

WHAT MOTIVATES AND DEMOTIVATES CONSTRUCTION COMPANY EMPLOYEES IN CHRISTCHURCH'S POST-EARTHQUAKE RESIDENTIAL SECTOR—A CASE STUDY

B.Holmes¹, L.Kestle²

¹UNITEC Institute of Technology

²UNITEC Institute of Technology

lkestle@unitec.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

The construction sector, whether internationally or locally, remains reliant on people and inter-relationships for positive project outcomes, for the client and stakeholders in particular. Employee motivation is generally regarded in literature as crucial in the drive for increased productivity by construction company managers. The research aim was to explore the motivational factors for employees working for a large New Zealand construction company, on arguably New Zealand's largest ever construction project, effecting earthquake repairs on approximately 100,000 residential homes in Christchurch for the next 3-5 years. The employees were considered as a single group to establish the overall motivational factors, and then a selection of participants from the three occupational groups, being Project Managers, Construction Supervisors, Quantity Surveyors and Contract Administrators were interviewed. The aim was to establish whether differing occupational groups were motivated by differing motivational factors. A questionnaire was distributed to 39 employees, 33 responded. How well the international literature findings matched or differed from the research data findings gathered from the industry participants in Christchurch was analysed. The findings suggested that there were differing motivating factors, and importantly demotivating factors, for the selected occupational groups.

Keywords: construction, industry motivation, post-earthquake, NZ.

INTRODUCTION

Technological advances and developments in off-site fabrication, has not significantly altered the fact that the construction industry remains one of the most people-reliant industrial sectors, (Langford *et al.*, 1995; Loosemore *et al.*, 2003). Improving the job satisfaction and motivation of those that work within the industry should arguably provide the central focus for improving performance (Asad and Dainty, 2005). The popularity of motivational research in the latter half of the twentieth century, has not been strongly evidenced within the New Zealand construction industry, and internationally little evidence exists about the motivation factors that influence different occupational groups within the industry (Asad and Dainty, 2005). The research findings and conclusions of these studies may or may not be applicable to New Zealand construction workers. Therefore this investigation focused on the question,

“What are the significant motivating and demotivating factors for the employees of a large New Zealand construction company, and do they differ between the occupational groups within that company?”.

The focus company was primarily involved in project management and worked with government agencies, homeowners and construction contractors to effect the post-earthquake repairs in Christchurch. The company employed over 350 people and was contracted for the earthquake repairs on approximately 100,000 homes over a period of three to five years. The occupational groups within the company selected for this case-study were the Project Managers, Construction Supervisors, Quantity Surveyors and Contract Administrators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary sources of selected literature for this investigation were published journal and conference research papers, emanating primarily from relevant research conducted in UK, USA and Australia. The selected literature specifically referred to and highlighted motivating and demotivating factors, and therefore significantly informed the focus of this research question.

Motivating factors

Consistently throughout the literature, monetary reward was the most significant motivator for all construction workers (Asad and Dainty, 2005; Cox *et al.*, 2006; Huang and Lu, 2008; Ogunlana, 1998). Other primary motivators for construction workers were found to be job security, co-worker relationships, and satisfaction of completing challenging tasks.

However, Huang and Lu, (2008) found that challenging work and the opportunity to do something that contributed to self-esteem was one of the least important motivators for contractors in Taiwan. Workers thought safety on the job was a significant factor, contributing to their motivation, according to Cox *et al.*, (2006), and Asad and Dainty, (2005). Good relationships with workmates, in a team environment was also considered an important motivating factor by subcontractors in Florida, USA, and construction operatives in Bangkok (Cox *et al.*, 2006; Ogunlana, 1998;).

Asad and Dainty, (2005) concluded that construction professionals were generally more motivated by intrinsic rewards than skilled and unskilled operatives. Skilled and unskilled operatives demonstrated a marked desire for extrinsic rewards being money, job security, and health and safety. Other findings were that there was no difference between the motivation factors for employees of large companies and the employees of small companies (Asad and Dainty, 2005), and Barrett, (1993) found that middle level professionals had a greater desire for monetary bonuses than higher level professionals.

