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The decline of the ‘traditional’ family: work-life benefits as a means of promoting a diverse workforce in the construction industry of Australia

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The ‘traditional’ managerial career model was based upon a clear division of labour. Typically, women stayed at home to raise children and manage household work while men acted as primary breadwinners. In this arrangement, relocation, long and inflexible hours of work and frequent travel were not only possible but were a prerequisite for advancement. However, since the 1950s, dramatic changes to family structures and workforce composition have occurred. In the twenty-first century the majority of women, including those who may be considered in the child-bearing and early child-rearing age group, are in paid employment. There has also been an increase in the number of lone parents in the workforce. There is evidence of a corresponding change in employees’ expectations, with both men and women placing greater value on both work and family involvement. Given these changes, it can no longer be assumed that employees are ‘free’ to devote all their energy to their work. Nor can it be assumed that there is a clear separation between employees’ work and personal lives. The construction industry has a culture of long hours and weekend work, and construction employees struggle to achieve a balance between their work and personal lives. This paper suggests that, in order to attract and retain a talented workforce, construction organizations will increasingly have to cater for the diverse needs of employees with regard to work-life balance. Furthermore, it is likely that employees’ needs will vary according to their gender, age and stage of family development. A ‘one size fits all’ approach to managing work-life balance is unlikely to suffice. This paper presents the results of an empirical investigation of project-based professional and managerial employees’ preferences for work-life balance initiatives in Australian private and public sector construction organizations. Preferences were found to differ significantly by employee family structure and age. The small number of female respondents did not warrant statistical comparisons by gender. However, the profile of female respondents suggests that women with dependent children are seriously under-represented in project-based positions within the participating organizations. Finally, the implications for managing a diverse workforce are discussed.

Keywords: Work-life benefits, age, gender, family structure, diversity

Introduction

Changing family roles and workforce demographics

The roles and expectations of men and women have changed significantly over the past 60 years. More Australian women than ever before are in the workforce reflecting rising educational levels, changing societal attitudes and declining birth rates. The Australian

Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report that women’s overall participation in the paid work force in Australia has risen from 43.7 per cent in 1978 to 55.5 per cent in 2004 (ABS, 2004a). As a consequence of the changing workforce profile, the number of dual-income couples overall has increased. In 57.5 per cent of Australian two-parent families (with children under 15) both parents were in paid employment in 2003 (ABS, 2004b).

With the increasing acceptance of gender equity, family is being seen more as a joint responsibility, both from a financial and nurturing perspective. There has

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been a substantial shift in the expectation of fathers' involvement in parenting. In an Australian study by Russell *et al.* (as cited in Russell and Bowman, 2000), 68 per cent of fathers reported they did not spend as much time with their children as they would like, with 57 per cent acknowledging that work-related factors were the major contributors to this problem.

The recent change from institutional aged care to home- and community-based care means that responsibility for caring for elderly relatives now rests more heavily with family members. With Australia's ageing population and increasing life expectancy, the number of workers with filial responsibilities is likely to rise. In 1998 older persons (aged 65 years or more) comprised 12 per cent of the Australian population and are projected to form 24 per cent of the total population by 2051 (ABS, 1999a; ABS, 1998). In fact it was predicted that, between 1996 and 2041, the aged dependency ratio will double from 18.1 to 34.8; thus, for every 100 workers there will be 34 aged dependents (Gorey *et al.*, 1992).

The changing workforce has forced changes to work practices to accommodate those with family responsibilities, most notably for taking time off work. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that, during 1998, 58 per cent of Australians with dependent care responsibilities took time off to meet family responsibilities. The average duration of this absence was 9.4 days in a 12-month period (Glezer and Wolcott, 2000). Furthermore, it appears that both men and women take time off work on an almost equal basis for this purpose (ABS, 1999b).

Changing expectations regarding work-life balance

Changing family structures have led to changed expectations regarding work-life balance. For example, a survey of Australian men under 35 years of age with young children and partners in the workforce reported that they were feeling more stress and are keen to change the corporate world to enable them to better balance work-life issues (Russell and Bowman, 2000). These findings are consistent with those of Loughlin and Barling (2001), who report that the new generation of younger workers, both male and female, is not motivated by the same rewards as their parents' generation. Instead they place greater value on 'non-standard' work models that enable them to enjoy a more satisfactory work-life balance.

