis of variance revealed that the difference in AWALI score between the occupational groups was significant (F=4.8, p=.001).

Table 2: AWALI Work/Life Interference by Occupation

Occupation	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Managerial	37.7	24	20.4
Professional	54.4	33	24.1
Clerical and services	38.1	13	21.6
Craft and related manual	36.2	62	19.1
Operating and labouring manual	46.7	52	22.9
Total	42.7	184	22.4

In order to ensure that differences in the AWALI scores observed between respondents in organisations of different sizes was not attributable to differences between occupations in organisations of different sizes, a univariate analysis of variance was performed. The results indicate significant effects for both organization size (F=4.06, p=.004) and occupation (F=3.41, p=.004), independent of each other. There was also a significant interaction effect between both organisation size and occupation (F=3.51, p=.000). These results suggest that organisation size has an independent effect on employees' work-life interference, even when respondents' occupation is controlled. However, the results also indicate that occupation and organisation size interact significantly to influence work-life interference.

Interview data
One hundred and twenty two of the 184 construction respondents to the VicWAL survey indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The interview sample was purposefully selected from this group and we attempted to secure a spread of interviews across regional and metropolitan areas, as well as including both male and female respondents. Interviewees included craft and related manual labour (tradespeople), operating and labouring manual workers and project-based professional and managerial employees. During the interview process, it became apparent that: (i) some organisations had expanded in size since the 2009 VicWAL survey; and (ii) some organisations had decreased in size. Given that a significant

amount of time had elapsed since the VicWAL survey, the contact details for some respondents were no longer valid. As a result, the availability of respondents to participate in an interview became a third criterion inclusion in the interview sample.

Fifteen interviews were conducted, and the characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 3. Twelve (80%) participants were male and three (20%) were female. Ten (66%) participants were partnered. Two (13%) participants lived alone, three (20%) lived away from home for work, two (13%) lived with their parents, two (13%) lived with their partner, five (33%) lived with their partner and children, and one (7%) lived with house mates. Eleven (73%) had children. Eight (53%) participants were located in a rural location, one (7%) in a regional location, and six (40%) in a metro location. Two (13%) of the participants were labourers, five (33%) machinery operator and drivers, two (13%) technician and trades, one (7%) professional, and five (33%) managers. Six (40%) worked in a small company of 1 – 15 employees, seven (46%) worked in a small to medium company of 16 – 99, and two (13%) worked in a larger company of hundred or more employees.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of the sample

	N	%		N	%
Gender			**Location**		
Male	12	80	Rural	8	53
Female	3	20	Regional	1	7
Partnered			Metro	6	40
Yes	10	66	**Occupation**		
No	5	34	Labourer	2	13
Household structure			Machinery Operator and Driver	5	33
Live alone	2	13	Technician and Trades	2	13
Live away from home for work	3	20	Professional	1	7
Live with parents	2	13	Manager	5	33
Live with partner	2	13	**Size of employer**		
Live with partner and children	5	33	1-15	6	40
Live with house mates	1	7	16 – 99	7	46
Children			100+	2	13
Yes	11	73			
No	4	27			

Thematic content analysis of interview data according to company size resulted in the emergence of varying themes relevant to participants' experiences of work-life balance. Themes are considered according to firm size and include organisational structure, formal or informal support, project size and predictability, and organisational culture.

Small (1-15 employees)
Organisational structure emerged as a theme which impacted participants' experience of work-life balance. Participants reported a flat organisational structure in which they had direct access to the owner who was usually also the manager. Some participants worked "side-by-side" with the owner/manager every day. The owner/manager knew the participants on a personal level, and was subsequently aware of participants' family situation, such as number and age of children. JE, working for a firm of seven, perceived that her manager actively supported the work-life balance of workers who were parents of dependent-aged children. JE commented: "*The fellow that owns the business has children but his children have grown up ..... he's very, very accepting of that. And the commitments that people just have because they're parents*". Some participants referred to their manager as 'family' or as a 'mate'. For example, DU, working in a company of ten employees commented on the relationship he had with his manager: "*He was more of a mate than a boss in that sort of sense*". Participants indicated that they felt comfortable and able to manage their working hours and felt as though they had support for work-life balance. RA,

working in a company of four explained: "*'Cause I would just ring him (owner) and tell him. I need to duck off, okay just, I mean he's forever yelling at me, this is my boss, have a couple of days off. Take a long weekend.*"

The informal nature of support was a theme raised by participants. There were usually no formal human resources policies to support work-life balance. Instead supports, such as flexibility of work hours, were ad hoc, informal and agreed directly between the owner/manager and the worker. Arrangements such as flexibility of start and finish time were based on a trust arrangement with the owner/manager. MA, working in a firm of ten commented: "*It's informal but it's also a high trust arrangement. And I could just say to my employer, "I need to do this" and he will say fine. And he wouldn't say, "oh okay, how many hours have you got owing", he wouldn't say that to me. He just trusts me to do the right thing*". While there were often no formal supports in a small firm, participants indicated that the relationship they had with their manager functioned as a support mechanism that allowed them to manage their own work-life balance through practices such as flexibility and taking time off for personal and family reasons. For example, TE, working in a firm of nine, explained that he didn't require prior approval from his manager to leave work for personal reasons. Instead, he advised his manager: "*I've got a dentist's appointment and I won't be here.*"

The ability to negotiate working hours and flexibility around working time emerged as a theme for participants working in small firms. Prior to commencing their role, some participants had negotiated part time working hours so that they were able to pick their children up from school. MA, working in a firm of ten commented: "*I work Monday to Friday, I start at 9:30 and finish at 2:30. And that way I'm able to drop kids off, pick kids up and yeah, still have the afternoons to do whatever activities they're involved in*". Other participants were able to manage their own working time to enable completion of tasks outside of work. RA, working in a firm of four commented: "*I work 7:30 till 4:00. That's it. I have a fantastic boss..... I can nick out and do stuff or if I need a day off, I can take a day off. It is actually quite easy*". JE, working for a firm of seven explained how she needed to take time off from work to take her son to monthly appointments and was able to work extra time in advance: "*The time that I've accrued as extra time and put that aside as knowing that I've got to go to the orthodontist next month. So I might just do an extra half an hour here or there and I always do that and I've always got the time to cover it*".

