

# **The Role of Inclusion on the Career Experiences of Professional Women in Construction**

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## **Abstract**

Much of the research on women in construction has indicated that they are often not well integrated within their organisations, with their lack of advancement related to exclusionary organisational tactics and discriminatory practices. An inclusive environment, characterised by a culture which supports positive relationships and less stereotypes, should provide an ideal environment for women to utilise their skills effectively, as well as balance their work and family lives. A questionnaire examined the perceptions of a sample of 456 professional women from the Australian construction industry. Inclusion was operationalised through a composite measure using standardised variables and two groups formed using a zero-zero split. Contrary to expectations, comparisons using independent t-tests found the career advancement of the two groups of women were not statistically different. Career satisfaction was significantly higher in the group with high inclusion; however work-family conflict and turnover intent were statistically lower in the same group. These findings indicate inclusion is an important organisational attribute. Some explanations for its lack of effect on women's advancement are discussed.

## **Keywords**

Construction, women, inclusion, career, career success, organisational culture

## **1. Introduction**

The construction industry contributes significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of most industrialised economies. It is an industry highly reliant on people and its masculine culture is considered to detract from the participation of women (Dainty et al., 2000). Inclusion is a valuable organisational attribute, with many positive personal and organisational outcomes (Mor Barak, 2000). An inclusive workplace also promotes positive relationships and an environment in which fewer stereotypes exist (Bilimoria et al., 2007). This research explored whether difference in inclusion affected the career success of professional women in construction. In addition, several variables known to be important to women and their organisations were also compared.

## **2. Women in construction**

Construction is characterised as being male dominated; a fact which has altered little over the past twenty years in most industrialised countries; despite societal changes, skills shortages and gender equality legislation (Francis, 2010). There remains a dearth of females entering or being retained in construction. A stereotype still exists about construction being macho (e.g. Barthorpe, et al., 2000), and therefore unsuitable for females (Blau, et al., 2002).

Research on women's experiences within the construction workforce has taken several approaches, demonstrating their participation and long term involvement has in some cases been actively discouraged. While some research has focussed on women's suitability to the industry and some has involved male and female comparisons, the majority has focused on the barriers women face within the construction work environment. The negative image of construction, its lack of gender equity, its masculine attitudes and discriminatory work practices are considered to detract from women's workplace experience and make their career advancement more difficult (Gale, 1994; Dainty, et al., 2000; Watts, 2007). This not only negatively affects the women's working in the industry in contracting and technical roles, but also undermines the recruitment of young women.

### **3. Career success**

Career success is considered both a motivator to participation and retention rates. It has both extrinsic and intrinsic components, namely career advancement and career satisfaction (Phillips & Imhoffs, 1997). The term career advancement is synonymous with vertical upward movement within an organisation's hierarchical ranks and assessed in terms of society's evaluation of achievement (Nabi, 1999). It has typically included objective, rather than subjective, variables such as salary or promotions, which can be evaluated impartially by a third party (Judge et al., 1995; Hofmans, et al., 2008). In contrast, intrinsic career success typically involves consideration of a person's satisfaction with their career, as well as their life overall. It has gained increased emphasis, particularly amongst women and older workers (Hofmans et al., 2008; Dyke & Murphy, 2006).

### **4. The benefits of inclusion**

Inclusion has been defined as "... the degree to which an employee is accepted and treated as an insider by others in a work system" (Pelled, et al., 1999: 1014). Mor Barak's (2000) model of exclusion and inclusion suggests that an organisation's culture contributes to feelings of inclusion, which in turn leads to job satisfaction, well-being and performance. Inclusion can be theoretically regarded as a form of organisational support. A meta-analysis by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found perceived organisational support was related to improved job satisfaction, positive moods and lessened withdrawal from the organisation. These findings were substantiated more recently by Acquavita et al. (2009) who also demonstrated exclusion was related to lower job satisfaction.