Becker and Moen (1999) describe how dual-earner couples make a conscious decision to 'scale back' work commitments to balance work and family. This scaling back is related to the life-course with many workers, both male and female, consciously placing limits on

work commitments following the birth of a child. In Australia, there is also a growing trend for men to reduce their time commitments to work in order to take more responsibility in the home (*The Age*, 2003). Further it appears that highly educated and professional employees proactively plan to blend work and family and that this influences their employment choices. For example, Cinamon and Rich (2002) report that employees who place high importance on both work and family will seek a work environment in which substantial resources are invested in supporting work-family role combinations (e.g. by adopting work-life balance policies). Similarly, Konrad (2003) reports that professionals and managers who expect to bear considerable domestic responsibilities express a preference for jobs that offer shorter, flexible work hours and a less demanding work environment. While this held true for both male and female respondents, the effect was greater among women, who traditionally invest more hours in household labour than men. However, Konrad (2003) also reports that employees who preferred flexibility to accommodate family circumstances did not reduce their desire for a rewarding career and intrinsically rewarding work. Thus organizations wishing to attract employees with family responsibilities face the challenge of finding ways to provide flexibility without denying career rewards to employees. In this context, non-traditional management approaches are required to attract, retain and motivate employees.

The Australian construction industry

The Australian construction industry is characterized by traditional work patterns. There is a strong culture of long hours and weekend work, especially among site-based employees. During peak times site-based employees are often required to perform significant amounts of unpaid overtime, often with little warning. Unsurprisingly, site-based employees are reported to suffer from significantly higher levels of work-to-family conflict and emotional exhaustion (burnout) than office-based counterparts in the construction industry (Lingard and Francis, 2004). The traditional work patterns prevalent in the construction industry are based on gendered assumptions about the nature of work and the ever-availability of employees. Work cultures that equate long hours spent at work with employee commitment assume a division of labour in which men's time is devoted to work while women's time is devoted to managing the home and family, a division which frees male employees to be available to respond to organizational demands at all times (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003). However, the persistence of traditional work patterns in the construction

industry, discussed above, is at odds with the enormous social changes that have occurred since the 1950s, most notably the decline of the traditional family, the dramatic changes to the demographic profile of the workforce and the emergence of a new generation of employees with expectations of achieving a satisfactory balance between work and family, as discussed above.

It has been argued that the industry's failure to accommodate the family needs of employees has acted as a barrier to women's entry into the construction industry (Fielden *et al.*, 2000). While Australian women's participation rates in construction and engineering have risen, currently only 7.9 per cent of all managers and professionals in the industry are female (ABS, 2003). The need to diversify the Australian construction workforce has been acknowledged and many direct forms of discrimination have been eradicated, but the industry remains heavily male-dominated. Adherence to inflexible, traditional employment practices is likely to be one reason for this failure (Fielden *et al.*, 2000). It is probable that these traditional work patterns act as an indirect form of discrimination for workers with family responsibilities. A recent survey by the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers (APESMA) supports this contention. The survey revealed that only 24 per cent of female engineers and 21 per cent of female architects were mothers. Women in these professions were also less likely to work part time and worked more hours a week above the 38-hour standard than other professionals. According to APESMA, many female professionals in engineering and architecture are forced to choose between career and family, with many leaving their professions in order to bear children (*The Age*, 2004). Other potential employees, both male and female, who foresee family responsibilities in the future may choose alternative careers to those in the construction industry. We suggest that if the construction industry is to attract and retain a diverse workforce, construction organizations must accommodate the work-life balance expectations of both women and men.

Work-life benefits

Work-life benefits are formal organizational initiatives designed to prevent or reduce conflict between employees' work and personal lives. Secret (2000) classifies work-life benefits into four categories:

- Alternative work arrangements;
- Leave time policies;
- Childcare services; and
- Mental health and wellness services.

Alternative work arrangements include the modification of daily start and stop times, compressed work

weeks, part-time work, job-sharing and tele-commuting on a regular basis. Leave time policies include mandated maternity and paternity leave entitlements and informal arrangements for a few hours or days off with or without pay but available on an ad hoc basis. Childcare services include on-site childcare facilities, subsidization of childcare costs, pre-tax credits for childcare assistance or information referral services for dependant care and resources. Mental health and wellness services include employee assistance programmes (EAPs), stress management workshops and seminars on family-related matters.

Research indicates that the availability of work-life benefits does alleviate the conflict employees experience between work and personal life (Warren and Johnson, 1995; VanRijswijk *et al.*, 2004) and facilitates a better balance between employees' work and personal lives (Tausig and Fenwick 2001; Madsen 2003). Work-life benefits are also reported to improve organizations' competitiveness by increasing their ability to attract employees (Casper and Buffardi, 2004), inducing employees to exercise discretionary effort in performing their work (Konrad and Mangel, 2000) and helping employees to be more productive (Eaton, 2003). Further, Arthur (2003) reports a positive relationship between the announcement of organizational work-life benefit initiatives and shareholder returns, indicating that investors view family-friendly firms more favourably.

