

Improving work-life balance of civil engineers in UAE

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Abstract

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has one of the highest per-capita expenditure on construction and the industry employs 15% of the total workforce. The intense pace of construction activities places a high demand on professionals working in this industry. This study investigates the work-life experiences of civil engineers working in the UAE in relation to job satisfaction, motivation, challenges and the effects of multicultural diversity at the work place. The effects of work life on family life, the responsibility of the organisations towards employees' well-being and the need for work-life balance policies are also considered. The research data is collected through face to face interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire. Interview transcripts are analysed and categorised inductively into themes for descriptive analysis. The study shows that a majority of civil engineers are dissatisfied with their work life balance. There is an overwhelming desire for flexible working hours, yet it is currently offered by very few employers. The paper concludes that the negative work-life experience of civil engineers could impair their performance. Construction companies should adapt work-life balance policies and provide the necessary training and support to maintain their well-being.

Keywords

work-life balance, motivation, UAE

1. Introduction

The UAE with one of the highest per-capita expenditure on construction have been a haven for workers seeking untaxed personal income for the past decade. It is the home to expatriates from over 200 different nationalities which makes up 80% of the total population (Badouri, 2007) as it offers a high and liberal standard of living. The construction industry employs 15% of the total workforce in UAE and utilises a quarter of the construction cranes in the world (Salama and Habib, 2009, Badouri, 2007). Ninety percent of the total 3.3 million construction workforce in UAE comprises expatriate workers and contributes 20% of the total GDP through the multi-billion dollar construction industry. Construction activities are concentrated in two main construction hubs, namely Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

One major challenge for the construction industry throughout the world is to provide a healthy balance of work, lifestyle and family. More businesses are embracing the concept of work-life balance for their employees as it increases the efficiency of their employees (Bernold and Abourizk, 2010). Lingard and Francis (2009) shows that work-life balance is an issue of increasing concern and relevance to all workers, irrespective of their personal family situations and that conflict between work and other life roles is an important manifestation of the lack of balance. They suggest that in order to retain a talented work force, organisations should embrace good work-life balance policies. Firms with skilled executive work

force that take up work-life balance measures for their employees have observed positive effects in their employee performance, flexibility and responsiveness (Bloom et al., 2009).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Motivation

Figure 1 presents an overall picture of the interrelationships between the impact of the lack of work-life balance on motivation and consequently on performance. Job satisfaction depends on different aspects of one's job such as salary, co-workers and opportunity to learn new things (Lingard and Francis, 2009). It is closely related to work family conflict and differs from one individual to another. The driving force behind personal standards and performance is motivation (Bernold and Abourizk, 2010). A satisfying job that meets the expectations of an employee motivates the employee to perform in their job. A satisfied workforce results in higher productivity in the organisations and they can thus meet deadlines easily.

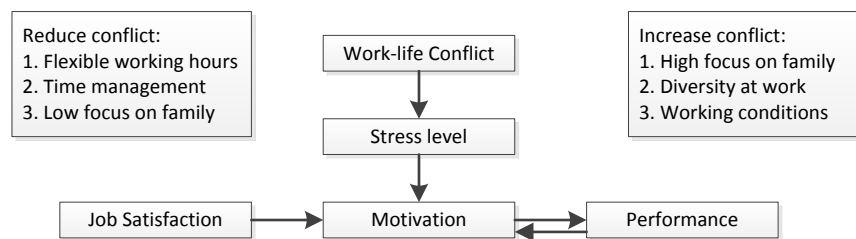


Figure 1: Overview of Literature Review

Ahmad and Skitmore (2003) in their research on Singaporean employees have found that a good position and flexible working hours are valued much more than leisure activities by typical employees. They also state that employees strive to gain respect in the workplace from their colleagues and employers and like to be identified with a special skill. Warren (1989) argues that the ego satisfaction acquired from completing a task to perfection is the motivation to perform it. He highlights the relationship between job satisfaction and motivation by stating that the more basic satisfaction is acquired from the result, the more motivation there is to complete the task. He refutes traditional comparisons which state that productivity is dependent on motivation and believes it is rather vice versa and that increased productivity can lead to an increase in motivation.