Size of project emerged as a theme for participants working in a small firm. This was primarily due to the limited access to resources and the inability to quickly respond to an unplanned event or the fluctuating demands of a large project. JE, an office manager working in a firm with seven people commented: "*I guess things became more demanding generally in the practice when we were engaged to work on those bigger projects, simply because as a small firm we would often find ourselves struggling for resources and in the country it's difficult to get you know, resources quickly when you need them*". Similarly, MI, an office manager working in a firm of two workers, commented: "*Because we're limited with our resources I've got people that I can haul in from every which way and say we need to go to this site. We've got a certain number of people that are working for us*".

Small to Medium (16-99 employees)
The unpredictable nature of the construction industry emerged as a theme for participants working in medium-sized firms. Participants described this as something that negatively impacted their work-life balance wellbeing. The need for extra work, longer or changed hours, the reallocation of resources, a halt or resumption of work and the weather were identified as uncontrollable factors which create uncertainty and stress in construction work. For example, WA, a machinery operator commented "*It was the time that [the employer] would want you to actually do something desperate was probably the time that you really missed out on something family wise.*" Participants described uncertainty as the 'reality' of construction work but the impact of unexpected events was exacerbated by a sense of having little or no control over one's work hours. For example, WA also expressed the belief that a refusal to work when requested to work extra hours would significantly compromise his job security and 'livelihood' and put him at the "bottom of the pile" in the opinion of his employer: "*the pressure the bosses put on you, and if you don't do it (work overtime) sometimes you are overlooked for the next job*".

Organisational culture or participants' beliefs about expected behaviours in their firm or workplace also emerged as an important factor impacting on participants' work-life balance in medium-sized firms. Several interviewees discussed a perception of a lack choice about their time commitments to work arising as a cultural norm of long work hours and overtime. For example, RO, a crane operator, described the pressure he experiences from clients (principal contractors) which result in long work days of up to 15 hours, and little opportunity for time off. For RO, it is not unusual to work 14 days "straight." Further, the cultural expectations that workers prioritise work over non-work commitments (including family) was particularly acutely felt by participants in companies employing between 16 and 99 workers. CA, also a machinery operator and driver working for an organisation of 16 – 99 workers, commented on the expectations around working hours and the lack of work schedule control: "*So it's like you're told you've got a choice but you actually really don't have a choice. Yeah, that happens a lot doesn't it?*"

Participants in firms of this size commented upon their employers' expectations that that they will take on extra, often unpredictable and/or irregular, work or responsibilities when the need arose. They expressed frustration at the fact that they had little or no choice in taking on extra work at the behest of their employer, as RO commented "*We're expected to do it…you are asked, but you are expected to do it*". This expectation that participants put "work first and life second" was strongly emphasised among participants engaged in mid-sized construction firms.

Another theme that was particularly important for participants in medium-sized firms relates to the reliance on informal rather than formal human resource management practices. A perceived lack of employer 'leadership' in creating a healthy and productive in which workers can achieve a satisfactory work-life balance was commented upon by all but one participant in a firm employing between 16 and 99 workers. For example, one participant commented upon his inability to take rostered days off (RDOs) saying that, within his firm, there is no formal mechanism for taking an RDO and informal employer consent is required. This participant also commented that the lack of a trade union presence in small firms is detrimental to work life balance. CA commented: "*If you have a wet day then they want you to take a rostered day off, which to me isn't correct, but without a strong union presence you've got to let a few things ride I suppose*". With no formal leave entitlements or mechanisms to prevent continual overwork or to overcome an inadequate allocation of resources to work tasks, participants in the mid-sized firms felt they were squeezed into a situation in which their lives were dominated by their work demands. For example, RO, a crane operator, commented upon the unwillingness of some employers to provide informal work-life support, as follows: "*that comes down to your lack of flexibility…you still have to live don't you? You still have to pay your bills, you still have to get to the bank, you still need to go to the dentist. And I think we've become a mean society. It used to be…I need to duck down to the bank, they used to let you do that. But not anymore…I'm not paying you $35 an hour to go to the bank.*"

Medium to Large (100+ employees)
The two participants working for large firms differed in their experience of work-life balance. The first participant, AL, worked as an engineer and routinely did a 38 hour week with little overtime and no weekend work. The firm in which AL worked supported employees' work-life balance. AL commented: "*There's, I can't remember the programme but yeah they encourage people to look after themselves….. sometimes if my manager saw me working extra hours he'd say do that tomorrow, no need to rush or something like that*". The firm in which he worked had reduced standard working hours as part of the human resources formal polices: "*I think from memory they [the firm] used to have more than 40 hours, now they change hours of work to 38 and yeah we have been supported if we have, we were given hours per year allocated for annual leave and carers leave*". AL reported that he had flexibility with work start and finishing time. It was possible to "*start from as early as 7:30 and can finish up early as well*". AL chose his start time so that he was able to meet other responsibilities: "*I start about 8:30 because I take the kids to school*". AL was fortunate that he worked close to his work office and travel time was only 15 minutes each way.

AL's experience was in stark contrast to ST. ST was not aware of any formal human resources management policies and practices in his firm. However, personal preference of working hours was an

important factor in considering working time and work-life balance. ST's average working week was long: "*I'm sort of pushing out 60 to 70 hours a week, plus*". ST chose to live away from home in order to maximise his income opportunities. ST explained that his job was well paid and that was why he stayed in the role: "*I get paid my RDOs. I'm basically on a wage and on a good deal, yeah. Got a company car, fuel card, phone, laptop. I get my double time, triple time [for overtime]*". However, the consequent lack of work-life balance was a trade-off. ST was married and a father of two school-aged children. ST lived near work from Monday to Saturday afternoon, which was almost two hours away from home. He drove home Saturday afternoon, then drove back to work on Sunday evening. ST explained that he was working long hours and lived away from his family so as to meet financial goals: "*Let's make some hay while the sun shines, so to speak…it's not going to be here forever and it's put me in front. I nearly own my house. I'll own it in another couple of months, which is excellent*". ST did not appear to experience family relationship conflict due to his working arrangements: "*I'm quite happy with the way everything is. The beauty of it all, like I said, I've got a good relationship with the wife and the kids. They're obviously very understanding*".

ST had worked at the same firm for 17 years. When he had started there were six employees However, the firm had grown from 70 to 200 employees in the last two years and had moved from a horizontal structure to a vertical reporting structure: "*There's my manager and then you get the CEO. There's the CEO of the civil division and there's the CEO of the actual company and then you've got the owner*". SE commented that the organisation has lost its 'family feel': "*and all of a sudden we've got too-big-too-quick syndrome sort of thing….We used to all go out for tea, for Christmas and all that. Or we'd go to the boss's farm and we had a big marquee and it was on a thousand acres. Just run around on the motorbikes and do what you want to do. But now it's this sort of … well, now it's obviously money. That's this day and age, isn't it? Money, money, money*". Thus, ST perceived the organisational environment had become less personal and family-focused and more corporatized and profit-focused as the company grew.