However, there is a lack of consensus about whether the positive effect of work-life benefits is universal (i.e. experienced by all employees, irrespective of their individual characteristics or circumstances) or whether the effect of work-life benefits differs for particular sub-populations of employees. Some research suggests demographic differences exist. For example, McKeen and Burke (1994) explored the extent to which managerial women valued different types of work-life benefits and found significant differences according to age and parental status. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) report that, in a homogeneous sample of managers and professionals, the work-life benefits of family-care and flexibility were used by employees possessing different demographic characteristics. Konrad and Mangel (2000) argue that the productivity impact of work-life benefits will be contingent upon the types of workers employed by a firm.

Other research suggests that work-life benefits have a positive effect upon employee attitudes irrespective of whether employees are likely to use them or not. For example, Grover and Crooker (1995) directly assessed the impact of childcare and flexibility policies on the organizational commitment of parents and non-parents. They report that employees who had access to flexible work hours had greater affective

commitment, irrespective of whether they were parents or non-parents. However, a policy of providing assistance with the costs of childcare was not associated with higher commitment among either group. Similarly, Casper and Buffardi (2004) report that the work-life benefits of flexibility and dependant care assistance predicted job pursuit intentions irrespective of whether potential employees were likely to use these benefits.

Still other research indicates that the relationship between work-life balance benefits and employees' work-related attitudes differs according to both employee characteristics and the *type* of work-life benefit in question. For example, Roehling *et al.* (2001) explored the effect of gender, age and stage of family development upon the extent to which work-life balance benefits contribute to employee loyalty to their organization. They report flexible time policies are associated with increased loyalty for men and women at all life stages but that the impact of childcare policies on employees' loyalty varied by employees' gender and age of youngest child.

Research objectives

Despite the potential advantages to be gained from the implementation of work-life benefits, some benefits may be costly to implement. It is therefore imperative that organizations consider the likely outcomes before deciding to provide work-life benefits. Knowledge about employees' preferences for work-life benefits can assist employers and human resource managers to develop policies and practices that are perceived to be of benefit to important sub-populations of existing or potential employees.

The objective of this study was to identify the preferences of a sample of Australian technical, managerial and professional construction employees, for a range of different work-life benefits. We also tested for significant differences between the preferences of key groups of employees who differ by various demographic characteristics. The rationale for considering these characteristics is briefly presented below.

Relevant employee characteristics

Family development theory holds that people's norms and expectations change as they progress through the stages of family life. White (1999) suggests that stages of family life interact with stages of other social institutions, including work, in complex ways. He suggests that family life must be synchronized with educational and work careers and that a lack of synchronicity gives rise to strain and conflict. Empirical research indicates that the importance attached to one's social roles (e.g. as employee or

parent) has been found to affect the nature of the relationship between work-family conflict and outcome variables such as job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Noor, 2004). Roehling *et al.* (2001) suggest that life stage is a function of both biological age and family configuration. It is likely that life stage will have a significant impact upon employees' experiences at the work-family interface. In particular, entering a partnership (or marriage) and becoming a parent are likely to be two transitions that can affect one's obligations to family and work and shape the prominence of a person's role as worker and family member. For example, Abroms and Goldscheider (2002) report that the relationship status of women (e.g. whether they are single, in a de facto relationship or married) has an impact upon the number of hours they spend in paid work. Costigan *et al.* (2003) suggest that the birth of a child is an important transitional period, significantly increasing family workload and requiring couples to make significant adjustments to family role arrangements. The stressful impact of the transition to parenthood is likely to be increased for employees in dual-earner couples in which both partners need to balance the demands of work with the new roles and responsibilities of being a parent.

Employees' sex is also likely to impact upon preferences for and use of work-life benefits. It is well documented that working women are more influenced by experiences in non-work domains than men. Hothschild (1989) writes of working women performing a 'second shift' when they return home from paid work. Empirical research shows that, on average, women demonstrate a slightly higher use of work-life balance benefits than men (Thompson *et al.*, 1999; Allen, 2001). This may be because, in most Western industrialized societies, women still perform the largest share of care-giving and household tasks (Dijkers *et al.*, 2004).

Given these differences, the extent to which employees respond favourably to organizational work-life benefits could depend, to some degree, on their sex, age and family circumstances. Consequently, Bardoel *et al.* (1999) suggest that, if work-life benefits are to be effectively used to attract and retain a diverse workforce, these benefits must be strategically designed to meet the needs of key constituent employee groups.

Research methods

Survey administration

The data were collected from employees of one public and one private sector organization in Queensland, Australia. The public sector organization is involved in

the construction of large infrastructure projects and the private sector construction company is involved in both civil engineering and building projects throughout the state of Queensland. All project-based professional or managerial staff of both organizations were invited to participate in the study.

The majority of the data was collected via a World Wide Web-based survey. Paper-based surveys were made available on the website (downloadable pdf version) to allow respondents who were not comfortable completing the survey online to participate in the study. The website contained information about the study as well as privacy information. The web-based delivery of the survey was deemed appropriate for the managerial/professional employees in the sample (Dillman, 2000).

