A theoretical and contextual framework for investigating trade and craft careers

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Recruiting and retaining an adequate share of the UK workforce is vital to meeting the construction industry’s demands and sustaining its current growth. This requires the attraction of new employees, developing proactive approaches to Human Resource Development (HRD), and developing retention strategies. Career development programmes are required which can align the industry’s needs with the career expectations of the individual. However, despite the importance of such schemes to the trade and craft occupations, most research devoted to career development has a professional and managerial focus. A need to redress this imbalance is compounded by a variety of negative factors such as the scarcity of skilled people, falling recruitment levels and high employee turnover rates. The overall aim of the work reported in this paper is to develop a typology of trade and craft careers, to be used as a framework for supporting specific career development initiatives. The paper presents the theoretical framework to be used in analysing the career perspectives of a stratified sample of trade and craft employees. This will facilitate an examination of career development expectations, reconciled against the realities of working life and career development opportunity. The relevant literature is introduced, along with the direction of the future research.

Key words: Careers, Development, Expectations, Human Resource Development, Trade and Craft Occupations.

INTRODUCTION

The Construction Industry is currently witnessing its best period of sustained growth since the late 1980’s (Construction Forecasting and Research (CFR), 2003; Building, 2003). Its sales growth of 15 per cent over the last twelve month’s outstrips the national industrial average (Benchmark Index, 2003). However, the construction labour market is tight with a high degree of capacity utilisation (Bridging the Gap, 2003). The industry is experiencing a high turnover of experienced employees at all levels. To compound this, (allowing for regional variations) there is a marked failure to attract new trainees or experienced/mature personnel. Consequently, this labour market climate threatens the industry’s ability to sustain growth or even meet current demand.

Retaining experienced employees may be achieved by developing and practising effective strategies of Human Resources Management (HRM) that align the needs of the individual with industry aspirations (Yankov and Kleiner, 2001). Attracting, recruiting and retaining an adequate share of the UK workforce is dependent on the creation of effective career development programmes (Young, 1990). This will serve to attract career-focused employees, influence a proactive approach to career
management and subsequently sustain employee tenure. However, very few studies have examined turnover, retention (Milman, 2003), career expectations or the career development of “blue-collar workers” (Leibowitz et al., 1992; McDonald et al., 2002). It is even suggested that few organisations subscribe to the belief that such employees have or even want “careers” (Thomas, 1989; Loscocco, 1990). This pathology is also true in the field of construction management were the majority of research devoted to career development has focused on professional and managerial employees as opposed to trade and craft operatives.

The work in progress draws heavily on the HRM literature, and seeks to develop HRM practice in construction related activities by developing policy and practical measures aimed at securing the industry’s future skills base. It aims to achieve this by exploring potential reasons for the industry’s poor record in retaining qualified trade and craft operatives, and assessing career development as a means of redress. This will be achieved in the first instance by reconciling trade and craft career development expectations against realities of working within the industry. By developing a typology of trade and craft career types, particular strategies for addressing career needs will be developed. This paper highlights the theoretical framework for examining trade and craft careers. It also presents the rationale and approach of the work in progress including a research method outline.

WORK IN PROGRESS - RATIONALE AND APPROACH

Competition across all industrial sectors for key skilled and un-skilled personnel has resulted in the emergence of workforce retention as a critical issue. In order to develop a firm understanding of the issues involved, it will be vital to appreciate the context in which retention is set at national level. Of particular interest here are the technical, social and economic structures that influence and filter individuals into different occupations. The following objectives will be undertaken in order to explore the overall aim of the research:

- assess the UK construction labour market and identify key drivers for the development of effective retention strategies;
- review the available literature and develop a conceptual view of careers in relation to trade and craft employees that will act as a framework for further investigation;
- explore career expectations of trade and craft employees;
- to explore realities of construction industry employees working lives at different stages of their careers;
- to explore the interplay of factors shaping careers, expectations and attitudes;
- develop and assess policy and practical measures to retain trade and craft employees to the construction industry; and
- validate these measures through data analysis and discussion with key industry stakeholders.

Research Method

An iterative multiphase approach will be used to satisfy the research aims and objectives. This will consist of questionnaires and focus groups administered to construction trainees and interviews with key stakeholders (i.e. employers, employees
and training providers). Contextual data on the construction industry and theoretical perspectives on careers will support these data, along with the most recent statistical data generated by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB).