Discussion

Work-life balance and company size
The majority of previous studies investigating work-life balance in the construction industry have collected data from very large construction firms and little was previously known about the experiences of workers in small or medium sized construction firms. The research results indicate that work-life research undertaken in large construction firms may not be representative of the work-life experiences of workers in small or medium sized construction firms. The AWALI survey data revealed a significant difference between the work-life experiences of construction workers in companies of different sizes. In particular, workers in construction firms employing between 16 and 99 workers reported significantly higher AWALI scores, indicating higher levels of work-life interference in firms in this mid-size range. The follow-up interviews conducted with workers employed by small to medium-sized construction firms revealed several themes that perhaps explain the high AWALI scores among workers employed in firms of this size.. Participants in small to medium-sized construction firms describe the unpredictable nature of construction work as a significant challenge to their work-life balance. Employers were described as being demanding of workers' time, putting pressure on workers to work long and extra hours above the standard work day. Workers employed by small to medium-sized firms described having little choice about the hours that they work, indicating their employing organisations have entrenched cultures and expectations that work will be prioritized over family. Participants working for small to medium-sized construction firms also commented that the lack of formal human resource management practices in their employing organisations has a negative impact on working conditions and work-life balance.
In contrast to the experiences of interview participants employed by small to medium sized construction firms, participants employed by small firms described their work environment as being characterized by high levels of trust and a close relationship between managers and workers. Although formal human resource policies are not in place, in small construction firms, the informal work-life supports work quite well and are perceived to have a beneficial effect. For example, participants in small firms described being able to access informal support as needed to in order to accommodate family activities and felt that

this flexibility worked well for them. This is consistent with research that shows that informal supports for work-life balance have a positive impact in terms of reduced work-family conflict and employee satisfaction with their work-life balance (Behson, 2005). Although some research suggests that issues relating to equity can arise when work-family policies and benefits are not formalized by human resource policies and procedures (see, for example, Hornung et al. 2008), participants in our sample of employees of small construction firms did not express concerns associated with equity in the availability of or access to work-life balance supports.

Although only two interview participants in our sample were employed by medium to large construction firms their experiences reflect two very different work environments. One participant described formal work-life policies and programs in place in their employing organisation. In this organisation work hours were systematically managed and monitored. The second participant working for a large construction organisation described how this firm had grown significantly and rapidly in terms of the number of employees, effectively expanding from a medium to a large size. The participant described how, with this growth, the "family feel" of the company was lost, reporting relationships became more hierarchical and formal and the organizational environment became less personal and focused on the achievement of corporate objectives. This participant was not aware of any formalized work-life balance benefits in this work environment and it is possible that, because the growth occurred rapidly in the period immediately before the interview, the need to formalize work-life benefits may not have been recognized.

The research results suggest work-life experiences, and the ways that organisations help employees to balance work and family demands change as construction companies grow. In small firms, the flat organisational structures, close relationships and informal work-life supports appear to work well. Our results are consistent with previous research that shows that formalized work-life balance support are often not implemented in SMEs (see, for example, Dex and Scheibl, 2001). This might be because they are cost prohibitive given the small size of the workforce. In very small firms, owners and managers tend to manage their staff personally and are able to respond to the family needs of individual workers (see, for example, Barrett & Mayson, 2008). However, as the number of employees increases, relationships become more distanced, the pressures of maintaining and sustaining growth are felt and informal supports for work-life balance appear to become less effective. In these organisations, especially during the transition from small to medium-sized firms, the scarcity of resources and a lack of managerial expertise in the management of human resources may continue to force an 'ad hoc' approach to supporting work-life balance. There is an inherent risk that, because managerial prerogative plays a critical role in determining access to work-life supports, as relationships become less personal and more hierarchical, inequality can arise. In larger organisations, formalised human resource management practices, including work-life balance programs and policies, are more likely to be in place (Barrett and Mayson, 2008; Dex and Scheibl, 2001). In medium to large organisations there is less reliance on ad hoc or informal work-life supports but, at the same time, the corporatised work environment may be perceived to be more focused on profits than people.

Conclusions

More research is needed into the experiences of workers in small to medium-sized construction firms to provide a complete picture of the experience of work-life balance in the Australian construction industry. Given that the majority of workers in the construction industry are employed by small to medium-sized enterprises, our research has important implications for research and practice. In terms of research, the results suggest that research undertaken in large construction organisations cannot be generalized to smaller organisations. Indeed, effective strategies to support work-life balance may vary depending on the organisation's size. It is therefore important to include company size as a variable of interest in work-life balance research within the construction industry and more research into the work-life experiences and appropriate supports for workers in small to medium sized enterprises is needed.

On a practical level, the research reveals that workers employed by small to medium-sized construction firms tend to have poor work-life balance relative to workers in small or large firms. This finding

suggests that work-life supports targeting these workers may need to be developed and implemented. In particular, as companies grow, our research suggests that informal supports for work-life balance become less effective and more formalized benefits and policies may be needed. Organisations in the small to medium-size range may not yet have implemented formalized human resource management practices, but possibly need to do so in order to prevent workers from suffering from elevated levels of work-family conflict.

Limitations and future research
Our research was cross sectional in nature. We collected data from construction industry employees using a survey and follow-up interviews. As such, our analysis could not capture the work-life experiences of employees as a construction organisation progresses through the stages of growth. Future research, using a longitudinal case study research design, is recommended to provide a greater understanding of the effects of organisational size and growth on work-life balance in the construction industry. Given the interaction between occupation and organization size in determining work-life interference, it is also useful for future research to focus in a more granular way on the experiences of different occupational groups within construction organisations as they grow. Notwithstanding its limitations, our research provides important new evidence that research involving large construction firms is insufficient to fully understand work-life balance experiences in the Australian construction industry.

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"Growing pains:" Work-life impacts in small-to-medium sized construction firms

Professor Helen Lingard[1]

Dr Michelle Turner[2]

Professor Sara Charlesworth[3]

Abstract

Purpose – The research compared the quality of work-life experiences of workers in construction firms of differing sizes and explored the work conditions and circumstances that impact upon the work-life experiences of workers in small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Australian construction industry.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected in two stages. First, data from a sub-set of construction industry workers were extracted from a large scale survey of workers in Victoria, Australia (the VicWAL survey). The survey measured work-life interference using the Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI). Next a subset of survey respondents was identified and interviewed to gain more detailed explanatory information and insight into work-life experiences.