A letter from senior management explaining the purpose of the survey and assuring the confidentiality and anonymity of responses invited professional and managerial employees to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire design

Demographic information collected from respondents included:

- year of birth;
- age;
- gender;
- number of years worked in the construction industry;
- number of years worked for current employer;
- job position;
- location of the majority of work time; and
- description of family and household, including dependent children (those under the age of 18 years).

The utility of work-life benefits was assessed using a 21-item composite scale. Participants were asked to indicate their preferences for benefits, ignoring the likelihood of future usage. Responses were scored on a five-point Likert-style scale, where 1=not at all useful; 2=of limited use; 3=moderately useful; 4=useful; and 5=very useful. The work-life benefit items were drawn from a wide variety of sources (Biggs, 1998; Scheibl and Dex, 1998; Moen *et al.*, 1999; Grandey, 2001; Hill *et al.*, 2001; Saltzstein *et al.*, 2001; Thornwaite, 2002).

Data analysis

Scores for the composite work-life benefit scale were analysed using Principal Components Analysis with varimax rotation. Owing to the clarity of the factors,

items loading on these factors were grouped and mean scores calculated for each factor. These mean scores were then used in further analyses of employees' preferences for work-life balance initiatives. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare the mean scores for the benefit factors between employees who differed by age and family structure.

Results

Two hundred and two complete and useable questionnaires were returned. Of the total responses, 63 (31.2 per cent) were from the private sector and 139 (68.8 per cent) were from the public sector. This represents a response rate of approximately 60 per cent from the private sector organization and 28 per cent from the public sector organization. Due to the web-based survey administration, precise response rates are unable to be calculated.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample. The mean age of the sample was 39.8 years (SD=10.7) ranging from 22 to 67 years. The average age of public sector employees was 40.2 years (SD=10.8) and private sector employees was 39.0 years (SD=10.5). Of the 202 respondents, 178 (88.1 per cent) were male and 24 (11.9 per cent) were female. In both organizations, the age of the female cohort was substantially younger than that of the male cohort. The average age of the male respondents was 41.0 years (SD=10.5) and female respondents was 31.1 years (SD=7.6).

Work-life benefit factors

The principal components analysis yielded a four factor solution, explaining 61 per cent of total variance. Table 2 shows the item loadings for each factor. After careful consideration of the items loading on each factor, the factors were labelled: childcare support; alternative work arrangements; crisis assistance/support; and wellness and personal development. There was relatively little double-loading of items, with the exception of three items. These items related to extended parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child; offering temporary part-time work options during family crises; and providing more flexible work hours. Despite this double-loading, the alpha coefficients for childcare support, alternative work arrangements, crisis assistance/support and wellness and personal development were .93, .77, .79 and .87 respectively. These coefficients meet the requirement of being greater than .70 and indicate that the factor sub-scales possess good internal consistency reliability.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of sample

	N	%		N	%
Age			Job description		
20–29 years	39	19.3	Site/project engineer	34	18.8
30–39 years	72	35.6	Project/construction manager	41	20.3
40–49 years	41	20.3	Contract administration	15	7.4
50–59 years	43	21.3	Foreman/supervisor	7	3.5
60 years +	7	3.5	Support services	25	12.4
Gender			Engineering services	16	7.9
Male	178	88.1	Corporate management	16	7.9
Female	24	11.9	Other	6	3.0
Years worked in construction			Description of household		
1–9 years	74	36.6	Couple with dependant children	85	42.1
10–19 years	51	25.2	Couple with non-dependant children	31	15.3
20–29 years	40	19.8	Single parent	6	3.0
30 years 4+	37	18.3	Couple without children	32	15.8
Hours worked per week			Single person	48	23.8
0–29 hours	4	2.0	Spouse/Partner		
30–39 hours	26	12.9	Yes	158	78.2
40–49 hours	92	45.5	No	43	21.3
50–59 hours	44	21.8	Dependent children		
60 hours +	36	17.8	Yes	103	50.9
Work location			No	99	49.1
On site	9	4.5	Country of birth		
Site office	66	32.7	Australia	166	82.2
Head or regional office	126	62.4	Other	36	17.8

Overall preference scores

The sample mean values for each of the work-life benefit factors are shown in Table 3. The highest mean preference score was reported for wellness and personal development. ($M=3.39$, $SD=.919$). The lowest mean preference score was reported for childcare support ($M=1.95$, $SD=1.116$). There was a moderate expression of preference for alternative work arrangements ($M=2.41$, $SD=1.059$) and crisis assistance/support ($M=2.51$, $SD=.932$).

