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Work-life balance in the Australian and New Zealand surveying profession

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the support of the RICS Raising the Ratio Committee. A copy of the full benchmarking report is available at: www.rics.org

Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to establish and illustrate the levels of awareness of work-life balance policies within the surveying profession in Australia and New Zealand. The culture and characteristics of the Australian and New Zealand work force are to be identified. The key aspects included in work-life balance policies are to be illustrated and the perceived benefits for the surveying profession are to be noted. The paper seeks to posit that it is vital to comprehend the levels of awareness of work-life balance issues within the surveying profession first, so that benchmarking may occur over time within the profession and second, that comparisons may be drawn with other professions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – There is a growing body of research into work-life balance and the built environment professions. Using a questionnaire survey of the whole RICS qualified surveying profession in Australia and New Zealand, this paper identifies the awareness of work-life balance benefits within the surveying profession.

**Findings** – This research provides evidence that awareness of the issues and options is unevenly spread amongst professional surveyors in the region. With shortages of professionals and an active economy the pressures on existing employees looks set to rise and therefore this is an area which needs to be benchmarked and revisited with a view to adopting best practice throughout the sector. The implications are that employers ignore work-life balance issues at their peril.

**Practical implications** – There is much to be learned from an increased understanding of work-life balance issues for professionals in the surveying discipline. The consequences of an imbalance between work and personal or family life is emotional exhaustion, cynicism and burnout. The consequences for employers or surveying firms are reduced effectiveness and profitability and increased employee turnover or churn.

**Originality/value** – Leading on from Ellison's UK surveying profession study and Lingard and Francis's Australian civil engineering and construction industry studies, this paper seeks to raise awareness of the benefits of adopting work-life balance policies within surveying firms and to establish benchmarks of awareness within the Australian and New Zealand surveying profession.
**Introduction: characteristics of the workforce**

Of total populations of 20.3 million and 4 million for Australia and New Zealand (NZ) respectively 10,478,500 people were employed in Australia (ABS, 2007a) in July 2007 and 2,086,200 people were employed in 2006 in NZ (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). According to Abhayaratna and Lattimore (2006) there was a 64.4 per cent labour participation rate in Australia and a 67.8 per cent labour participation rate in NZ for people aged 15 years and above in 2005. In 2007 the labour market in NZ is considered to be very tight with solid economic growth since 2002 and unemployment rates at 3.7 per cent.

Similar conditions exist in Australia where unemployment stands at 4.3 per cent, a record 40 year low, in 2007 (ABS, 2007b). There is no separate data about surveyors as their employment levels are recorded in data relating to construction and property and business as well as the mining and government sectors. Most are employed in the construction, property and business sectors, which include all occupations, for example trade and administration occupations for construction and business occupations such as finance and banking for the property and business sector. In 2005 in NZ 165,700 people were employed in construction and 236,800 were employed in property and business services. Therefore the sectors in which surveyors are employed are large and contribute significantly to the gross national product and economies of Australia and NZ.

Australia has an ageing population; it is anticipated that the percentage of population aged 65 and over to the total population will increase from 13.12 in 2005 to 18.33 in 2020 and that the percentage of inactive population aged 65 and over to the total labour force will increase from 23.43 to 32.98 per cent in the same period (OECD, 2007). In NZ, the percentage of the population aged 65 plus to the total population in 2020 will be 17.1 per cent (OECD, 2007). The OECD average for 2020 is 17.8 per cent. In 2020 Japan will have 29.2 per cent while Turkey will have 7.2 per cent within this category.

**Workforce participation**

In Australia and NZ there has been growth in female participation in the workforce over the last decade and in Australia this has increased to 2,595,800 in July 2007 and retention of females should now be a goal of employers. From 1997 and 2006 there was an increase from 52 to 62 per cent in the proportion of single parents in the work force (i.e. either employed or looking for work). This comprised an increase in the proportion of single mothers in the work force, from 49 to 60 per cent though mainly this was in part time employment. The proportion of partnered mothers in the work force increased from 61 to 66 per cent in the same period, whereas the participation rate of partnered fathers stayed the same around 94 per cent, while the small number of single fathers varied in the range of 63 to 77 per cent. Thus it is important for employers of surveyors to retain staff and one ways this can be achieved is to adopt work life balance policies.