Demotivating Factors

Smithers and Walker, (2008) established that the most significant demotivators for construction professionals working in Melbourne, Australia, was a lack of recognition for work done, poor planning and unfair resource distribution, ad-hocracy, aggressive and often hostile management styles, and feeling isolated by the opposite gender on-site. Smithers and Walker, (2008) findings supported previous research by Ogunlana, (1998) where poor treatment by supervisors had been ranked as the highest demotivator by construction workers, followed by unsafe working conditions. Civil engineering operatives in Hong Kong ranked rework as the highest demotivator (Skitmore, 2004) and this was followed by overcrowded work areas, team disagreements, tool unavailability and inspection delays. Huang and Lu, (2008) believed that tool and machinery unavailability rated highly as a demotivator. Whereas Skitmore, (2004) found that the demotivators which rated the lowest were management changes, management incompetence and material unavailability, and concluded that by reducing demotivation factors such as rework, lack of material availability and overcrowded work areas, large gains in productivity could be achieved. Workers had estimated a total of 5.1 hours to 13.6 hours a week were being lost due to demotivating factors.

A further, and interesting finding with construction professionals in Melbourne, Australia by Smithers and Walker, (2008), was that as a group construction professionals were generally motivated by the same

factors. However, those who were based on-site were subject to more demotivating factors, such as aggressive management, non-recognition, and poor planning, than those based at company offices. It was concluded that the level of motivation of site-based workers was lower than that of office based workers.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research was qualitative and exploratory, in order to gain knowledge and establish the motivating factors for employees of a large New Zealand construction company, working in Christchurch. Agreement for the selected company and employed personnel to be involved in the research project was sought and gained in writing from senior management personnel before anyone was approached to be a participant.

A survey of the focus company was conducted for this research using a questionnaire, as it would provide wide coverage, and give a snapshot-in-time that would help answer the research question, "What are the significant motivating and demotivating factors for the employees of a large New Zealand construction company and do they differ between the occupational groups within the company?"

The questionnaire comprised two distinct parts. Part One involved three open-ended questions, to basically set the scene for the multi-choice questions that followed. Part Two was a list of multi-choice questions offering a five point scale for participant answers, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The questions were primarily drawn from the findings in the literature review, and included references to Maslow's five categories of Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954), and also included references to demotivating factors that were part of Herzberg's (1959), Two Factor Theory. This 'mixed theory' approach was also used by Ogunlana, (1998).

Section 1 Open Questions						
1.	What are the significant things that motivate you to come to work and do your best each day?					
2.	What are the significant things that negatively affect your motivation at work?					
3.	If you have relocated to Christchurch specifically for the earthquake recovery work, what were the most significant things that motivated you to do so?					
Section 2 Multi Choice Questions		Strongly agree	Agree	Neither/nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	Improving your standard of living including housing & food is a significant motivator for you at work.					
2.	Gaining an increase to how much you are being paid is a significant motivator for you at work.					
3.	Knowing your current position within the company is secure for the foreseeable future significantly affects your motivation at work.					
4.	Being safe and comfortable has no significant affect on your motivation at work.					
5.	Having good co-worker relationships is a significant motivator for you at work.					
6.	Completing challenging tasks is a significant motivator for you at work.					
7.	Being part of a team has no significant affect on your motivation at work.					
8.	Being acknowledged for your achievements is a significant motivator for you at work.					
9.	Having the ability to increase your training or skills is a significant motivator for you at work.					
10.	The opportunity for a promotion from your current position has no significant affect on your motivation at work.					
11.	The ability to be creative in your role and improve the performance of the company is a significant motivator for you at work.					
12.	Flexible working hours resulting in a good work life balance is a significant motivator for you at work.					
13.	Poor planning and resource allocation significantly affects your motivation at work.					
14.	Having to redo work has no significantly affect on your motivation at work.					
15.	An increase to the amount of hours you work would significantly affect your motivation at work.					
16.	Aggressive management significantly affects your motivation at work.					
17.	Unsafe work conditions significantly affect your motivation at work.					
18.	Management changes significantly affect your motivation at work.					
19.	Disorganisation in terms of polices and procedures does not significantly affect your motivation at work.					
20.	Overcrowded work areas significantly affect your motivation at work.					
21.	Absence of management or clear leadership significantly affects your motivation at work.					