Lok and Crawford (2004) found that organisational commitment is one of the leading factors of organisational performance. An employees' overall contribution to the organisation comes through organisational commitment in the absence of which the individual mentally withdraws from working with the organisation and looks to quit when they are dissatisfied at work. Further, Lingard and Francis (2009) have found that organisational supportiveness in the employees' family life directly correlates to the organisational commitment of the individual. They describe three types of commitment namely, emotional attachment to the organisation, commitment towards continuing their job and the moral obligation of sticking with a specific firm. Lok and Crawford (2004) also claim that the level of education, age and time spent in an organisation play a major role in commitment towards it.

2.2 Work-life conflict

Work family conflict is a central issue in work-life balance (Lingard and Francis, 2009). Past research indicates that typical employees are willing to sacrifice part of their income for more time with their

family (Ahmad and Skitmore, 2003). Lingard and Francis (2009) state that stress and strain on a working individual can be inflicted when the work life and family life conflicts, which can be time, behaviour and strain based. The rise of dysfunctional attitude, psychological and physical problems due to work family conflict can lead to major damage to the individual, their family and their organisation. They find that a lack of job satisfaction, life satisfaction and organisational commitment are caused by inadequacy in balancing the job and family. Workers who are unhappy with their family life due to work related stress also tend to impart less than the minimum required performance in their respective jobs. The sources of these conflicts are the results of being overworked across long, irregular work hours thus denying an individual the opportunity to time with the family. Most employees experiencing work-family conflict are susceptible to quitting their job. They concluded that the interference of work with family affects the individual more negatively than the interference of family with work. Recent research shows that in the UAE, 35% of working fathers work up to 50 hours weekly and 45% of working mothers and 58% of working fathers are denied flexible timing and convenient working hours (Maceda, 2012).

2.2.1 Role centredness

Role salience or role “centredness” is the importance a person places on a role. The more importance one places on a certain role the more stress it imparts on them. The four kinds of people classified according to role salience are the dual-centred people who demonstrate high levels of attention to both work and family, the low importance profile who do not impart importance to either work or family. The last two groups consist of work-centred and the family centred people (Lingard and Francis, 2009). Saltzein et al. (2001) state that individuals who are empowered strongly with either job or family roles are mindful of the demands and challenges of that particular role. The interaction between the primary role involvement and role demands play a significant part in the work-family conflict. They claim that even though detachment from family roles due to work stress can cause conflicts, an individual who does not feel the sense of responsibility or share a psychological attachment towards the family role would not be significantly affected.

2.2.2 Diversity at work

Workplace diversity occurs when staff from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds co-exist in an organisation (Al-Jenaibi, 2012). Workplace diversity in UAE is common as the net migration rate in the UAE is among the highest in the world. The majority of its workforce (skilled professionals and unskilled workers) are foreign nationals. Most of the workers in the construction industry come from south and south-east Asia and practically all the manpower in the private construction companies comprise of expatriate staff. These factors require managers in these companies to apply skills and strategies in order to mobilise effective communication with the work force.

2.2.3 Burnout

Maslach et al. (1996) define burnout “as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, de-personalisation and reduced personal accomplishment”. Lingard and Francis (2009) say that long working hours and demanding projects can lead to overwork and competition causes job insecurity. The effect of overwork can also lead to diminishing physical and mental health such as clinical depression and ineffective family management. The competitive, high risk environment of the construction industry together with almost impossible deadlines, job insecurities and overlap of work with family issues causes stress on employees and can in extreme case result in burnout. Employees who suffer from burnout typically show signs of reduced work efficaciousness, cynicism and pessimism and acute emotional exhaustion.