**Work-life balance**

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) highlighted the conflict between work and family for some and participation in one was to the detriment of the other. Becker and Huselid (1998)
characterized work-life conflict as “a lack of fit” between employees and their life responsibilities and the goals of their organisation. By the 1990s it was accepted in the discipline of human resource management that if firms were to retain staff, they needed to improve morale, commitment, satisfaction, reduce stress and work related problems (Cappelli, 2000). The costs of employing and training staff are high and reduced turnover can result in financial savings and be a motivation for firms to implement work-life balance. Furthermore employees that are stressed are more likely to make errors and take time off sick. In extreme case employees suffer from burnout and emotional exhaustion (Lingard et al., 2007). During the 1990s some Australian employers realized the benefits of adopting work-life balance strategies to recruit and retain the best employees (De Cieri et al., 2002). For employees it demonstrates an employer's commitment to balance family and work by introducing flexible work arrangements, as well as child care and family and parental leave policies.

In Australia the need for work-life balance was further increased by the changes to organizational structures where flatter, more participative and less hierarchical structures were introduced, and fewer employees were expected to manage increased workloads (De Cieri et al., 2002; Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2007). Lingard and Francis (2005a) reported that Australian males under 35 years of age reported more stress and were keen to change the corporate world to accommodate work life balance. Generation Y places more value on non standard work models that permit them to balance work and family life better, and the trend is for more dual earner families to scale back from work commitments (Becker and Moen, 1999). A benefit of work-life balance is that the workforce becomes more diversified (Bond et al., 1997) and with their aging populations, employees with family commitments will continue to grow in Australia and NZ (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2007). Numerous studies have identified that women bear the brunt of the family responsibilities and therefore the most pressure is likely to be on them (Abbott et al., 1998; Konrad and Mangel, 2000).

Barriers to work-life balance are work cultures that reward and promote long working hours and high organizational commitment to the detriment of other life commitments (De Cieri et al., 2002). Another barrier is isolated and unsupportive work environments for employees with life commitments external to the organization, such as caring for elderly or sick relatives. Attitudes and resistance of supervisors and senior management, a preference for recruiters to deal with people perceived as similar to themselves (homo-sociability) and a lack of education and communication of work life balance strategies are further barriers to implementation (De Cieri et al., 2002). Surveys by NZ's Department of Labour found a positive relationship between a workplace culture that is supportive of work-life balance and use of work-life provisions (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2007). A 2007 survey found that public sector organisations were more likely to implement work-life balance policies (Managing Work-Life Balance International, 2007) and this indicates that some barriers may be affecting the private sector more than the public sector. The literature reveals consistencies in the drivers and the barriers for work-life balance in Australia, NZ and elsewhere (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2007; Managing Work-Life Balance International, 2007).

**Work-life balance and the Australian and New Zealand surveying profession**
Surveyors typically work in the construction or property sectors. Construction has been perceived as adopting chaotic working practices for decades (Ball, 1988; Lingard et al., 2007; Loosemore et al., 2003). Dainty et al.'s (1999) UK study revealed the site based profession was demanding, time consuming and encroached on family responsibilities but that most accepted long hours and the geographically transient culture. The study (Dainty et al., 1999) showed that the practices and culture lead to poor retention especially for females. Australian studies have confirmed similar issues of burnout; stress, high turnover, and work-family conflict in construction (see Lingard and Sublet, 2002; Lingard and Francis, 2005a, b, 2006). Lingard and Lin's (2004) study of 109 females showed that women in the construction sector valued work-life balance policies because of the transparency and support and felt more commitment to such employers. They found that participants did not perceive construction careers as compatible with family life and felt forced to choose between work and family (Lingard and Lin, 2004). Organizational commitment to work life balance was found to be a determinant of employee turnover, motivation and productivity for females. Female participation in the construction industry in Australia was estimated at 7.9 per cent of the workforce (Lingard and Francis, 2005a).