Much of the research on women in construction indicates that women's lack of advancement and satisfaction has been associated with exclusionary organisational tactics and discriminatory practices (Dainty, et al., 2000; Menches & Abrahams, 2007; Watts, 2007). Bilimoria et al. (2007) proposed that how well integrated women were within their organisational setting influences their ability to effectively utilise their skills. They assert that women who do 'fit in' or are 'included', rather than 'excluded', should advance more: an opinion also expressed within women in construction research (Greed, 2000).

Research into how satisfaction evolves also provides some support that inclusion is related to the level of satisfaction a person has with their job or career. For instance, Ng et al. (2005) meta-analysis of career success established organisational sponsorship were

predictors of career satisfaction. Based on organisational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) it is considered that levels of career advancement and career satisfaction for those in more inclusive work environments should be higher, in comparison to those in lower inclusion (or exclusionary) environments.

It is also well understood that women place a priority on the balance they are able to achieve between their work and family lives (Sturges, 1999). Supportive supervisors are understood to influence the work-family balance of their employees and organisational support mechanisms can also reduce work-family conflict (Lingard & Francis, 2009). Work-family conflict has been described as "... a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985: 77). Work to family conflict has associated with demanding work roles, as well as with subjective career success (Hoobler, et al., 2010). It may be that inclusive work environments support workers with family commitments and therefore lower levels of work-family conflict are more common in these organisational contexts.

Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) determined that turnover was reduced in environments of increased organisational support. Turnover intent, which refers to an individuals' intention to leave their organisation, is associated with several negative organisational outcomes such as increased costs and poorer work performance (Davidson et al., 2010; Hancock et al., 2013). Turnover is therefore an important variable from an organisational perspective. Mor Barak et al. (2006) and Allen et al. (2003) found exclusion was a significant predictor of turnover intent, so it would be expected that turnover will be lower in inclusive organisations.

## **5. Research aims**

The aim of this research was to determine if career success was greater in more inclusive work environments for a group of professional women in construction. In addition, the effect of inclusion on work-life conflict and turnover intent was explored.

## **6. Method**

A cross-sectional quantitative study was adopted for this research and the data collected using a password controlled website. The participants consisted of women who were employed in professional or managerial roles within the Australian construction industry. This industry shares similar characteristics of those in other developed countries. At the time of administration of the survey the total female membership of all surveyed institutions was approximately 915. A total of 463 completed surveys were submitted, representing a response rate of around 51%. The final sample consisted of 456 professional women who had worked on average 10.2 years ( $SD=7.48$ ) in construction-related roles. The average age of the respondents was 34.9 years ( $SD=8.46$ ), with the majority (73.5%) being less than 40 years of age. The majority (69.1%) were partnered and 31.1% were mothers. The average number of working hours per week was 47.0 ( $SD=10.19$ ). Tenure with current organisation averaged 4.4 years ( $SD=3.93$ ). Please refer to Table 1 for further information.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics**

	N	%		N	%
<b>Company classification</b>			<b>Company sector</b>		
Construction contractors	171	37.5	Public	88	19.3
Technical consultants	185	51.5	Private	368	80.7
Other (e.g. legal, educ)	50	11.0	<b>Work hours per week</b>		
<b>Number of children</b>			up to 20 hrs/wk	7	1.5
0	314	68.9	20 to 29.99 hrs/wk	12	2.6
1	56	12.3	30 to 39.99 hrs/wk	35	7.7
2	64	14.0	40 to 49.99 hrs/wk	197	43.2
3 or more	22	4.9	50 or more hrs/wk	205	45.0

### 6.1 Measures

As well as the demographic information outlined above, the questionnaire also assessed a number of variables. As noted earlier, career success comprises has two components namely; Career advancement and career satisfaction. Career advancement was measured using a composite score based on 3-items, where a higher score was indicative of a higher level of career advancement. Items included a self-assessment on a 6 point response scale of their current hierarchical level (ranging from graduate to CEO), level of responsibility and their annual salary and remuneration (this was transformed into a full time equivalent based on hours worked). Career satisfaction was measured using a single item relating to participant's overall level of career satisfaction so far in their career.