2.3 Construction industry and work-life balance

The construction industry is a very competitive environment functioning at very low profit margins and usually under threat of heavy penalties for missed deadlines resulting in overworked and unhappy employees particularly as a consequence of long irregular work hours (Leonhard and Simaan, 2010). Yip and Robinson (2006) point out numerous sources of stress in the construction industry such as working in

challenging and unhygienic locations, insufferable work conditions, long working hours, bureaucracy, tight schedules, lack of opportunities and work family conflict. These have caused many to leave to industry and also reduced the attractiveness of the industry to the Y-Generation who are currently in the workforce.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

A survey was conducted with 60 professional civil engineers in the UAE through face to face interview, telephone interview and distribution of the questionnaires through email. The respondents were mainly expatriate employees working in both public and private sector organisations. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared based on the review of literature. The questions were formulated to elicit the respondents' satisfaction with their respective careers, stress inducing situation experienced at the workplace, measures to cope with the interface between work and family, and the steps taken by organisations to ensure employee well-being. The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended as well as open-ended questions covering the topics mentioned earlier.

The study employs a mixed approach of both quantitative and qualitative research methods in an attempt to deduce and induce conclusions from the survey results. In mixed method research, qualitative and quantitative methodologies can be interwoven in a variety of ways such as a single application on different stages of the study or used simultaneously in an integrated manner on the same phase(s) of the inquiry (Niglas, 2000). Quantitative and qualitative data analysis from a mixed-method study can also be sequenced in a variety of ways (Yoshikawa et al., 2008). The results of the analysis are presented in the form of charts, graphs and figures for the close-ended questions, while the respondent's comments and quotations on the open ended questions were coded and categorised into themes with examples to illustrate the themes.

3.1 Staff satisfaction

The motivation to perform tasks directly affects one's work-life, the first two questions measure the degree of employee satisfaction with their job. A three point scale is used to assign the degree of satisfaction and motivation. The result shows that men are more satisfied with their jobs where a least a third of the male respondents are highly satisfied with their jobs. Older respondents are more satisfied with their job compared with younger respondents probably due to the fact that they are closer to the ideal point in their career. Nevertheless, 18% of the male respondents said that they were not satisfied with their job. Amongst the female respondents, a quarter of the respondents are not satisfied with their current jobs at all while another quarter claimed they were highly satisfied, with the rest being moderately satisfied. Overall, only 20% reported dissatisfaction with their jobs.

On the issue of overall motivation to perform daily tasks at the workplace, more than half (58%) are somewhat motivated while 28% of the respondents were not motivated and only perform their work because of duty and responsibility. Male respondents are generally more motivated at work than their female counterparts. The results show the need to introduce work-life balance policies into organisations in the construction sector to improve employees' motivation levels.

The respondents were next asked about the reasons for their satisfaction with their job or career. When asked about their perception of the difference between a career and a job, most agreed that a career is achieved through long term planning and by gradually rising up in position over the years. Career has been generally defined as a constantly growing entity through which an individual advances by acquiring experience and progressing in position at their job. A job is generally described as something one has to take up in order to launch a career and earn money whether they like it or not. When asked whether the respondents has reached an ideal point in their career, only 20% felt they have and the rest of the

respondents are dissatisfied with the progress of their career at the current point in time. Despite the earlier findings that 80% of respondents are moderately to highly satisfied with their jobs, most are not satisfied with how their careers have progressed. While most of the respondents acknowledged that they have a good job, they felt that they do not have an ideal job at this point in their careers.

3.2 Motivation

When enquired about their motivation, 72% of the respondents expressed that they are somewhat to highly motivated to conduct routine tasks and perform tedious jobs at their work place. When asked about what drives their motivation to perform routine tasks at the work place, the responses received can be categorised according generalised themes with typical descriptive answers summarised in Table 1. The most common force that motivates one to do work is the recognition by seniors and peers at work and respect received for their exceptional performance. Other popular drivers of motivation include aiming for promotions and aspiring to elevate their grade or acquire a high position. Monetary benefits such as expectation of incentives, year-end bonuses and the prospect of a raise in salaries due to proficiency in performance are also important drivers of motivation.