However there are indications that the burnout and stress starts in the classroom. Lingard et al.'s study of 227 construction students concluded that Australian construction students exhibited stress, emotional exhaustion, detachment and high levels of cynicism (Lingard et al., 2007). These students were balancing high levels of work and study commitments with the concern that many will not enter the sector upon graduation or will exit shortly after (Lingard et al., 2007). It is an issue because burnout is known to occur over a long period, a type of chronic stress, and these students are under sustained pressure to balance work and family during their studies and upon initial entry into the workforce. No studies were found which examined work life balance in the NZ construction and surveying sectors, though a general survey revealed 40 per cent of NZ workers had problems balancing work and family (Department of Labour (DOL), 2007).

There is evidence that the construction sector in particular is under pressure with its traditional work patterns, that Australian and NZ organisations in general are experiencing retention issues partly due to record lows in unemployment levels and buoyant economies. The awareness and benefits of work-life balance are well known in the human resource management sectors and numerous private and public sector organizations have adopted the strategies (Managing Work-Life Balance International, 2007). The barriers to the adoption of such strategies is also known as is the consequence of not implementing such policies. No study had benchmarked the surveying profession in Australia and NZ.

**Research objectives**

The objective was to provide a benchmark for the profession based on the members of the RICS in Australia and NZ. Whilst this is informed by a deep understanding of good practice in terms of work-life balance and recruitment and retention objectives, it also reflects existing practices within the surveying profession and work-life balance priorities as demonstrated through previous research (RICS, 2003, 2005). Furthermore this research would allow a comparison to be made of UK and Australian/NZ practices.
**Questionnaire design**

Questions were developed based on previous research (Ellison, 2003) and reflected issues important and relevant to surveying, and wider issues of work-life balance found in the literature. This research used the questionnaire developed in the benchmarking report (RICS, 2005) because it covered relevant issues and, it would allow direct comparison between the UK and the Australian/NZ data (not reported here).

The survey comprised six sections. The first section collected data about company size, the sector the company operated in and whether the respondent answered as an employer or employee. Section two examined the terms and conditions of employment, for example whether respondents had the option of flexible working and how maternity and paternity leave and pay were dealt with. Section three covered staff recruitment, retention issues and staff monitoring. Staff turnover was included and whether exit interviews occur. The fourth section asked about staff development issues such as promotion, roles and responsibilities, monitoring management training and diversity and equality training. Section five examined remuneration and reward issues and how remuneration is decided, staff appraisals, benchmarking of salaries and remuneration and monitoring. The final part covered work-life balance issues such as the existence of policies, support and management of work-life balance.

**Research population and sampling**

Questionnaires were distributed in March 2007 to all Australian and NZ RICS working members, over 1,300 surveyors, and a census of the entire research population was conducted. Student, unemployed and retired members were omitted. In total, 156 surveys were returned completed, a return rate of 11.8 per cent. The data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15 for analysis. A total of 105 responses were answered from the perspective of the employee, 35 from the employer view with 16 missing responses, thus there is a bias towards employees in the data set, though the employers' responses are sufficient in number. No data were collected on the basis of gender, age or ethnicity.

**Data analysis**

**Terms and conditions of service**

Previous research (RICS, 2003) showed flexible working policies was the most important factor that workers felt would improve their work-life balance. The survey investigated the availability of flexible working hours, job share, part time working, remote working, compressed hours, time off in lieu, term time working, package of flexible working options and, career breaks as specific forms of flexible working. Table I records the results and shows that the top three conditions were flexible and part time working hours and time off in lieu. Employees were least likely to have compressed hours, term time working and job share.
Table II shows few employers discouraged unsocial working hours; promoting the culture of long hours. Even fewer employers offered leave or pay in excess of the minimum, though they were better at maintaining contact and accommodating individual’s requirements. Hardly any employers helped out with childcare support or costs.

**Staff recruitment and retention**

A total of 25 per cent of companies recorded recruitment and retention on the basis of gender, 19.9 per cent on the basis of age, 19.2 per cent on the basis of ethnicity and 17.9 per cent on the basis of disability. Between 44.2 to 47.4 per cent did not monitor diversity within their organisations and this is evidence that more detailed record keeping should be undertaken in these respects. Concerning gender monitoring, 16 per cent monitored job grade and gender, though nearly a third (32.1 per cent) of respondents were unsure about monitoring. A total of 11.5 per cent of organisations monitored age and gender, and 15.4 per cent monitored management responsibility and gender. High percentages (63.5 per cent) did not monitor against age, gender, ethnicity or disability areas all covered by discrimination legislation in Australia and NZ.