Inclusion had not previously been operationalised so, based on the description by Bilimoria et al. (2007), it was considered as a composite measure comprising four specific variables: person-organisation fit; sexual discrimination; peer support; and supervisor support. As the variables were measured on different response formats they were standardised by transforming them into z-scores before summing them. A scatterplot of Inclusion revealed no discernible groupings of women. In addition, in order to compare groups according to their level of inclusion, scores above zero were classified as Inclusive and below zero as Exclusive. Person-organisation fit was assessed using three items developed by Cable and DeRue (2002). A five-item scale was used to measure sexual discrimination. The scale utilised a 5-point response scale with the central response category (3) indicative of equality between men and women, The 5 items were derived from a Women Workplace Culture scale (Bergman & Hallberg, 2002) with a lower score more indicative of higher level of discrimination. Peer and supervisor support were measured using six items from Taylor and Bowers' (1972) peer and supervisory leadership scales which are part of the Survey of Organizations questionnaire (cited in Cook et al., 1981). For the sake of brevity three items related to emotional support and three related to practical support for both peer and supervisory support were chosen, based on their suitability for the construction context.

The scale for work-to-family conflict was drawn from the work of Boles et al. (2001). Turnover intent was measured via the two items drawn from a three item sub-scale of the Michigan Organizational Assessment (cited in Cook et al., 1981).

## 6.2 Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS (version 21). All variables were examined for reliability of measurement. Data screening confirmed that all responses were in range and no extreme variations from normality of the variables were found. Independent *t*-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores in inclusive and exclusive work environments.

## 6.3 Limitations of this research

While the cross-sectional correlational field study method is widely used, it has some limitations particularly in regards to causality. In addition, the sample was drawn mainly from women who were members of various professional associations in Australia, so the sample may not have been representative nationally or internationally.

## 7. Results

An independent *t*-test was conducted to compare the career advancement and career satisfaction scores for women employed in work environments which were perceived as less and more inclusive. No significant difference in the scores for career advancement in the exclusive work environments ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=1.129$ ) and inclusive work environments ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=1.214$ ;  $p=.306$ ) was found. However, there was a highly significant difference in the scores for career satisfaction in the exclusive work environments ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=0.930$ ) and Inclusive work environments ( $M=4.09$ ,  $SD=0.706$ ;  $t(454)=-9.571$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

An independent *t*-test was conducted to compare the work-family conflict scores for women employed in work environments which are less and more inclusive. A highly significant difference in the scores for work-family conflict in the exclusive work environments ( $M=4.45$ ,  $SD=1.318$ ) and inclusive work environments,  $M=3.79$ ,  $SD=1.367$ ;  $t(454)=5.211$ ,  $p<.001$ , was found. A highly significant difference was also found in the scores for turnover intent in the exclusive work environments ( $M=4.16$ ,  $SD=1.756$ ) and inclusive work environments,  $M=2.61$ ,  $SD=1.481$ ;  $t(383.2)=10.208$ ,  $p<.001$ .

## 8. Discussion

Bilimoria et al. (2007) proposed that organisational inclusion assists woman's career advancement. This assertion was not supported by this research, with those in more inclusive work environments receiving no more favourable treatment in terms of advancement, than those in excluded environments. However, inclusion does appear to be an important organisational attribute for improving women's work and home lives, and reducing their turnover intent. Inclusion was related to career satisfaction, work-life conflict and turnover intent. Women in inclusive work situations had significantly higher levels of career satisfaction, lower levels of work-family conflict and turnover intent, than those in excluding environments. This is of significance given the importance the intrinsic component of career success and work-life balance to women, as well as the cost of turnover to organisations.