Findings – The survey results indicated that respondents who reported working for a construction firm with between 16 and 99 employees reported significantly higher AWALI scores (indicating high work-life interference) than workers in organisations employing 15 or less or more than 100 workers. The follow-up interviews revealed that workers in small construction organisations were managed directly and personally by the business owner/manager and able to access informal work-life supports that were provided on an "as needs" basis. In comparison workers in medium-sized firms perceived higher levels of work pressure and an expectation that work would be prioritised over family life.

Research implications – The research shows that the findings of work-life balance research undertaken in large construction organisations cannot be generalised to SMEs. Organisation size should also be treated as an important variable in work-life balance research in construction.

Practical implications – The research suggests that a better understanding of how workers in SME construction firms experience work-life balance is important in the design and development of work-life balance programs. In particular the challenges faced by workers as companies grow from small to medium-sized enterprises require careful consideration and management.

Originality/value – Previous research has focused on the work-life balance experiences of employees in large construction firms. Little was previously known about the experiences of workers in SME construction firms. The research provides new insight into the work-life experiences of construction workers in organisations of varying sizes.

Keywords: work-life balance, small-to-medium sized enterprise, company size, work-life programs

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[1] School of Property, Construction and Project Management, RMIT University
[2] School of Property, Construction and Project Management, RMIT University
[3] School of Management, RMIT University

Introduction

Work-life balance in construction
The construction industry is a high risk industry for work stress associated with excessive workloads, time constraints and deadlines (Sutherland and Davidson 1989; Leung, Skitmore & Chan, 2007). Work stress has been linked to lower levels of performance in construction project managers (Djebarni 1996; Leung, Chan & Olomolaiye, 2008). Ng, Skitmore & Leung (2005) identify work-family conflict as one of the least easily managed work stressors experienced by construction professionals. Similarly, Haynes and Love (2004) identify long hours, workload and insufficient time spent with family as the three most significant stressors experienced by construction managers in Australia. Lingard, Francis & Turner (2010) report that time- and strain-based work interference with family are higher among Australian construction workers than among other occupational groups in international research.

However, research into work-life balance in the construction industry has almost exclusively focused on the experiences of workers engaged by large firms. Little is known about the work-life experiences of workers in small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs).The present research addresses this gap by exploring the work-life experiences of workers in SME firms operating in the Australian construction industry.

The prevalence of small-to-medium sized enterprises in construction
There are various definitions of a small business. The Australian Taxation Office defines small firms as those with an income below AU$10 million and the Australian Bureau of Statistics classifies firms employing fewer than 20 workers as small and those employing up to 199 workers as medium. However, in an analysis of human resource management practices, Kotey and Sheridan (2004) further differentiate between "micro firms" defined as those employing fewer than five workers and "other small firms" employing between five and twenty workers.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), at the end of June 2012, there were 209,783 businesses in the Australian construction industry. Of these, 97.7% (or 204,949) are classed as small, i.e, employing between 0 and 19 people. In contrast, large construction businesses (employment range of 200 or more) accounted for 0.1% (or 186) of all construction businesses. Small businesses also employ the majority of construction industry workers, 590,000 workers or 62.1% of the industry's workforce. Businesses employing between 20-199 workers employed 183,000 workers (with 19.3%) and 177,000 (18.6% of the industry's workforce) are employed by businesses employing 200 or more people (ABS, 2013).

Work-life balance in SMEs
Few researchers have directly investigated the work-life experiences of workers in SMEs. However, the research evidence that is available indicates that SMEs tend not to provide formal work-life policies or programs even though they might respond to employees' needs on an "as needs" basis (Dex and Scheibl 2001; Barrett and Mayson 2008). Reasons for this include: (i) difficulty in getting SMEs to participate in research; (ii) the expense of collecting data from a sufficiently large sample of SMEs in traditional survey-based research; and (iii) an often low level of interest by large organisations that fund research, in the experiences of SMEs (MacDermid et al. 1999). It is unclear whether findings from work-life research in large corporate organisations can be generalised to workers in SMEs.

However, MacDermid et al. (1999) suggest some features of SMEs that differentiate them from larger organisations, and which could produce different work-life experiences for workers. For example, smaller organisations have less complicated 'flatter' organisational structures and decision-making is more centralized. Work in small businesses is less routinised and specialised and is often characterised by greater autonomy than in larger organisations. However, the opportunities for career development and advancement may be fewer in small organisations (Loan-Clarke et al., 1999) and formal mechanisms for the resolution of disputes are often lacking. Human resource management in small firms tends to be informal (Wiesner and McDonald, 2001; Mazzarol, 2003) and the absence of formal policies can reduce

workers' protection against discrimination and raise questions of fair treatment (Bird, 1989). Some research indicates that working for a small business can be deleterious to workers' health and safety due to poor working conditions, autocratic management and difficulty controlling risk (Wilkinson, 1999; Hasle and Limborg, 2006). Loosemore and Andronakis (2007) report that pyramid contracting, implementation costs, capability and awareness issues and fear of change all impede the improvement of OHS in small construction firms. Lingard and Holmes (2001) report that workers in small construction firms feel powerless to improve their work conditions and express a fatalistic acceptance of the need to sometimes work in unsafe and unhealthy ways. MacDermid et al. (1999) also suggest smaller organisations pay less and provide fewer benefits, such as dependent care assistance, than larger organisations.

Writers have distinguished between formal work-life supports and informal adjustments to work patterns made to balance work and personal life. These informal adjustments are temporary modifications of where, when or how work gets done but do not constitute permanent changes to work arrangements (such as part-time work, regular tele-working or flextime). Informal supports do not change the number of hours worked or the output required of a job and do not require that employees' terms and conditions of employment be modified. Behson (2005) reports that informal organisational work–family supports have a greater positive impact upon employee satisfaction, and are more strongly related to reduced levels of employee stress, work-family conflict and turnover intention, than the provision of formal work-life supports. However, issues of equity in the granting of informal supports can also arise (Hornung et al. 2008).