Most organisations (61.5 per cent) did not monitor staff turnover by gender, or by ethnicity (54.5 per cent), or by age (52.6 per cent) and are unaware if they are failing to retain females for example. Confidential exit consultations were undertaken with 37.8 per cent of respondents, though almost a third did not know and 30.1 per cent said no. Where consultations are undertaken 18.6 per cent were run and analysed independently and 42.9 per cent were undertaken in house. As 36.5 per cent of respondents declined to answer these questions the real picture could be different. When consultations are undertaken the results were disseminated widely in 24.4 per cent of cases however 42.3 per cent of respondents did not answer and a different picture may occur in practice. In total, 46.2 per cent of consultations lead to clear identifiable actions and 62.2 per cent of respondents felt that employers provided opportunity for employee suggestions.

**Staff development issues**

The survey examined promotion, roles and responsibility, monitoring, management training and equality and diversity training issues. There was less response to the “don’t know” and “missing” options suggesting that respondents were more confident in this area. With best practice promotion should be based on clear competency criteria to avoid suspicions of favouritism and bias. The process should be transparent with a clear non prejudicial route for appeal. A total of 55.1 per cent stated that there were clear competency criteria. A total of 44.2 per cent responses said the process was transparent and 42.9 per cent said it was not. In total, 26.3 per cent had redress to a clear route for appeal. Of employers 60.3 per cent monitored allocation to management roles, 70.5 per cent monitored the allocation of new projects and clients, however, only 17.9 per cent monitor the take up of training across the age of employees, 14.1 per cent across gender, 11.5 per cent across ethnicity, 31.4 per cent across qualification and 40.4 per cent across position within the organisation. Qualification and position are seen as more significant benchmarks than gender, age and ethnicity when it comes to take up of training.
Where general management training is concerned 51.3 per cent stated it was offered to all staff with management responsibilities, though 32.1 per cent of staff with management responsibilities were not offered management training. For specialist training such as equality and diversity training, 39.7 per cent of staff involved in recruitment and promotion were offered training, however 34 per cent were not. A total of 42.9 per cent are offered training where they have a people management responsibility and management grade, staff were more likely to have training (43.6 per cent), though 34.6 per cent did not. In 38.5 per cent of cases equality and diversity training is offered to all staff. These are concerns and there may be skills gaps that require addressing.

**Remuneration and reward**

Only 26.9 per cent stated that the staff appraisals were undertaken by specially trained individuals’, with 62.8 per cent performed by untrained appraisers. Of appraisals 62.2 per cent were based on clearly defined procedures and criteria and 56.4 per cent felt the process was transparent. When appeal is considered only 32.7 per cent have a clear non-prejudicial route. Of appraisals 63.5 per cent assessed productivity through output and 66.7 per cent included personal and career development together.

Salaries are benchmarked mostly against annual salary surveys (37.3 per cent). Between 33.3 and 47.4 per cent stated that no benchmarking is undertaken for remuneration and reward and about a quarter of responses were “don't know” and this indicates that practices need improvement. When remuneration and reward is monitored against gender, age and ethnicity it is possible to evaluate whether workplace discrimination is occurring, 12.2 per cent stated that it was monitored against gender, 10.9 per cent against age and 10.3 per cent against ethnicity and 32.1 per cent recorded “don't know” answers.

**Work-life balance issues**

The survey examined best practice issues such as; the accessibility of a policy, Board support, definition of terms, clear implementation processes, manager support, the responsibility of an appropriately ranked person, support by measurable targets, and, regular renewal through a process involving staff. In total, 35.9 per cent felt there was a policy understood and accessible to staff, 33.3 per cent felt the policy was supported by the Board, 21.2 per cent felt work-life balance was clearly defined, 12.85 per cent felt the documentation detailed the process, 40.4 per cent felt that managers supported the policy and 24.4 per cent felt the policy was the responsibility of a suitably ranked person. In total, 11.5 per cent believed that the policy was supported by measurable targets, and 18.6 per cent felt that the policy was regularly renewed through a process involving staff. There was a significant negative response to the work-life balance issue and between 42.9 and 66 per cent answered negatively to all these questions.