Comparisons by age

Figure 1 and Table 4 show the mean preference scores for each of the work-life benefit factors by respondents' age. Employees in the 40–49 year age group expressed the strongest preference for childcare support initiatives. Understandably, employees in the 60+ age cohort expressed the lowest preference for childcare support initiatives. A one-way ANOVA indicated that the differences in mean preference scores for childcare support initiatives between employees in different age cohorts was statistically significant ($F=3.381$, $p=.011$).

Employees in the 30–39 year age cohort expressed the strongest preference for alternative work arrangements. Employees in the 60+ year age cohort expressed the lowest preference for alternative work arrangements. However, the one-way ANOVA indicated that the differences in mean preference scores for alternative work arrangements between employees in different age cohorts was not statistically significant.

The highest preference for crisis support was among employees in the 50–59 age cohort. Employees in the 60+ age cohort expressed the lowest preference for crisis assistance/support initiatives. A one-way ANOVA indicated that the differences in mean preference scores for crisis assistance/support initiatives between employees in different age cohorts was significant ($F=2.983$, $p=.020$).

The highest expressed preference for wellness and personal development initiatives was among employees in the 20–29 year age cohort. Preferences for wellness and personal development initiatives were the lowest in employees in the 60+ year age cohort. A one-way ANOVA indicated that the differences in mean preference scores for wellness and personal development initiatives between employees in different age cohorts was statistically significant ($F=3.136$, $p=.016$).

Table 2 Factor analysis for work-life benefits

	Factor 1 Childcare support	Factor 2 Alternative work arrangements	Factor 3 Crisis assistance/ support	Factor 4 Wellness and personal development
Providing child care facilities.	.893			
Providing emergency care for a child or other dependants.	.889			
Providing assistance with child care costs (i.e. salary sacrificing).	.887			
Providing vacation care for children during school holidays.	.821			
Providing an information and referral service to assist with care of dependant children.	.798			
Offering extended parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child.	.557	.514		
Providing scholarships for employees' children	.520			
Offering permanent part time work options.		.799		
Introducing job sharing.		.745		
Offering extended part time options for return to work after the birth or adoption of a child		.667		
Increasing flexibility in work location (working from home/telecommuting).		.549		
Providing an information and referral service to assist with care of aged parents.			.765	
Providing of a legal information service.			.644	
Offering temporary part time work options during family crises.		.497	.630	
Allowing for special family leave e.g. to care for a sick dependant.			.615	
Providing an employee assistance programme for employees with family problems.			.599	
Ensuring people take their annual leave regularly.			.568	
Providing a fitness programme (e.g. paying for sports club membership).				.746
Providing a wellness programme.				.658
Reimbursing the costs of courses and further study.				.646
Providing more flexible work hours.		.463		.567
Eigenvalues	4.8	3.0	2.8	2.2
% of variance	22.7	14.2	13.3	10.6

NB: Boxes denote factors.

Comparisons by family structure

Figure 2 and Table 5 show the mean preference scores for each of the work-life benefit factors by respondents' self-reported family structure. Employees who are partnered with dependent children expressed the strongest preference for childcare support initiatives. Employees who are single or partnered without dependent children expressed the lowest preference for childcare support initiatives. A one-way ANOVA indicated that the difference in mean preference scores for childcare support initiatives between employees in different family structures was highly significant ($F=25.255, p=.000$).

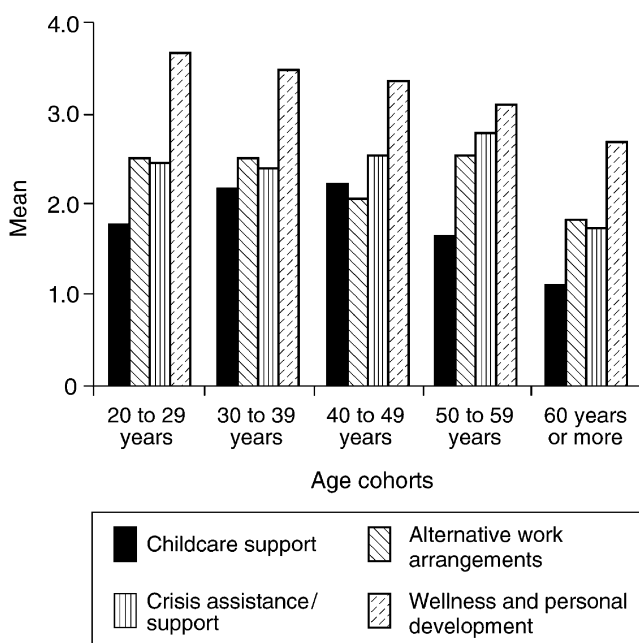
Employees in all family structures indicated that alternative work arrangements would be of some use to

them and a one-way analysis of variance confirmed no significant differences exist. Employees who are partnered with dependent children expressed slightly higher preference for crisis assistance/support initiatives. However, the one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the mean preference scores of employees in different family structures for crisis assistance/support initiatives.