By their very nature, current industry statistical data fail to capture the essence of active working life. A methodology is desired capable of examining the individual workers perspective of how the industry as a whole serves to develop their career; and whether or not the current dynamics of the industry impact adversely on retention. Viewing the career as a dynamic interaction between individuals, the organisation and the industry, a greater understanding of these factors as witnessed by the individual employee is required in order to devise active strategies capable of retaining them.

Key to the present research methodology are the expressions of meaning and values in trade and craft career dynamics. Typical to the research method will be the qualitative use of directive probes (i.e. ‘How is your career important to you?’; ‘Why is your career important to you?’; and ‘How do the industries practices affect your career?’) with a view to determining links between consequences and values of actions, but critically about personal motivations. An understanding of the very nature of trade and craft employee occupations should serve to identify further factors that align individual career choice with industry objectives. In conjunction with quantitative and contextual data on technical, social and economic structures, a conceptual model will be developed. This will identify constraints and industry limitations to career choice and development over time, which cause a filtration of individuals into different industry’s and occupations.

The main phases of the research will be to:

1. balance extant and emergent theoretical perspectives through a review of the literature, also taking account of contextual data.;
2. conduct an initial scoping study comprising qualitative interviews with employers, employees and training providers, in order to gain insights into key drivers for the development of employee retention policies;
3. -in conjunction with the CITB- conduct an exploratory postal survey of trainees who have recently left their courses in order to determine possible causal factors behind them leaving the industry;
4. through questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus groups, assess the career expectations, aspirations and motivations of trainees entering into the industry;
5. conduct an in-depth analysis of the career experiences of a stratified sample of qualified construction craft operatives at different stages in their careers. This should identify possible issues leading people to leave the industry as well as those factors that encourage them to stay;
6. reconcile career expectations against realities of working life within the construction industry by analysing and combining all data gathered, identifying the interplay of industry and organisational factors; and
7. develop and validate a set of practical and policy guidelines for addressing the issues raised.

EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Retention is the proactive conjunctive to any debate on turnover, and relates primarily to sustaining workforce levels. The issue of employee retention is emerging across many industries as a critical challenge posing many questions to long-term
sustainability, development, survival and economic success (Kreisman, 2002). The construction industry is no exception and retention at all levels is a ‘major HRM issue’ (Young, 1990; Loosemore et al., 2003 p.8). However, little academic research has been conducted into staff turnover at trade and craft level, consequently, there have been very few practical recommendations on how to stem the flow of labour out of the industry. Given that recruiting and training a new employee is almost always a more expensive option than retaining a current employee (Hinkin and Tracey; 2000; Piper and Liska, 2000; Aghazadeh, 2003), it is critical that such issues are addressed.

The construction industry lends itself neatly to many forms of dialectic enquiry due to historically prevalent cultures (Barthorpe et al, 2000), increasing technological factors (Agapiou et al., 1995) and emerging human factors issues (Langford et al., 1995; Loosemore et al., 2003). By no means least in this mêlée is the acute shortage of skilled and unskilled labour, which subsequently posits a greater emphasis on employee retention. The conceptualisation of career development initiatives as a guide to facilitating retention is not new. Young (1990) suggested that the dynamic internal and external environments within which the construction industry operates require it to develop the ability to influence employee retention through further investment in active career development programmes. However, previously such thought has focused primarily on professional and managerial occupations, fundamentally disregarding other occupations. Initiatives should also be developed uniquely to redress the complex problems that challenge trade and craft tenure.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Career development for the purposes of this paper will be determined as part of a ‘systematic analysis of employee abilities and interest affecting job placement and progression, through various assessment, counselling and training activities’ (Gunnigle and Flood, 1990, p. 172). It is a process for achieving specific employee and organisation goals. Career development may include the provision of career information to employees, identifying advancement opportunities and the promotion of job satisfaction (Bernes and Magnusson, 1996). Career development thus provides a future orientation to strategic related activities such as human resource development (Kirk et al. 2000). Career development provides a means for the industry to improve the quality of occupational existence while simultaneously linking to the improvement of overall employee productivity.