There is evidence that, in smaller firms social groupings are less rigidly formed and there is reduced social distance between members, creating closer working relationships and a more supportive organisational environment than exists in larger companies (Bird, 1989). Practical support from co-workers and supervisors is linked to positive work-family interaction in large construction firms (Lingard et al., 2010). Social networks and management practices change as small businesses grow, with a heavier reliance upon informal relationships in the initial start-up stage and a heavier reliance upon formal relationships as the business grows (Peltier and Naidu, 2012). However, little is presently known about the work-life experiences of workers as companies grow and human resource management practices become more formal.

Aim
The research combined two data sources to explore the work-life experiences of workers in SME construction firms. Specific objectives were:
(i)   To compare the quality of work-life experiences of workers in construction firms of differing sizes; and
(ii)   To explore the work conditions and circumstances that impact upon the work-life experiences of workers in SME construction firms.

Research Methods

Data collection
Data were collected in two stages. First, data from a sub-set of construction industry workers were extracted from the VicWAL survey sample. The VicWAL survey was conducted in July 2009 with 3007 employees living and working in regional, rural and metropolitan Victoria. The target group for the VicWAL survey was employees (that is, people working for salaries or wages) living in Victoria who were aged 18 years and over. People who were self-employed were only included if they also held another job as an employee. The sample was weighted for age and sex using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Labour Force data (ABS 2009) for Victoria, Australia's second largest state. While the weighted sample closely resembles the ABS employed population data in terms of age and sex, there were some differences in the representation of specific industries and occupations (see Haynes et al. 2010).

The ABS ANZSIC classification comprises 19 main industries of which construction is one (ABS 2006). The construction industry division comprises three sub-divisions, building construction, heavy and civil engineering construction and construction services. The construction industry was under-represented in the VicWAL survey, comprising 6.1% of survey respondents compared to 9.1% of employed persons as estimated by the ABS. However the gender distribution (91% male) within the VicWAL construction industry sample is similar to that in the ABS construction industry data (89% male). Further the occupational distribution within the VicWAL construction industry sample is broadly similar to that in the ABS construction industry data, with technicians and trade workers and labourers forming the largest occupational groupings (ABS 2009).

The VicWAL survey included five questions asking respondents to ascertain the degree of work-life interference they experienced. These five questions (gauging work interference with activities outside work, work interference with time with family and friends, work interference with community connections, satisfaction with overall work–life balance and a feeling of being rushed or pressed for time) comprise the Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) (see Pocock et al. 2007, 2009; Skinner and Pocock 2008).

The AWALI is a standardized scale calculated by taking the average of responses to these five questions so that the minimum score on the index is 0 (indicating the best possible work-life interaction) and the maximum score is 100 (the worst possible work-life interference). The five-item work-life index has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α = .82) (Pocock et al. 2009). The initial VicWAL survey requested respondents to supply their names and contact details if they were willing to be interviewed at a later date. A sub-set of the construction industry respondents was purposefully selected to participate in a telephone interview. The purpose of the interviews was to explore possible reasons for differences in work-life experiences evidenced by variation in AWALI scores among the construction industry respondents to the VicWAL survey. The criteria for inclusion were that the interviewee worked for a firm employing fewer than 199 persons, and had previously provided contact details and agreed to an interview. Telephone interviews were conducted in April and May 2011 and explored how working in an SME construction firm impacts on work-life balance.

Results

VicWAL survey data
Of the 3007 respondents to the VicWAL survey, 184 worked in the construction industry, representing 6.2% of the total VicWAL dataset. The VicWAL survey data confirmed the prevalence of small businesses in the construction sector. A much larger proportion of the construction industry respondents to the VicWAL survey worked in smaller sized organisations of less than 100 employees (67.2% compared with 34.8% for the total sample). The results also indicate that construction is characterised by traditional work arrangements. A larger proportion of construction respondents were permanently employed (94.3% compared with 77.3%) and full-time workers (94.3% compared to 67.9%). The mean weekly working hours for the construction respondents (43.9 hours) was higher than that for the total sample (36.4 hours), reflecting both greater full-time employment and over-time. Construction respondents had a shorter average job tenure with their employer compared to the total VicWAL sample. The mean time worked by construction respondents with their employer was 5.3 years compared to 6.9 years for the whole sample. Also, a larger proportion of construction respondents thought it was likely or very likely that they would lose their job in the 12 months following the survey (15.7% compared to 8.5% for the whole sample). A larger proportion of construction respondents were members of a union, (32.3% compared with 26.6%), a far smaller proportion worked under a union-negotiated agreement (39.3% compared with 50.6%), which may reflect the concentration of respondents in smaller-sized firms. The mean AWALI score for the entire VicWAL sample was 40.8 and the median was 40.0 (i.e., 50% of respondents' scores are above 40.0, and 50% below). On the basis of this, scores above the average score of 41.0 were interpreted as indicating worse than average work-life interaction, and scores below this level were interpreted as indicating better than average work-life interaction (Skinner and Pocock 2009, 14).

The mean AWALI score for construction industry respondents to the VicWAL survey was 42.72, suggesting slightly worse work-life interaction than the average for the total VicWAL sample.

Differences by company size
There was substantial variation in the mean AWALI scores for construction workers who were employed by firms of differing sizes. Table 1 shows the mean AWALI score for construction industry respondents grouped by firm size. A one way ANOVA revealed that these differences were statistically significant ($F=7.610$, $p=000$).

Table 1: AWALI Work/Life Interference by Size of Employer

Number of Employees	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Less than 5	28.0	26	20.3
5-15	42.1	44	22.2
16 -99	51.9	54	22.4
100-or more	29.6	20	16.2
500 or more	46.9	40	19.0
Total	42.7	184	22.4

Construction industry respondents working in firms with fewer than five employees reported a mean AWALI score of 28.0, indicating considerably better work-life experiences than the VicWAL average. The AWALI score for construction respondents working in companies employing between five and 15 employees increased to 42.1, slightly worse than the all industry average. However, construction industry respondents working in firms employing between 16 and 99 workers reported a significantly higher AWALI score (51.9) when compared to all other employees in the construction sample. This indicates that construction workers in firms of this size experience significantly worse work-life interference than construction workers in general. Further, the AWALI score for construction workers in firms employing between 16 and 99 workers was also much higher than for the total VicWAL sample for persons employed by firms of this size (40.6). The average AWALI score for construction respondents in firms with between 100 and 499 employees was 29.6, indicating substantially better than average work-life interaction. Finally, construction respondents in firms employing 500 or more workers reported a mean AWALI score of 46.9, which is indicative of worse than average work-life interference.