Both partnered employees with children and single parents expressed a relatively low preference for wellness and personal development initiatives. Single employees expressed the strongest preference for wellness and personal development initiatives. Employees who are partnered without children also expressed a relatively strong preference for wellness and personal

Table 3 Work-life benefit preferences mean scores

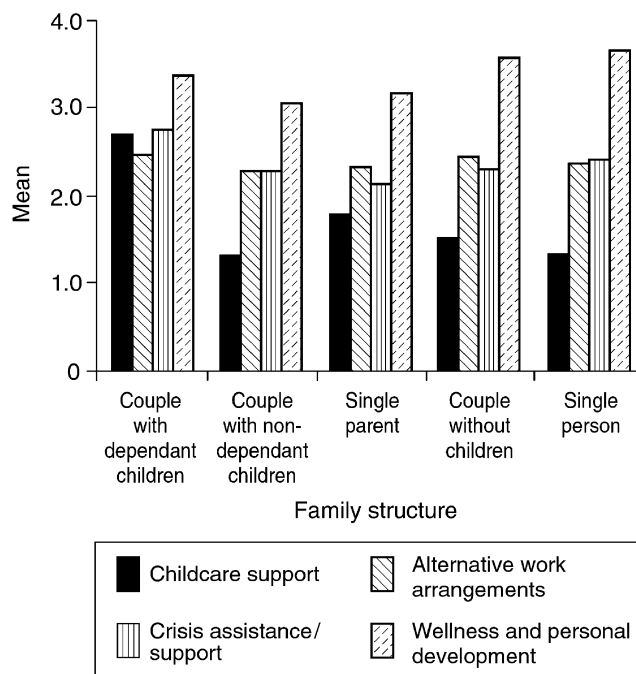
	Mean value	Std deviation
Childcare support	1.95	1.116
Alternative work arrangements	2.41	1.059
Crisis assistance/support	2.51	.932
Wellness and personal development	3.39	.919

**Figure 1** Respondent preferences for work-life benefit by age cohort

development initiatives. However, a one-way ANOVA revealed that the differences between the mean preference scores of employees in different family structures for wellness and personal development initiatives were not statistically significant.

Comparisons by gender

Figure 3 shows the mean preference scores for each of the work-life benefit factors by respondents' gender.

**Figure 2** Respondent preferences for work-life benefit by family structure

This shows that men expressed a slightly higher preference for childcare support benefits than women, while women expressed a stronger preference for wellness and personal development initiatives and alternative work arrangements. Owing to the much smaller number of female respondents than male respondents, statistical comparisons of means were not warranted.

These results must be considered in the context of dramatic differences in the family structures of the men and women in our sample. Table 6 shows that 83 men (46.6 per cent) reported being partnered with dependent children and six men (3.4 per cent) indicated they were single fathers. In contrast, only two women (8.3 per cent) reported being partnered with dependent children and there were no single mothers. Compared with men, a much larger proportion of female respondents reported themselves to be partnered *without* children or single.

Table 4 Work-life benefit preferences mean scores for different age cohorts

	Mean Value				
	20–29 years	30–39 years	40–49 years	50–59 years	60 years +
Childcare support	1.76	2.16	2.22	1.62	1.07
Alternative work arrangements	2.49	2.51	2.06	2.57	1.83
Crisis assistance/support	2.44	2.39	2.55	2.82	2.05
Wellness and personal development	3.68	3.49	3.37	3.09	2.82

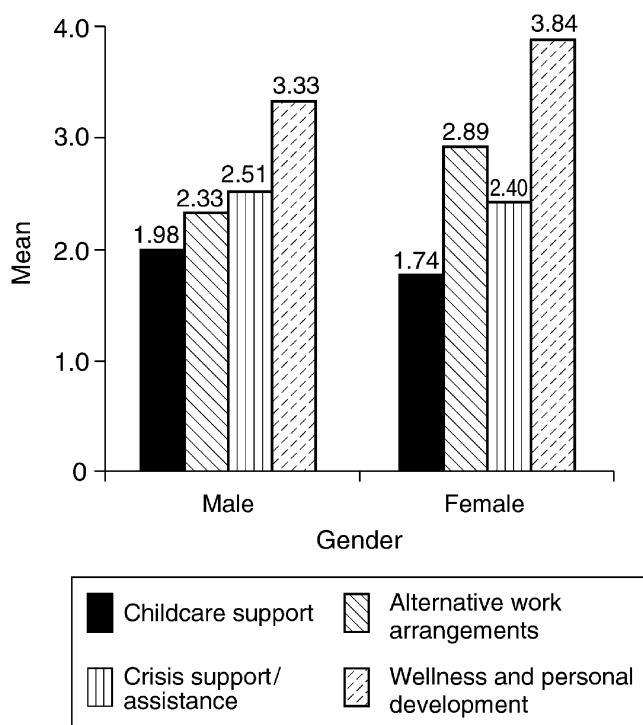
Table 5 Work-life benefit preferences mean score for different family structures