**Conclusions**

The results showed reason to be both optimistic and pessimistic about work-life balance within the Australian and NZ RICS qualified surveying profession.
In terms of flexible working conditions most can work part time or remotely, take time off in lieu but are unable to job share, work in term time, take a career break or work compressed hours. Few had the option of a flexible package. There is a skills shortage and high demand for surveyors in Australia and NZ and employees are in a good bargaining position. However the culture of unsocial working hours identified by De Cieri et al. (2002) is very strong and employers do not discourage out of hours working.

There was a high lack of knowledge regarding maternity and paternity benefits and the research population may be predominantly males and/or those who do not require access to such benefits. The survey did not collect data on age or gender and this limits the ability to interpret these results further. Employees felt that employers would not provide maternity or paternity leave or pay in excess of legal minimums, though contact is maintained and employers did accommodate individuals' requirements. Little provision is made for financial or in kind support with childcare; an area for improvement.

Improvements are possible to recruitment and retention practices. Though some monitoring does occur and is based on gender, age, disability and ethnicity, more monitoring and measurement should take place and/or should be communicated to employees. Similarly monitoring of grade jobs based on ethnicity, disability, gender and age in a transparent way allows employees to appreciate that there are no barriers to progression for employees who are either affected by disability, from ethnic backgrounds, aged or female – an issue raised by Ellison (2003). There is good practice in terms of exit surveys with staff, though it could be improved by using independent consultants and be more widely disseminated. Promotion criteria were clear however transparency and the appeal systems need improvement. Either companies need to make clear that there is monitoring of training based on age, gender, disability and ethnicity or employers need to start measuring the take up of training to provide evidence that no discriminatory practices are occurring (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2007; Managing Work-Life Balance International, 2007). Management training to appropriate staff does occur, though it needs to be improved in equality and diversity training especially as both Australia and NZ have diverse populations with immigrant workers and increasing female participation (OECD, 2007).

In remuneration and reward, appraiser training needs improvement though procedures and criteria are clear for most. Appeals procedures can be improved for employees who are dissatisfied with their appraisal. Benchmarking practices should be improved within the workforce where few data are collected on gender, age, disability or ethnicity and compared to national, regional and professional averages.

Although work-life balance policies are understood and accessible to a third of respondents, half have no understanding or accessibility, employees need educating (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2007) or employers need to initiate policies. More work is required to educate surveyors on the definition of work-life balance, about targets, monitoring, reviews and policies.

Australia and NZ have ageing workforces and surveying is predominantly male and ageing. Around half the population is female and could work in the sector if the barriers identified
by Lingard and Francis (2005a) are addressed. Surveying firms must become employers of choice to recruit and retain the highest calibre staff. Transparency and openness are required in aspects of work-life balance to demonstrate that best practices are adopted. High staff turnover is expensive where employers have invested in training. The profession will face problems if it becomes perceived as one, which does not value its workforce – there are many competing professions. The survey revealed where the profession has adopted best practices and it demonstrated where further work is needed.

**Further research**

This paper presents the first data collected specifically about surveyors' levels of awareness of work-life balance issues but it does not explore whether surveyors are experiencing negative impacts as a result of an imbalance in work-life balance. Following on from the work of Lingard and Sublet, 2002, Lingard and Francis, 2004, 2005a, b, examining issues for the engineering and construction professionals it is suggested that their approach be replicated to produce data for the surveying profession in order that cross professional comparisons may be made.

**Limitations**

This research was limited in the following ways:

- responses from NZ were too small to be deemed representative of the surveying profession there; and
- the survey covered all surveyors who are RICS members in Australia and NZ and there are many surveyors who belong to other professional bodies, and their views would be an addition to the study.

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<th>Don't know</th>
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**Table I** Terms and conditions of service. Access to flexible working conditions

*Note:* All figures are percentages
Table II Terms and conditions of service. Unsocial hours and maternity/paternity benefits

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Note: All figures are percentages

References


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