Career Development Interventions

In the field of human resource management, career development has emerged as an important topic (Gunnigle and Flood, 1990; Callanan & Greenhaus, 1999; Zeng and Kleiner 2001) and is firmly established as a critical aspect of career theory (Hall and associates, 1986). Career development is characterised by the search to attain competitive advantage through HRD investment and is a recognised intervention strategy to improve performance (Argyris, 1992). As suggested by London and Stumpf (1982), it is typified by a three-phased approach:

1. the assessment of the individual skills, interests, and preferences;
2. the identification of objectives and formation of a coherent plan; and
3. training, development and accumulation of experiences in line with the specified plan.
Career development needs differ between individual employees, consequently, organisations vary in the resources available to them and organisation career development strategies make use of a variety of interventions (Schlossberg, 1997). Particular career development interventions identified in the literature include:

- **alternative career paths** - incorporate the skills that employees already have with what they feel they want. This results in flexible career structures;
- **assessment centre activities** - identifies workers' career potential, or for use in job placement activities;
- **career coaching/counselling** - helps individuals to prepare for a career change or helping employees advance in their existing jobs;
- **career pathing** - outlines an individual’s career plans in conjunction with a career coach;
- **cross training** - involves teaching skills outside of current job assignment;
- **dual career tracks** - as distinct from alternative career paths - involves preparing employees to succeed and be rewarded without being on a vertical career path;
- **job enlargement** – increases the number of tasks a worker performs;
- **job enrichment** - as distinct from job enlargement - involves increasing a worker's responsibility and control over his or her work; and
- **job rotation**, the systematic movement of employees from job to job (Harrison, 2000; Jackson, 2000).

Career development helps to attract career focused employees, as well as motivating, developing, and retaining existing employees. According to Kirk (2000), specific benefits of a carefully crafted career development system can be:

- a better employee-organisation fit;
- a better employee-job fit;
- better communications between employees and managers;
- increased employee satisfaction;
- increased employee loyalty; and
- increased employee tenure.

**Sustainable Career Development**

From the environmentalist’s perspective, ‘Sustainability’ relates to a simple concept of: equity within and between generations (Pepper, 1996); or meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations (Iles, 1997). All economic and social development should be sustainable (Pepper, 1996). Recent attitudinal changes within the private sector and government have prompted a more sustainable approach to construction (Hill and Bowen, 1997; Brandon, 1999; Denwick and Miozzo, 2002). There has been substantial investment by government and firms across Europe in the development of technologies and products that support sustainable building and sustainable urban regeneration.

Modern environmentalist perspectives on social and economic development can be taken and applied to theories of career development, thus contributing to the concept of “Sustainable Career Development” (Iles, 1997). This conception can be applied to career development as a critique of the view that employees as merely a resource (Iles, 1997). Through effective HRM strategies, career development is capable of improving retention, and industries may secure their ability to continue development and growth for stakeholders in successive generations. However, the HRM literature distinguishes between ‘Soft HRM' and ‘Hard HRM’. Soft HRM or ‘developmental
humanism’ (Legge, 1989 p.66), which views employees as keys to organisational success: an ideology promoting the development of unique humanistic values (Drucker et al., 1996). Conversely, hard HRM or ‘utilitarian instrumentalism’ (Legge, 1989 p.66) has the tendency to view employees as a mere factor of production (Drucker et al., 1996). The casual, fragmented and hierarchical nature of the construction industry suggests an inherent incompatibility with developmental humanism, promoted by a management culture more in a utilitarian instrumentalist tradition, typified by hard HRM practices. Hard HRM approaches are typical of the industry’s inability of operating in a co-ordinated, homogeneous way with universal issues such as career development (Drucker, 1996; Barthorpe et al., 2000). Particularly at trade and craft level, employees are mainly treated in a casual way, typical of the industry’s structure, which impacts substantially on worker motivation and contributes to staff turnover.

Career development constitutes a motivating tool to create and sustain competitive advantage, which has become an integral feature of strategic HRM (Arthur et al., 1989). An integrated career development strategy based on concepts of sustainability could serve to alleviate tensions which occur between individual organisations (particularly SME’s) and the industry as a whole. If employers can assist their employees in making decisions about their careers, they can better prepare employees to be effective. When employers understand how their employees develop, they can do a better job of planning for their organisation’s human resource needs. Organisations should track career paths and help develop career ladders across the industry. An application of the sustainability concept would require all of the industry’s stakeholders to take account of career development initiatives. Through effective training and career development, the industry as a whole may retain and develop talent, thus enjoying human capital advantage. Through encouraging learning, co-operation and innovation, the industry will be rewarded with human process advantage. Both have the benefit of ensuring long-term sustainable success.