Differences by occupational grouping
Further analysis was undertaken to examine whether construction respondents' work-life experiences differed by their occupation. Table 2 shows the mean AWALI score for construction industry respondents grouped by occupation. Professional employees had the highest AWALI scores (54.4). Operating and manual labourers also reported high AWALI scores (46.7). Managers, those in clerical and service roles and craft and related manual workers all had AWALI scores below the threshold of 41.0, indicating better than average work-life interference. A one way analysis of variance revealed that the difference in AWALI score between the occupational groups was significant (F=4.8, p=.001).

Table 2: AWALI Work/Life Interference by Occupation

Occupation	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Managerial	37.7	24	20.4
Professional	54.4	33	24.1
Clerical and services	38.1	13	21.6
Craft and related manual	36.2	62	19.1
Operating and labouring manual	46.7	52	22.9
Total	42.7	184	22.4

In order to ensure that differences in the AWALI scores observed between respondents in organisations of different sizes was not attributable to differences between occupations in organisations of different sizes, a univariate analysis of variance was performed. The results indicate significant effects for both organization size (F=4.06, p=.004) and occupation (F=3.41, p=.004), independent of each other. There was also a significant interaction effect between both organisation size and occupation (F=3.51, p=.000). These results suggest that organisation size has an independent effect on employees' work-life interference, even when respondents' occupation is controlled. However, the results also indicate that occupation and organisation size interact significantly to influence work-life interference.

Interview data
One hundred and twenty two of the 184 construction respondents to the VicWAL survey indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The interview sample was purposefully selected from this group and we attempted to secure a spread of interviews across regional and metropolitan areas, as well as including both male and female respondents. Interviewees included craft and related manual labour (tradespeople), operating and labouring manual workers and project-based professional and managerial employees. During the interview process, it became apparent that: (i) some organisations had expanded in size since the 2009 VicWAL survey; and (ii) some organisations had decreased in size. Given that a significant

amount of time had elapsed since the VicWAL survey, the contact details for some respondents were no longer valid. As a result, the availability of respondents to participate in an interview became a third criterion inclusion in the interview sample.

Fifteen interviews were conducted, and the characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 3. Twelve (80%) participants were male and three (20%) were female. Ten (66%) participants were partnered. Two (13%) participants lived alone, three (20%) lived away from home for work, two (13%) lived with their parents, two (13%) lived with their partner, five (33%) lived with their partner and children, and one (7%) lived with house mates. Eleven (73%) had children. Eight (53%) participants were located in a rural location, one (7%) in a regional location, and six (40%) in a metro location. Two (13%) of the participants were labourers, five (33%) machinery operator and drivers, two (13%) technician and trades, one (7%) professional, and five (33%) managers. Six (40%) worked in a small company of 1 – 15 employees, seven (46%) worked in a small to medium company of 16 – 99, and two (13%) worked in a larger company of hundred or more employees.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of the sample

	N	%		N	%
Gender			**Location**		
Male	12	80	Rural	8	53
Female	3	20	Regional	1	7
Partnered			Metro	6	40
Yes	10	66	**Occupation**		
No	5	34	Labourer	2	13
Household structure			Machinery Operator and Driver	5	33
Live alone	2	13	Technician and Trades	2	13
Live away from home for work	3	20	Professional	1	7
Live with parents	2	13	Manager	5	33
Live with partner	2	13	**Size of employer**		
Live with partner and children	5	33	1-15	6	40
Live with house mates	1	7	16 – 99	7	46
Children			100+	2	13
Yes	11	73			
No	4	27			

Thematic content analysis of interview data according to company size resulted in the emergence of varying themes relevant to participants' experiences of work-life balance. Themes are considered according to firm size and include organisational structure, formal or informal support, project size and predictability, and organisational culture.

Small (1-15 employees)
Organisational structure emerged as a theme which impacted participants' experience of work-life balance. Participants reported a flat organisational structure in which they had direct access to the owner who was usually also the manager. Some participants worked "side-by-side" with the owner/manager every day. The owner/manager knew the participants on a personal level, and was subsequently aware of participants' family situation, such as number and age of children. JE, working for a firm of seven, perceived that her manager actively supported the work-life balance of workers who were parents of dependent-aged children. JE commented: "*The fellow that owns the business has children but his children have grown up ..... he's very, very accepting of that. And the commitments that people just have because they're parents*". Some participants referred to their manager as 'family' or as a 'mate'. For example, DU, working in a company of ten employees commented on the relationship he had with his manager: "*He was more of a mate than a boss in that sort of sense*". Participants indicated that they felt comfortable and able to manage their working hours and felt as though they had support for work-life balance. RA,

working in a company of four explained: "*'Cause I would just ring him (owner) and tell him. I need to duck off, okay just, I mean he's forever yelling at me, this is my boss, have a couple of days off. Take a long weekend.*"

The informal nature of support was a theme raised by participants. There were usually no formal human resources policies to support work-life balance. Instead supports, such as flexibility of work hours, were ad hoc, informal and agreed directly between the owner/manager and the worker. Arrangements such as flexibility of start and finish time were based on a trust arrangement with the owner/manager. MA, working in a firm of ten commented: "*It's informal but it's also a high trust arrangement. And I could just say to my employer, "I need to do this" and he will say fine. And he wouldn't say, "oh okay, how many hours have you got owing", he wouldn't say that to me. He just trusts me to do the right thing*". While there were often no formal supports in a small firm, participants indicated that the relationship they had with their manager functioned as a support mechanism that allowed them to manage their own work-life balance through practices such as flexibility and taking time off for personal and family reasons. For example, TE, working in a firm of nine, explained that he didn't require prior approval from his manager to leave work for personal reasons. Instead, he advised his manager: "*I've got a dentist's appointment and I won't be here.*"

The ability to negotiate working hours and flexibility around working time emerged as a theme for participants working in small firms. Prior to commencing their role, some participants had negotiated part time working hours so that they were able to pick their children up from school. MA, working in a firm of ten commented: "*I work Monday to Friday, I start at 9:30 and finish at 2:30. And that way I'm able to drop kids off, pick kids up and yeah, still have the afternoons to do whatever activities they're involved in*". Other participants were able to manage their own working time to enable completion of tasks outside of work. RA, working in a firm of four commented: "*I work 7:30 till 4:00. That's it. I have a fantastic boss..... I can nick out and do stuff or if I need a day off, I can take a day off. It is actually quite easy*". JE, working for a firm of seven explained how she needed to take time off from work to take her son to monthly appointments and was able to work extra time in advance: "*The time that I've accrued as extra time and put that aside as knowing that I've got to go to the orthodontist next month. So I might just do an extra half an hour here or there and I always do that and I've always got the time to cover it*".