	Mean Value				
	Couple dependant children	Couple non dependant children	Single parent	Couple without children	Single person
Childcare support	2.69	1.31	1.79	1.50	1.33
Alternative work arrangements	2.45	2.34	2.30	2.43	2.37
Crisis assistance/support	2.73	2.39	2.14	2.30	2.40
Wellness and personal development	3.34	3.06	3.17	3.54	3.63

Discussion

Work-life benefit categories

The principal components analysis revealed that some of the benefit items included in the survey loaded on more than one factor. While this was not a serious problem because the factors possessed good internal consistency reliability, the double-loading does suggest that some overlap between work-life benefit categories exists. In particular, there appears to be some conceptual link between childcare support, alternative work arrangements and crisis assistance/support. It is possible that these types of work-life benefit are mutually supportive, offering different ways in which employees can simultaneously satisfy their work and personal life expectations. Future research should explore these linkages.

**Figure 3** Respondent preferences for work-life benefit by gender

Work-life benefit preferences

Previous research has linked work-life benefits with job pursuit intentions, organizational commitment, employee loyalty and productivity and share price, suggesting that there is a lot to be gained by organizations that implement work-life benefits. However, our results reveal that preferences for work-life benefits vary considerably between different groups of professional and managerial employees in our sample. These results suggest that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to work-life balance in the construction industry. No single work-life benefit is likely to meet the needs of all employees. Thus workforce profiling is probably a useful means to identify the most beneficial and highly valued initiatives to implement. It seems probable that a 'cafeteria style' range of benefits might need to be offered from which employees can design the salary and benefit packages that best suit their needs at a particular life stage. The key is likely to be in affording employees a sense of flexibility and control over their work arrangements. Further, our results suggest that, as employees progress through the stages of family life, their requirements may change, and regular review of work-life benefit availability may need to be undertaken.

Among respondents to our survey, male respondents expressed a stronger preference for childcare support policies than female respondents. This finding was somewhat unexpected and appears to contrary to the findings of previous research showing that female employees use organizationally provided childcare arrangements more frequently than male employees (Dijkers *et al.*, 2004). One possible reason for this finding is that, unlike other work-life benefits, not all employees would be eligible to use childcare support. Indeed, these benefits are likely to only be of use to employees who are parents of dependent children. Female respondents with dependent children were seriously under-represented among respondents to our survey. The reasons for this are not clear; however, this may indicate that existing work-life benefits are insufficient to attract or retain working mothers, even acting as a subtle source of discrimination. The

Table 6 Respondents' family structure by gender

	Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%
Couple with dependant children	83	46.6	2	8.3
Couple with non-dependant children	27	15.2	4	16.7
Single parent	6	3.4	0	0
Couple without children	22	12.4	10	41.7
Single person	40	22.5	8	33.3

under-representation of women in general, and particularly mothers, is a serious concern. Future research should explore the role of various work-life benefits in attracting and retaining women in all age groups and stages of family development.

Our survey was limited in that we were only able to ascertain the work-life benefit preferences of existing employees. It is also important for organizations to consider benefits that would appeal to groups of employees they wish to target for recruitment. The expectations of these people may not be the same as those of existing employees, especially in an industry in which considerable segregation by gender still exists. Careful planning of work-life benefits can be used to target employees from currently under-represented demographic groups and is likely to play an important role in the attraction, retention and motivation of a diverse workforce.

Unlike childcare support, wellness and personal development and alternative work arrangements can be used by all employees. Among respondents in our study, these work-life benefit types were favoured similarly by respondents irrespective of age and family structure. This is consistent with research undertaken by Secret (2000), who explored the likelihood that a sample of men and women would use different types of work-life benefits. She reports that employees with children were no more likely to use some work-life benefits than employees without children and concludes that work-life benefits are valued by all employees, including those who are child-free. Similarly, Roehling *et al.* (2001) report that employees value flexible work arrangements irrespective of gender or life stage. The implication of our finding is that work-life benefits addressing wellness and personal development and alternative work arrangements can be useful to construction industry employers who are concerned about the equitable provision of benefits to employees with and without dependent children.

Work-life benefits and strategic human resource management

Given the labour shortage facing Australia and the increasing scarcity of key personnel in the labour

market, the implementation of work-life benefits is likely to become a greater necessity for strategic human resource management. Previous research suggests that organizations that operate in tight labour markets are more likely to adopt work-life benefits as a means of reducing the negative consequences of work-family conflict and attract and retain high quality employees (Poelmans *et al.*, 2003). In the future, construction firms will experience a greater need to attract employees from currently under-represented segments of the population. Work-life benefits that are linked to job pursuit intentions could play a key role in facilitating this attraction (Casper and Buffardi, 2004). Further, we suggest that adopting work-life benefits would also enhance the competitiveness of construction organizations by eliciting high levels of commitment and performance from their existing employees and reducing costly turnover. Institutional theorists assert that, in industries in which the provision of work-life benefits is not already widespread, proactive organizations that offer benefits gain competitive advantage over those that do not offer work-life benefits (Ingram and Simons, 1995). Thus, in the construction industry, progressive family-friendly firms are likely to be rewarded with increased organizational effectiveness.

