

Full Length Research Paper

The well-being of workers in the South African construction industry: A model for employment assistance

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The construction industry is an important player in the economy of South Africa. In spite of the numerous constraints facing the industry in developing countries, it makes significant contributions to economic growth. The construction industry is a challenging place to work. This diverse industry is, however, associated with high risk environments and employees are exposed to harsh and dangerous situations, for example, employees have to work with dangerous machines and equipment. The industry stands out from other industries as having the highest worker injury and fatality rates. Every construction worker is likely to be temporarily unfit to work at some stage as a result of moderate injuries or health problems after working on a construction site. The construction industry is closely linked to the economy of a country and is often a good indicator of the state of that economy. If the construction sector and the economy of a country are so closely linked, then it makes sense to effectively manage the human resources active within that industry. In order to investigate and explore the well-being of employees, a research questionnaire was developed and presented, to a sample of 34 male respondents in a medium sized construction company for completion. A non-probability sampling procedure was utilised for the study. The empirical results indicated the difficulties that the respondents are experiencing. The results further revealed the need for assistance from the employer to the respondents. It is anticipated that the research will contribute, firstly, to an awareness of problems in the construction industry regarding the well-being of workers, and secondly to develop a model which will positively contribute to the effective development and implementation of assistance programme for employees in the construction industry.

Key words: Construction industry, employee, employee assistance programme, employee well-being, standards for employee assistance programmes in South Africa (EAPA-SA), troubled employee.

INTRODUCTION

The main motivation for conducting research of this nature was to investigate the well-being of employees in the construction industry and to make recommendations on the design of an employee assistance programme that can improve well-being and productivity in the construction industry. The construction industry in South Africa has been left behind regarding the modern human resource practices. In this industry you will find that contracts have time constraints; pressure to complete jobs in

time, have negative effects on the workforce, specifically on the moral of the workers; workers work long hours and are exposed to work over time more than often; and working conditions are extremely tough and cannot be compared to other in-house conditions. Therefore, a need exists to apply proper human resource practices in this industry. The method to attain the requisite information was via personal interviews, using semi-structured open-ended questions.

The findings of the interview data are presented and discussed. Recommendations are made with regard to a strategy that can be followed with the implementation of an Employee Assistance Programme.

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Problem statement

The problem formulation for the study was based on the absence of an Employee Assistance Programme in a medium-sized construction company and the negative effect the absence of it has on the well-being of employees. The researchers were of the opinion that an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) can have a lasting impact on the clients it aims to serve.

Objectives of the study

The aim of conducting research of this nature was to understand the demanding working environment of the construction industry and the factors which lead to employees being troubled. The researchers were of the opinion that an EAP can significantly improve the well-being of employees in the construction industry. The following specific objectives were pursued:

1. To examine how employees experience their working conditions;
2. To ascertain the well-being needs of employees; and
3. To make recommendations with regard to a model of employment assistance to utilise in dealing with the well-being problems of employees in the construction industry.

LITERATURE STUDY

To contextualise this study the researchers undertook a comprehensive review of relevant literature regarding the demanding working environment of the construction industry and how a model of employee assistance can serve as a resource in dealing with the well-being of employees. The literature review also includes an examination of the history of EAPs in South Africa, definitions of an EAP, models currently in practice with the advantages, disadvantages and factors that influence the organisation's choice of an EAP model, as well as the core technology of EAPs.

The construction industry

The construction industry is associated with the fabrication of houses, apartments, factories, offices, schools, roads and bridges. In addition to the manufacture of new structures, this industry also addresses alterations and repairs to existing structures. The products of the industry are used by other industrial sectors for the production of other goods and services. For instance, the development of feeder roads, village market infrastructures, electricity and water supply will spur production of rural goods and services, thus creating employment for the rural communities. The construction industry is labour intensive, particularly in developing countries. Construction in

developing countries involves more workers per activity on site. Typically, 2 to 10 times as many workers per activity are utilised compared with developed countries (Koehn and Reddy, 1999).

The construction industry is closely linked to the economy of a country and is often a good indicator of the state of that economy (Strassman, 1975; Haupt, 2001). However, the construction industry differs from most other industries in that it is constantly in flux (Hinze, Bohner and Lew, 2008). Working conditions are very seldom the same from one day to the next, posing many challenges to the workers. The construction industry is considered to be dangerous and of a highly hazardous nature (Hinze and Olbina, 2008; Haupt, 2001; Rowlinson, 2004). Globally the construction industry has one of the highest injury rates, very often second only to the mining sector (Haupt and Smallwood, 2006; Hinze, 2006).

Aspects of risk and vulnerability include sub-standard living environments, high rates of alcohol abuse and the fact that employees are separated from their families for long periods of time, thus enhancing visits to prostitutes. They become HIV-positive and then return to their primary sexual partners, spreading the virus in those home communities (Fourie and Schonteich, 2002).

Research conducted by construction stakeholders indicates that the industry has the third highest prevalence of HIV positive workers, and the industry faces an increase in lost workdays due to absenteeism and productivity decreases (Hinze et al., 2008).

Across the United States, for example, construction ranks as the most dangerous industry, accounting for about 20% of all work-related fatalities. In the 2008 Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries the United Kingdom has found that construction had 969 fatalities in 2008, the largest number when compared with other industries. For example, cost of claims paid by FEMA (Federated Employers Mutual Association) (2009) for the period January 2009 to December 2009 reached the significant amount of R133 044 999 57.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act, (1993) makes provision for the health and safety of employees and the protection against hazards to health and safety in the workplace.