Figure 1 Questionnaire

The participants selected for this research worked for a large New Zealand construction company in Christchurch, set up to undertake the housing repairs in Christchurch, following the 7.0 and 6.3 magnitude earthquakes in September 2010 and February 2011. The company comprised approximately 350 employees, distributed across fifteen 'Hub' offices. Each hub had a Project Manager, 8-10 Construction Supervisors, 3-5 Quantity Surveyors, and 6-8 Contract Administrators. The hubs were all managed from a Head Office of approximately 35 employees, consisting mainly of Administration and Senior Management. A conservative sample of 39 employees was selected for this study, to gain the best response rate possible. From the 39 employees selected, 33 completed the questioning, which provided a response rate of 85%. The participants selected involved 3 Project Managers, 12 Contract Administrators, 12 Construction Supervisors and 12 Quantity Surveyors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The motivators identified most frequently by the respondents as the reasons for coming to work, and doing their best were:

- completing challenging tasks,
- having good co-worker relationships,
- producing good results for clients and the community,
- remuneration,
- achieving goals and targets,
- increasing personal knowledge and skills,
- being part of a team,
- flexible working hours resulting in a good work life balance,
- being acknowledged for achievements.

The respondents identified a greater number of demotivating factors than motivating factors, that affected them. The most frequently identified demotivating factors were:

- repetitive and non-stimulating tasks,
- difficult clients/conflict with clients,
- poor colleague relationships,
- poor company policies/procedures,
- poor leadership,
- poor treatment by management,
- negative office atmosphere,
- management indecision,
- disorganisation,

One of the 'open questions' in Part One was, "If you have relocated to Christchurch specifically for the earthquake recovery work, what were the most significant factors that motivated you to do so?"

This question was included because the participant sample had a relatively high proportion of people who had relocated to Christchurch to work on the earthquake recovery project. Of the 33 respondents, 12 had relocated or specifically moved to Christchurch to be employed on the earthquake recovery project. The most common reasons, or motivators for relocating to Christchurch were the employment opportunities offered, and to assist the community with the earthquake recovery. Another common motivator was the level of remuneration. Four of the twelve respondents relocated for the remuneration, three respondents moved to Christchurch as it was seen as a career progression opportunity. Two respondents relocated for a change in life-style.

The most significant motivating factors for the overall group showed that the group had a strong preference for intrinsic rewards, and that their

motivating factors fell within the higher levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. These findings were in line with those from similar research in countries such as Australia, England, Ireland, Hong Kong and the United States, and supported the published literature on motivation factors for construction professionals. The significant motivator of flexible working hours/work life balance was a unique finding in this study as it was not included in the reviewed literature.

There were considerable differences in terms of the motivating factors that affected the different occupational groups. Project Managers had a marked preference for intrinsic rewards compared with the three other occupational groups. Quantity Surveyors and Construction Supervisors provided mixed responses. However, intrinsic rewards were identified as the most significant motivating factors. Compared to the other occupational groups, Contract Administrators were found to have a stronger preference for extrinsic rewards such as monetary rewards and job security. The latter being considered a lower order need on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954).

The most significant demotivating factors were poor planning and unfair resource allocation, aggressive management styles, having to redo work and dealing with difficult clients. This finding was in line with Herzberg's theory, (1959) where it stated that "people were inherently dissatisfied or demotivated by hygiene factors and therefore by attending to the hygiene factors". For Project Managers, an increase in hours worked, management changes and poor company policy were the most significant demotivators. For Construction Supervisors poor planning and unfair resource allocation were the most significant demotivating factors. Quantity Surveyors were significantly demotivated by poor planning and unfair resource allocation, overcrowded work places and the absence of clear leadership. Contract Administrators were significantly demotivated by disorganisation around policies and procedures.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the research was to answer the question, "What are the significant motivating and demotivating factors for the employees of a large New Zealand construction company and do they differ between the occupational groups within the company?" This was achieved by conducting a survey with the focus company, and involved 33 of the 39 participants invited to be respondents, across a range of four occupational groups. There were considerable differences in the factors that affected the motivation of the different occupational groups of Project Managers Quantity Surveyors, Construction Supervisors, and Contract Administrators, as previously discussed in the Results section The two

most common motivators for relocating to Christchurch were the employment opportunities offered, to assist the community with the earthquake recovery, the level of remuneration. and for a change in life-style. Demotivating factors affected the occupational groups very differently as discussed earlier, ranging from an increase in the expectations of hours to be worked, poor company policy, poor planning and resource allocation, overcrowded work places, the absence of clear leadership, and disorganisation around policies and procedures. The findings closely matched the selected literature findings with only very few exceptions.

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