THEORETICAL VS CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Although those involved in managing technical professionals recognise that more attention towards career development is needed, there remains a lack of research about careers and career planning amongst other occupational, social and special groups. Many of the traditional, career development theories have been based almost exclusively on studies of male subjects from white middleclass backgrounds aspiring to upper managerial positions. Themes have emerged in the field of vocational psychology that recognise the need for including groups such as women and racial/ethnic minorities. Integrative models have emerged that synthesize conceptually related constructs (Hackett and Lent, 1992). Lent et al. (1994) proposed a social cognitive model which seeks to explain the interplay between the individual, academic attainment, interests, career choices, and performance. This, in action with ‘Self efficacy’ (Bandura, 1977) - a person's beliefs or expectations about his/her capacity to accomplish certain goals, offers a rational framework for career development. Also exempt from many models was the framing of career development amongst employee’s traditionally populating ‘blue-collar’ occupations. Emergent career development theories, such as Lent et al., offer frameworks for examining career development at construction trade and craft level.
Careers can be taken as being personal possessions (Arnold, 1997). Efforts to shape the direction of careers provide individuals with a means to assert agency in their life course (Tiedeman and Miller – Tiedman). As employees grow and change, the types of work they may want to do may change as well. The labour intensive nature of construction work is not often in keeping with formal career agendas in late adult life. Piper and Lisca (2000) cite a 1992 study which highlights that a tradesperson typically leaves craft work at age 36. However, these individuals will have skills and experiences which can be valuable to the industry. A career progressive ladder leading to alternative work within the industry may be capable of promoting active career reinvestment.

**Career Expectations**

Fundamental to retaining employees is an analysis of expectations and motivations for embarking on a particular career path. Taken from theories of motivation, VIE Theory (Valency, Instrumentality, Expectancy) or Instrumentality Theory as originally proposed by Vroom (1964) presents another way of viewing the career development aspirations from the social cognitive career theoretical perspective (Arnold et al., 1998 p. 325 - 326). This theory aims to explain how people choose - from several courses of action - which they will pursue. This choice process is seen as a cognitive, calculating appraisal of the following factors:

- **Expectancy**: Individuals would perceive an ability to perform certain actions;
- **Instrumentality**: Performing the action leads to identifiable outcomes; and
- **Valence**: The outcomes will be of value to the individual.

However, the nature of the work at trade and craft levels tends to limit aspirations. Work is typically labour intensive and considered less attractive than other occupations. Lewin's (1935) classic equation of \( B = f(PE) \) identifies that behaviour (B) evolves as a function (f) of the interplay between person (P) and environment (E). As such, many trade and craft employees may lack mobility aspirations because of the nature of the employment climate. A widely held view in the education sciences is that ‘careers develop people, who then develop careers’ (Healy, 1982 p.14).

**Upward Mobility**

Underlying career development approaches is the assumption of upward directionality which imbues the early/traditional theories of careers (Jennings, 1971; Hall, 1986; Arnold, 1997). Incremental progression of responsibility is often a consideration when devising initiatives for career development. However, this assumes the application of ‘gradational theories of occupational stratification’ emphasising a perfect labour market as a device for acquiring and distributing economic resources (Wright 1981, pp.3-18). It implies rational systems whereby education and individual effort alone determine and guarantee movement through hierarchies and vertical mobility (Thomas, 1988). However, alternative theoretical perspectives highlight careers as existing and being affected at the intersection of several factors including: socio-economic history; social class; organisational structures; labour market segmentation; aspects of choice; and individual effort (Thomas, 1988; DeSimone et al., 2002). Careers thus become coordinates along the space between these factors (Thomas, 1988). At blue-collar/trade and craft level, these factors often serve jointly to limit career opportunity and change the value of expected rewards (Austrin, 1980; Leibowitz et al., 1992; McDonald et al., 2002). Although an individual may shift
coordinates within this space, the tendency is to occupy adjacent careers on a line within a single plane (Thomas, 1988). Moving between planes generally requires a significant change in qualification, labour market position and/or organisation (ibid).