Table 1: Drivers of Motivation to perform tasks at workplace

Inductive categories /Themes	Frequency	Sample of descriptive responses
Tangible Achievements/ Completed projects.	8 (13%)	<i>“when I look at all the projects I have been a part of in the past and how successful they turned out I feel that want to be able to do more of that”</i>
Need for respect and peer recognition	20 (33%)	<i>“Once you have signed up for it you have to end up doing work, you can’t be known as the guy who doesn’t do anything around here”</i>
Attain Promotions/ Aim for higher positions	15 (25%)	<i>“Talking about building career, only working hard can help me step up into higher positions”</i>
Setting attainable goals related to work	7 (12%)	<i>“I try not to look at my work as workload, instead I make a schedule to finish it part by part so I can meet deadlines</i>
Monetary benefits	10 (17%)	<i>“frankly, we all are doing a job for the salary and if you don’t do the job you were hired for, you will lose it.”</i>

3.3 Challenges faced at the workplace

The respondents were asked about the problems and challenges faced as a professional working in the industry. More than 90% of the respondents faced difficult tasks and work overload and consider these the main challenges of their job. Other common challenges include the discomfort faced due to harsh climatic conditions particularly for site based engineers and issues concerning site location and travel. Some of the respondents highlighted the lack of professional training and long work hours.

To understand the impact of the cultural differences between peers and colleagues in the workplace on the work-life of an individual, the respondents were asked about the extent of cultural difference at their workplace and how that impacts them in the course of work. The result shows that 42% of the respondents adapt themselves to cultural variance at their workplace. Many of the respondents (41%) benefitted positively from the multicultural working environment and do not consider them a hindrance to their work. 53% of the respondents have either benefitted or are unaffected by the effects of cultural diversity, the rest of the respondents (47%) faced or are still facing difficulty at work due to this issue. The main problem seems to be the difficulty in communicating with construction workers who speak little or no English and have to be given extensive training and language coaching in order to be instructed and directed by the employee in charged. The respondents also voiced concern about perceived favouritism towards subordinates from the same nationality or language by team leader or senior management. As the

leaders are influential in determining their promotion, they felt pressurised to work harder to prove their eligibility over other colleagues who share the same cultural background as the leaders.

3.4 Role centredness and work-life conflict

In order to understand the conflict between work and family, the respondents were asked about the challenges of maintaining a good work-life balance. The study shows that half of the female respondents state they are family focused while a third claim their focus is well balanced between job and family. Among the male respondents, 41% claim to have a balance between job and family and 39% admit they are more work centred. However, regardless of the individual focus, problems still arise when trying to achieve a balance. Problems faced by the respondents are categorised into three main themes as presented in Table 2. More than half the female respondents (56%) admit to facing negative impacts at home due to their work life. In total, 40% of all respondents suffer the negative impacts of their work on their family. Two of the main problems faced are the lack of time to communicate and interact with their family as they spend a lot of time commuting to work or overtime at work; and monetary issues faced as a result of the high cost of living in the UAE.

Table 2: Most recurring problems in family life due to work

Inductive categories /Themes	Frequency		Sample of descriptive responses
	Men	Women	
Negative impacts of work at home	15 (34%)	9 (56%)	<i>“during my children’s summer vacation I’m usually stuck at work and we don’t get to visit our home country much which drifts them away from our culture”</i>
Short of time to spend with family	5 (11%)	2 (12%)	<i>“usually I bring my work home and am not able to spend time or help with my children’s’ school work”</i>
Monetary issues	4 (9%)	5 (31%)	<i>“almost all the money I earn is used up for my children’s education, tuition and hobbies I... the standard of living in this country makes it really hard to make any savings ”</i>
No recurring problems	15 (34%)	0	<i>“I think I handle the balance of work and family very well my family has never complained to me about any problems”</i>
Don’t know/ No answer	5 (11.4%)	0	

3.5 Staff burnout

In view of the negative impact of staff burnout, the respondents are asked whether the challenges and work has resulted in extreme depletion of energy, motivation and strength. The result shows that none of the respondents has ever experience burnout despite their challenging jobs. While the result provide a positive view of the industry, it is also likely that most of the engineers who have experienced burnout are probably no longer in the profession, and the ones who are still working are too embarrassed to admit it. To probe this matter further, the respondents were asked about how they cope with the stress so that burnout could be avoided. The primary means of reducing stress is being able to manage their time effectively. This includes setting realistic goals, breaking complex task to manageable tasks and completing them as quickly as possible.