Size of project emerged as a theme for participants working in a small firm. This was primarily due to the limited access to resources and the inability to quickly respond to an unplanned event or the fluctuating demands of a large project. JE, an office manager working in a firm with seven people commented: "*I guess things became more demanding generally in the practice when we were engaged to work on those bigger projects, simply because as a small firm we would often find ourselves struggling for resources and in the country it's difficult to get you know, resources quickly when you need them*". Similarly, MI, an office manager working in a firm of two workers, commented: "*Because we're limited with our resources I've got people that I can haul in from every which way and say we need to go to this site. We've got a certain number of people that are working for us*".

Small to Medium (16-99 employees)
The unpredictable nature of the construction industry emerged as a theme for participants working in medium-sized firms. Participants described this as something that negatively impacted their work-life balance wellbeing. The need for extra work, longer or changed hours, the reallocation of resources, a halt or resumption of work and the weather were identified as uncontrollable factors which create uncertainty and stress in construction work. For example, WA, a machinery operator commented "*It was the time that [the employer] would want you to actually do something desperate was probably the time that you really missed out on something family wise.*" Participants described uncertainty as the 'reality' of construction work but the impact of unexpected events was exacerbated by a sense of having little or no control over one's work hours. For example, WA also expressed the belief that a refusal to work when requested to work extra hours would significantly compromise his job security and 'livelihood' and put him at the "bottom of the pile" in the opinion of his employer: "*the pressure the bosses put on you, and if you don't do it (work overtime) sometimes you are overlooked for the next job*".

Organisational culture or participants' beliefs about expected behaviours in their firm or workplace also emerged as an important factor impacting on participants' work-life balance in medium-sized firms. Several interviewees discussed a perception of a lack choice about their time commitments to work arising as a cultural norm of long work hours and overtime. For example, RO, a crane operator, described the pressure he experiences from clients (principal contractors) which result in long work days of up to 15 hours, and little opportunity for time off. For RO, it is not unusual to work 14 days "straight." Further, the cultural expectations that workers prioritise work over non-work commitments (including family) was particularly acutely felt by participants in companies employing between 16 and 99 workers. CA, also a machinery operator and driver working for an organisation of 16 – 99 workers, commented on the expectations around working hours and the lack of work schedule control: "*So it's like you're told you've got a choice but you actually really don't have a choice. Yeah, that happens a lot doesn't it?*"

Participants in firms of this size commented upon their employers' expectations that that they will take on extra, often unpredictable and/or irregular, work or responsibilities when the need arose. They expressed frustration at the fact that they had little or no choice in taking on extra work at the behest of their employer, as RO commented "*We're expected to do it…you are asked, but you are expected to do it*". This expectation that participants put "work first and life second" was strongly emphasised among participants engaged in mid-sized construction firms.

Another theme that was particularly important for participants in medium-sized firms relates to the reliance on informal rather than formal human resource management practices. A perceived lack of employer 'leadership' in creating a healthy and productive in which workers can achieve a satisfactory work-life balance was commented upon by all but one participant in a firm employing between 16 and 99 workers. For example, one participant commented upon his inability to take rostered days off (RDOs) saying that, within his firm, there is no formal mechanism for taking an RDO and informal employer consent is required. This participant also commented that the lack of a trade union presence in small firms is detrimental to work life balance. CA commented: "*If you have a wet day then they want you to take a rostered day off, which to me isn't correct, but without a strong union presence you've got to let a few things ride I suppose*". With no formal leave entitlements or mechanisms to prevent continual overwork or to overcome an inadequate allocation of resources to work tasks, participants in the mid-sized firms felt they were squeezed into a situation in which their lives were dominated by their work demands. For example, RO, a crane operator, commented upon the unwillingness of some employers to provide informal work-life support, as follows: "*that comes down to your lack of flexibility…you still have to live don't you? You still have to pay your bills, you still have to get to the bank, you still need to go to the dentist. And I think we've become a mean society. It used to be…I need to duck down to the bank, they used to let you do that. But not anymore…I'm not paying you $35 an hour to go to the bank.*"

Medium to Large (100+ employees)
The two participants working for large firms differed in their experience of work-life balance. The first participant, AL, worked as an engineer and routinely did a 38 hour week with little overtime and no weekend work. The firm in which AL worked supported employees' work-life balance. AL commented: "*There's, I can't remember the programme but yeah they encourage people to look after themselves….. sometimes if my manager saw me working extra hours he'd say do that tomorrow, no need to rush or something like that*". The firm in which he worked had reduced standard working hours as part of the human resources formal polices: "*I think from memory they [the firm] used to have more than 40 hours, now they change hours of work to 38 and yeah we have been supported if we have, we were given hours per year allocated for annual leave and carers leave*". AL reported that he had flexibility with work start and finishing time. It was possible to "*start from as early as 7:30 and can finish up early as well*". AL chose his start time so that he was able to meet other responsibilities: "*I start about 8:30 because I take the kids to school*". AL was fortunate that he worked close to his work office and travel time was only 15 minutes each way.

AL's experience was in stark contrast to ST. ST was not aware of any formal human resources management policies and practices in his firm. However, personal preference of working hours was an

important factor in considering working time and work-life balance. ST's average working week was long: "*I'm sort of pushing out 60 to 70 hours a week, plus*". ST chose to live away from home in order to maximise his income opportunities. ST explained that his job was well paid and that was why he stayed in the role: "*I get paid my RDOs. I'm basically on a wage and on a good deal, yeah. Got a company car, fuel card, phone, laptop. I get my double time, triple time [for overtime]*". However, the consequent lack of work-life balance was a trade-off. ST was married and a father of two school-aged children. ST lived near work from Monday to Saturday afternoon, which was almost two hours away from home. He drove home Saturday afternoon, then drove back to work on Sunday evening. ST explained that he was working long hours and lived away from his family so as to meet financial goals: "*Let's make some hay while the sun shines, so to speak…it's not going to be here forever and it's put me in front. I nearly own my house. I'll own it in another couple of months, which is excellent*". ST did not appear to experience family relationship conflict due to his working arrangements: "*I'm quite happy with the way everything is. The beauty of it all, like I said, I've got a good relationship with the wife and the kids. They're obviously very understanding*".