**Academic Attainment**

There are a few factors that may be considered weighting against the use of advanced career development initiatives. Possible lower academic achievement among trade and craft populations may pose problems in implementing innovative schemes. They may require the ability to adopt, interpret and use complex information relating to key career concepts (Lewin and Mitchell, 1995). It may thus prove necessary to provide costly training before such techniques can be applied. To compound this, the view often held is that trade and craft employees are motivated by purely financial rewards, and career development is neither expected nor desired (Thomas, 1988; McDonald, 2002). However, these views can neither be dismissed nor corroborated as very few studies have attempted to address these issues. It represents a fundamental unbalance in thought as career development and progression is viewed as a prime motivational factor in retention of employees at managerial and professional levels.

**Managerial Vs Trade and Craft Occupations**

An exploratory study conducted in the USA by McDonald et al. (2002) on non-salaried employees, focused on satisfaction with work, careers and the potential role of career development activities in enhancing work life. The investigation not only outlined career development experiences, but also revealed; concerns; interests; and a range of needs and perspectives regarding career development similar to those recognised in managerial occupations. This reinforces the importance of conducting further studies with similar populations. One factor in the seemingly disproportionate concern over the human resource problems, is the importance of trade and craft contributions to the construction economy.

In most general labour market analysis there is a wide social and psychological distancing between management and blue-collar workers (Lewin and Mitchell, 1995). However, the construction industry’s labour intensive nature and the subsequent human capital implications that this presents (Austrin, 1980; Langford et al., 1995; Agapiou et al., 1995; Loosemore et al., 2003), makes trade and craft employees vital to the industry as direct producers of its products. Strategically, the paucity of knowledge with regards to these workers effectively means that decision making is furthest removed from those occupational groups that potentially have greatest impact on quality, productivity and competitiveness. Research that focuses on the needs and perspectives of this group is therefore long overdue and will serve as a basis for exploration into further employee retention strategies.

**Contractor and Sub-Contractor Relations**

Symptomatic of problems relating to career development is the casual nature of the construction industry due to: the large proportion of self-employment, much of which is “non legal” (Harvey, 2001 p.7); and the nature of sub-contractor organisations (Agapiou et al., 1995; Cabahug, 2002), which employ few personnel directly. In Austrin (1980, p. 304), the problem is identified as follows.
The industry is characterised by a main contractor who contracts out the work, the sub-contractor who contracts for a piece of that work, and other workers who are hired out on mainly labour only basis to the main contractor by the sub-contractor. Accordingly, the worker is placed in a position of dual dependency; on the sub-contractor for a wage and the main contractor for the supply of work.

It is asserted (for example Yarnall, 1998; Harrison, 2000) that for career development to be effective in organisations, line managers need to support the future development of their staff and have the necessary skills to coach and counsel them as appropriate. Due to the fragmented structure and project-based nature of the construction industry, the effect of this is possibly limited. Compounding this is the fact that workers tend to be employed for particular construction projects which have a limited duration (Langford et al., 1995; Barhorpe, 2000; Loosemore et al., 2003). Although this does not always involve an abject detachment of the worker from the industry, the nature of itinerant working patterns often fundamentally implies the continuous renegotiation of the employment relationship and a subsequent reengagement of a psychological relationship on work availability. Fundamentally, the nature of such work does not attach itself to any structured career ladder, nor does the working climate complement any career development initiative. Typically, organisations do not adopt a paternalistic stance, for example, through job security and upward promotions with regard to the workforce for career management. This may be a route cause of individuals seeking lateral career moves into other industries. However, a considerable investigation into this phenomenon is yet to be conducted.

CONCLUSION

If the industry is to remain at a level of functional efficiency, it must retain a human resource pool sufficiently skilled to meet the demands of its customer base. Maintaining an adequate supply of appropriately skilled workers requires understanding of the career needs of those who work within the industry. The research in progress aims to categorise individualistic and industry wide perspectives on trade and craft career development, identifying the range of factors which facilitate or inhibit the career mobility process at this level. This paper has presented a theoretical basis for such an investigation, outlining the framework of dimensions against which trade and craft careers will be explored. By gaining insights into the career needs of craft workers it is hoped that effective retention strategies can be developed to ensure that the industry’s skills base can be maintained in the future.

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