For employees who work on-site, practical precautionary measures include staying away from the heat when working outdoors in the extremely hot climate of the UAE to taking more regular breaks to avoid physical and mental exhaustion during the work day. Several respondents state that having a positive attitude at work towards others and controlling their temper and negative opinions help them avoid tense

situations at the work place. Time spent with friends, family and children or taking vacations or engaging in hobbies or sports and meditation help to relieve stress and tension.

3.6 Employer’s social responsibility

Ensuring employee well-being is the firm’s responsibility towards its staff. Respondents were asked about the perks and benefits received from their respective organisations to help them with their personal and family well-being. From the results, it can be deduced that in general employees working in the UAE seem to be fulfilled in their basic and general needs like medical coverage, travel and accommodation by the organisation employing them. However, very little provision is made to ensure a healthy work-life balance. The policies that are most desired by the employees to improve the well-being of their staff are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Work-life balance policies recommended by respondents

Inductive categories /Themes	Frequency	Sample of descriptive responses
Flexible work hours	60 (100%)	<i>“traditional compulsory presenteeism at the work place should be curbed and employees should be given a chance to go home if the day’s work has been completed”</i>
Employee recognition/ performance rewards	30 (50%)	<i>“tangible appreciation presented to employees will make them happy and motivated at work”</i>
Implementation of paternity leave	13 (22%)	<i>“While women are entitled to maternity leaves with full pay, men should also be given some time off to furnish for their infants”</i>
Opportunities for roles in management and leadership	24 (40%)	<i>“senior managers and team leaders should be considerate and compassionate towards the staff working under them so as to not be a cause of frustration and stress for the team members ”</i>
Observation of staff/team wellbeing	20 (33%)	<i>“Staff should be individually observed and exceptions should be provided for those staff who show signs of extreme stress and tension ”</i>
Training/coaching/ to develop skills/ de-stress	58 (97%)	<i>“because stress is the main problem at the work place sessions should be conducted to de-stress and rejuvenate employees”</i>

From the responses, flexible work hours seem to be the most coveted work-life balance policy desired by the workforce in the UAE construction industry and is supported by all the survey respondents. Other wishes of the employees include implementation of regular training, skill development, better time management and de-stressing sessions. This is followed by employee recognition awards or presentation of tangible appreciation and a request to select humble, compassionate and good natured individuals for the roles of leadership, i.e. senior management who would not misuse their position or take advantage of their subordinates and add stress to their work. The management should take proactive steps to detect signs of stress in the employees so that they could be given time off to rest and recover from stress. Several male and female respondents asked for fully paid paternity leave so that they could properly prepare for the addition of an infant in their life and schedule.

4. Conclusions

This study examines the state of work-life balance for civil engineers working and living in the UAE by assessing the level of career satisfaction among the construction personnel surveyed. A majority of professionals across various age groups and cultural backgrounds are dissatisfied with how their career had progressed. The biggest challenge faced at work is the stress caused by the arduous nature of

construction work and the extensive work load in the construction industry. The best approach to reduce stress appears to be time management and similar strategic measures to avoid the dire consequences of stress such as burnout. Most of the respondents have a more balanced focus between work and family yet many are faced with negative impacts to their family life as a result of work stress. The study also shows that the basic benefits currently provided by their employers lack pivotal components of work-life balance policies such as flexibility of work hours which is desired by all those interviewed professionals.

The negative impact of work as described by the respondents agrees with Lingard and Francis' (2009) study which states that work interfering with family affects the individual more negatively than any other factors. On the theory of role salience, 38% of the respondents are 'dual-centred' individuals who will be significantly affected by the lack of work-life balance. Organisations operating in the UAE should adapt work-life balance policies that enable flexible work hours for the employees and provide necessary training and support in order to maintain their wellbeing. Improvement in work-life balance will reduce the existing stress faced by employees in the construction industry and will go a long way to improve staff performance.

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