Organizational issues impeding take-up of benefits

However, research also strongly indicates that the mere provision of such benefits is insufficient. There is evidence that, even when provided, work-life benefits are often not utilized by employees. The workplace social context and the perceived appropriateness of utilization are reported to have a significant impact upon the extent to which work-life benefits are used (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002; Kirby and Krone, 2002). It is likely that many of the desirable outcomes associated with work-life benefits will not be realized unless employees do not feel free to utilize them. For example, Eaton (2003) reports that work-life benefits are only related to organizational commitment to the extent that these benefits are perceived to be useable.

Usability issues apply to all employees, although particular problems are apparent for employees who are male and/or those who perform a managerial role (Barham *et al.*, 2001).

Issues of organizational culture have been identified as critical determinants of work-life benefit utilization. In particular, employees' perceptions about the career consequences associated with using benefits, normative expectations about appropriate amounts of time spent at work and managerial support for employees' work-life balance are likely to play a role. Although work-life benefit programmes create new ways of working, organizational cultures may still reward old ways of working with the result that employees who use work-life benefits are negatively affected (Thompson *et al.*, 1999; Wayne and Cordeiro, 2003).

Empirical research demonstrates that perceptions of a supportive work environment are significantly related to employees' attachment to their organization above and beyond the availability of work-life benefits (Thompson *et al.*, 1999; Allen, 2001). Research also shows that expectations concerning work outcomes predict the use of work-life benefits (Butler *et al.*, 2003). These studies all suggest that to derive maximum benefit from work-life benefits, organizations need to allay employees' concerns that use of benefits will lead to negative consequences.

Behson (2002) suggests that, in many instances, rather than take advantage of formal organizationally provided work-life benefits, employees cope with work-life balance issues by making informal adjustments to their work arrangements. These adjustments are not proscribed or mandated by the company but are often sanctioned at a local level by the employee's immediate supervisor or manager. In a direct comparison of formal work-life benefits versus informal support, Behson (*in press*) reports that informal support predicted the largest portion (95 per cent) of variance in work-to-family conflict, job satisfaction, turnover intention and absenteeism. Thus the empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the relative importance of informal work-life supports in addition to the provision of formal work-life benefits. The highly decentralized nature of construction operations creates the possibility that informal policies are experienced differently within a single construction organization. Negative responses from supervisors or managers at a local or project level could even outweigh the positive effects of benefit provision at the organizational level. In this context, it is particularly important that managers and supervisors at all levels support employees' work-life balance and fully understand the organizational benefits associated with the provision of work-life balance policies and programmes.

Conclusions

Our study has demonstrated that distinct sub-populations of employees differ in terms of their preferences for work-life benefits. In particular, employees' preferences differ according to their age and stage of family development. In the context of changing workforce demographics and employee expectations about work-life balance, construction organizations should consider the implementation of work-life benefits as a strategy to attract, motivate and retain a diverse workforce. Particular attention may need to be paid to policies and benefits attractive to working mothers. It is noteworthy that one Australian contractor recently introduced a policy of offering paid maternity leave, not a legal entitlement in Australia, in an attempt to attract female employees. Our results indicate that no 'one size fits all' solution to employees' work-life balance exists. Rather, to maintain equity, benefits that can be used by men and women in a diverse range of family structures and life stages should be offered.

Future research

The study was limited in that its focus was solely on the preferences of technical, professional and managerial employees in the Australian construction industry. The findings must therefore be understood in the context of the Australian social, legal and economic environment. It is likely that broader social, legal and economic variables will impact upon employees' work-life balance experiences and expectations and we therefore recommend that future research replicate our study in other countries.

A limitation of this study was that it relied upon respondents' reports of their preferences for different work-life benefits. No attempt was made to ascertain whether such policies would be used and, if so, what impact the use of work-life benefits would have. Future research needs to evaluate the effect of different types of work-life benefit on sub-populations of employees. For example, what work-life balance policies bring about a reduction in work-family conflict, an increase in employee loyalty or a reduction in absenteeism and/or turnover? In order to achieve this, experimental research is required. The extent to which the employee characteristics of gender and life stage moderate the relationship between benefit availability and the outcomes listed above should also be investigated. An experiment of this type would provide human resource managers with a better understanding of appropriate and effective management strategies for a diverse workforce.

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