ST had worked at the same firm for 17 years. When he had started there were six employees However, the firm had grown from 70 to 200 employees in the last two years and had moved from a horizontal structure to a vertical reporting structure: "*There's my manager and then you get the CEO. There's the CEO of the civil division and there's the CEO of the actual company and then you've got the owner*". SE commented that the organisation has lost its 'family feel': "*and all of a sudden we've got too-big-too-quick syndrome sort of thing….We used to all go out for tea, for Christmas and all that. Or we'd go to the boss's farm and we had a big marquee and it was on a thousand acres. Just run around on the motorbikes and do what you want to do. But now it's this sort of … well, now it's obviously money. That's this day and age, isn't it? Money, money, money*". Thus, ST perceived the organisational environment had become less personal and family-focused and more corporatized and profit-focused as the company grew.

Discussion

Work-life balance and company size
The majority of previous studies investigating work-life balance in the construction industry have collected data from very large construction firms and little was previously known about the experiences of workers in small or medium sized construction firms. The research results indicate that work-life research undertaken in large construction firms may not be representative of the work-life experiences of workers in small or medium sized construction firms. The AWALI survey data revealed a significant difference between the work-life experiences of construction workers in companies of different sizes. In particular, workers in construction firms employing between 16 and 99 workers reported significantly higher AWALI scores, indicating higher levels of work-life interference in firms in this mid-size range. The follow-up interviews conducted with workers employed by small to medium-sized construction firms revealed several themes that perhaps explain the high AWALI scores among workers employed in firms of this size.. Participants in small to medium-sized construction firms describe the unpredictable nature of construction work as a significant challenge to their work-life balance. Employers were described as being demanding of workers' time, putting pressure on workers to work long and extra hours above the standard work day. Workers employed by small to medium-sized firms described having little choice about the hours that they work, indicating their employing organisations have entrenched cultures and expectations that work will be prioritized over family. Participants working for small to medium-sized construction firms also commented that the lack of formal human resource management practices in their employing organisations has a negative impact on working conditions and work-life balance.
In contrast to the experiences of interview participants employed by small to medium sized construction firms, participants employed by small firms described their work environment as being characterized by high levels of trust and a close relationship between managers and workers. Although formal human resource policies are not in place, in small construction firms, the informal work-life supports work quite well and are perceived to have a beneficial effect. For example, participants in small firms described being able to access informal support as needed to in order to accommodate family activities and felt that

this flexibility worked well for them. This is consistent with research that shows that informal supports for work-life balance have a positive impact in terms of reduced work-family conflict and employee satisfaction with their work-life balance (Behson, 2005). Although some research suggests that issues relating to equity can arise when work-family policies and benefits are not formalized by human resource policies and procedures (see, for example, Hornung et al. 2008), participants in our sample of employees of small construction firms did not express concerns associated with equity in the availability of or access to work-life balance supports.

Although only two interview participants in our sample were employed by medium to large construction firms their experiences reflect two very different work environments. One participant described formal work-life policies and programs in place in their employing organisation. In this organisation work hours were systematically managed and monitored. The second participant working for a large construction organisation described how this firm had grown significantly and rapidly in terms of the number of employees, effectively expanding from a medium to a large size. The participant described how, with this growth, the "family feel" of the company was lost, reporting relationships became more hierarchical and formal and the organizational environment became less personal and focused on the achievement of corporate objectives. This participant was not aware of any formalized work-life balance benefits in this work environment and it is possible that, because the growth occurred rapidly in the period immediately before the interview, the need to formalize work-life benefits may not have been recognized.

The research results suggest work-life experiences, and the ways that organisations help employees to balance work and family demands change as construction companies grow. In small firms, the flat organisational structures, close relationships and informal work-life supports appear to work well. Our results are consistent with previous research that shows that formalized work-life balance support are often not implemented in SMEs (see, for example, Dex and Scheibl, 2001). This might be because they are cost prohibitive given the small size of the workforce. In very small firms, owners and managers tend to manage their staff personally and are able to respond to the family needs of individual workers (see, for example, Barrett & Mayson, 2008). However, as the number of employees increases, relationships become more distanced, the pressures of maintaining and sustaining growth are felt and informal supports for work-life balance appear to become less effective. In these organisations, especially during the transition from small to medium-sized firms, the scarcity of resources and a lack of managerial expertise in the management of human resources may continue to force an 'ad hoc' approach to supporting work-life balance. There is an inherent risk that, because managerial prerogative plays a critical role in determining access to work-life supports, as relationships become less personal and more hierarchical, inequality can arise. In larger organisations, formalised human resource management practices, including work-life balance programs and policies, are more likely to be in place (Barrett and Mayson, 2008; Dex and Scheibl, 2001). In medium to large organisations there is less reliance on ad hoc or informal work-life supports but, at the same time, the corporatised work environment may be perceived to be more focused on profits than people.

Conclusions

More research is needed into the experiences of workers in small to medium-sized construction firms to provide a complete picture of the experience of work-life balance in the Australian construction industry. Given that the majority of workers in the construction industry are employed by small to medium-sized enterprises, our research has important implications for research and practice. In terms of research, the results suggest that research undertaken in large construction organisations cannot be generalized to smaller organisations. Indeed, effective strategies to support work-life balance may vary depending on the organisation's size. It is therefore important to include company size as a variable of interest in work-life balance research within the construction industry and more research into the work-life experiences and appropriate supports for workers in small to medium sized enterprises is needed.

On a practical level, the research reveals that workers employed by small to medium-sized construction firms tend to have poor work-life balance relative to workers in small or large firms. This finding

suggests that work-life supports targeting these workers may need to be developed and implemented. In particular, as companies grow, our research suggests that informal supports for work-life balance become less effective and more formalized benefits and policies may be needed. Organisations in the small to medium-size range may not yet have implemented formalized human resource management practices, but possibly need to do so in order to prevent workers from suffering from elevated levels of work-family conflict.

Limitations and future research

Our research was cross sectional in nature. We collected data from construction industry employees using a survey and follow-up interviews. As such, our analysis could not capture the work-life experiences of employees as a construction organisation progresses through the stages of growth. Future research, using a longitudinal case study research design, is recommended to provide a greater understanding of the effects of organisational size and growth on work-life balance in the construction industry. Given the interaction between occupation and organization size in determining work-life interference, it is also useful for future research to focus in a more granular way on the experiences of different occupational groups within construction organisations as they grow. Notwithstanding its limitations, our research provides important new evidence that research involving large construction firms is insufficient to fully understand work-life balance experiences in the Australian construction industry.

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