These results have important personal and organisational implications. For instance, Erdogan et al. (2012) found career satisfaction and life satisfaction were highly correlated, indicating career satisfaction as an important indicator of well-being. They proposed career

satisfaction could also acts as a mediator between work related variables (such as role stress, work-life conflict) and life satisfaction. In addition, inclusion's importance for organisations is also clear given the relationship of career satisfaction with constructs such as job satisfaction, job performance, work quality, organisational commitment and turnover intents (e.g. Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2011; Erdogan et al., 2012; Duckworth, et al., 2009). For example, Jones (2006: 36) concluded "... the current research suggests employees who are happy with their lives tend to be more productive in the workplace, both in terms of in-role and extra-role performance". Therefore, while organisational support may not assist women's advancement within their chosen career its presence may act as a strong deterrent to their departure, as well as influence their performance and well-being.

However, was it surprising that inclusion was not related to advancement - perhaps not when career advancement patterns are considered? Turner (1960) proposed two models to explain social mobility (referred to as 'contest' and 'sponsored' mobility) which have since been extended to explain an individual's career mobility. Contest mobility refers to advancement based on one's own abilities and contributions to the organisation, whereas sponsored mobility is where advancement is based on the fact that early success is perceived and then organisational 'elites' provided with sponsoring activities, such as support, mentorship, access to networks, etc. (Ng et al., 2005). This indicates that human capital variables such as education and work hours were more related to contest mobility and interpersonal (e.g. peer support, mentoring, networks) and organisational variables (e.g. supervisor support, organisational fit, equity principles) were related to sponsored mobility.

In their study of predictors of career success Wayne, et al. (1999) found strong support for sponsored mobility, demonstrating the importance supervisor and organisations play in advancement. However, it should be noted that 87% of the subordinate group in their study was male, making it a relatively skewed sample. The issue of diversity in career advancement was also highlighted by Smith (2005: 1177) who found sponsored mobility may apply to men; concluding that there was "... moderate and consistent evidence that the processes leading to promotions for white men differ from those of women and minorities in important respects". While Ng et al. (2005) extensive review of relevant career literature concluded that white men were advantaged by organisational support and their networks, their meta-analysis indicated too few studies have been undertaken to test if gender moderated the relationship between organisational sponsorship and career advancement.

In a study of physicians, Pachulicz, et al. (2008) found however, that women reported significantly fewer leadership positions, lower organisational support and less sponsorship than men. Women in construction too report discriminatory recruitment and promotional practices, indicative of different mobility patterns for men and women (e.g. Dainty, et al., 2000). For instance, Watts' (2009: 522) study female civil engineers "...cited promotion into management posts as a function of 'who you know' and, therefore, unmeritocratic" which would be considered an acknowledgement of the benefits to men of networks, mentoring and organisational support. Therefore, if women experience contest rather than sponsored mobility, this may be why inclusion, which was measured as a form organisational support, had no effect on career advancement. While the career mobility of men in construction has not been investigated, it may be that experience sponsored mobility, as men do in other industries. If this was the case, then it would be evidence that discriminatory promotional practices occur in construction.

## 9. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the relationship between inclusion and the intrinsic and extrinsic components of career success for a group of professional women in construction. While there was no significant difference in levels of career advancement for those in work environments perceived to be exclusive and inclusive, women had significantly higher levels of career satisfaction in inclusive environments. Previous research has shown that men's career advancement is affected by interpersonal and organisational supports, which could be considered to be closely associated with how inclusion was measured in this research. It is unclear how women advance, but this research does provide some support for a contest mobility pattern, as inclusion had no effect on their advancement.

It may well be that human capital and other personal variables, associated with contest mobility affect women's advancement. If a sponsored mobility career pattern is in place for men in construction, as it is in other industries, then companies are using different promotional procedures for male and female employees. This could affect women's long term retention and ultimately their recruitment into the industry. Companies therefore need to reassess their HR procedures accordingly.

The finding that inclusion does influence women's level of career satisfaction and work-family conflict was important. This aspect of career success and balance women consider important and its attainment is within the reach of organisations interested bettering the work lives of their female employees. Cultural change in the form of increased recognition of women, support from supervisors, reduction in sexual discrimination and improved peer support is achievable, with leadership support. This can have a positive effect on both the personal and organisational lives of professional women, as well as potentially reducing the loss of women from the industry.

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