As a proactive measure to improve health and safety performance in South Africa's construction industry, the South African Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors (SAFCEC) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) became the first employer and employee organisation in the nation's construction trade to enter into an occupational health and safety agreement. The health and safety agreement, signed on 11 April 2006, would require SAFCEC and NUM to make a number of commitments, which include among other things: encouraging their members to make occupational health and safety a way of life in the workplace; providing their members with the required training opportunities, working together to achieve together to achieve their joint ideals and objectives for occupational health and safety; and promoting the

integration of occupational health and safety into business processes and strategies.

According to the Department of Labour of South Africa, Annual Report (2008), the yearly fatality and injury statistics translate into about one construction worker killed and four permanently disabled every day in South Africa. No one is excluded from the possibility of becoming a fatality statistic. It is therefore extremely important that employees are physically and mentally healthy at all times. People are the company. People issues are integral to the company. The management of a company is essentially responsible for its people's emotional and psychological health. The demanding working environment of employees in the construction industry should be managed by an adequate Employee Assistance Programme.

As Matlala (1999) states: "Failure by organisations to adopt employee assistance into their culture will inevitably lead to the escalation of sickness and the deterioration of organisational performance."

Employee assistance programmes

Robertson (2006) defines EAP as a comprehensive programme offering free, confidential assessments and short-term counselling to employees and their families. The intended beneficiaries of the EAP are thus the employee, the employee's family, the organisation and its constituents.

In the researchers' view the historical development of EAPs in South Africa has been a complex process. EAPs have evolved from social welfare – occupational social work, human resource management, occupational health and the mental and medical health fields. This view is acknowledged by Du Plessis (2001) in her statement that "while social workers appear to be the preferred profession in staffing EAPs, they are certainly not the only ones, as nurses, psychologists and human resource personnel all play important roles as well."

There is limited information available about the EAP as a developing profession in terms of how programmes occur in South Africa, specifically in the construction industry. Participation in an EAP may occur voluntarily or through supervisory, peer or medical referral.

Typical areas addressed by employee assistance programmes

Typical areas addressed by employee assistance programmes are: career counselling; alcohol/drug abuse programmes; counselling for marital/family problems; AIDS education/support groups; counselling for mental disorder; financial counselling; retirement counselling; termination/outplacement assistance; legal counselling; health education/health risk screening; emotional distress; and major life events, including births, accidents and deaths.

Types of EAP models

The literature distinguishes between the following EAP models: the in-house model or external models, the contract model, the consortium model and the hotline model. There are two main types of EAP models, namely in-house and off-site models.

In-house model

The In-house model, which is also called an internal programme, is a programme staffed by personnel who are employees of an organisation they serve. According to the EAP-SA Standards, internal programmes offer services rendered by EAP professionals employed by the organisation (EAP-SA Standards, 1999:20).

From the preceding definitions it is evident that an In-house model offers services within an organisation, in the form of the staff members running the programme, which provides a direct link between the EAP and the employee's workplace. An In-house EAP model may either be administered by an employer or by a union only.

Off-site model

According to Straussner (1990) work organisations or unions make a contractual agreement with a self-employed social worker, or personnel employed by an organisation that offer EAP services. If there were to be a competition between the different EAP models for providing the best EAP service, there would be no clear winner.

The combined EAP/Managed Care System is the standard for the future such as an integrated EAP/Work life/Human Resources Programme with services in career development, childcare, eldercare, health promotion and retirement counselling amongst others.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

After a considerable literature review, the researcher concluded that a qualitative approach would best suit the study. By utilising a qualitative approach, an attempt was made to understand the way of life of the participants. The complexities of their lives were captured by describing what really goes on in their everyday lives, how they operate, as well as their frame of reference. The qualitative approach has been used in documenting the processes, followed by the conceptualisation and introduction of an EAP for a medium-sized construction company.

Data collection procedure

Observation

The researchers spent some time on site with the participants to get first hand insight on how they operate. Comprehensive field notes were made.

Interviews

To ensure the comprehensive collection of data the sample comprised of thirty four male employees in the construction industry who mostly have to work away from home. The semi-structured face-to-face interviews afforded the researcher an opportunity to understand the closed internal worlds of the thirty four employees by studying their perceptions and experiences. The interviews uncovered a variety of difficulties that employees are experiencing.

Focus groups

Two focus groups were conducted with the participants at the end of the interviews to obtain consensus on what the real challenges are. During these discussions participants were allowed to air their respective opinions freely and also experience the problems and frustrations of co-workers, in order to agree on the most common areas that need intervention.

Method of data analysis

In De Vos (2005:333), mention is made of reducing the volume of raw information, sifting the most relevant information, identifying patterns and eventually communicating the essence. The researchers scrutinized the data for general ideas and themes. All the material that focused around one theme was put into one category. The goal was to integrate the themes and concepts into an accurate and detailed interpretation of the research results.

Data analysis was done manually. The information obtained from the sample of employees during the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using the Huberman and Miles Approach, as described by Poggenpoel in De Vos (2005:340).

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Well-being problems of employees

Family problems

A large number of respondents (31.3%), as illustrated in the graph in Figure 1, referred to family problems as being a result of their working conditions. Family problems are often put down to the following: the tradition that employees in construction work long hours and over weekends; they are often away from home and their families for extended periods of time; the competitive nature of the industry causes a constant drive to meet deadlines; employees find it difficult to achieve a balance between work and family; they regularly miss out on important family events and milestones, such as births, funerals, birthdays, school events and general events deemed important for family members to share; and nurturing family relationships become problematic.

Distance

26.6% of respondents experiences distance as a problem due to limited time being available to attend to personal and family matters. The impact of distance on the family

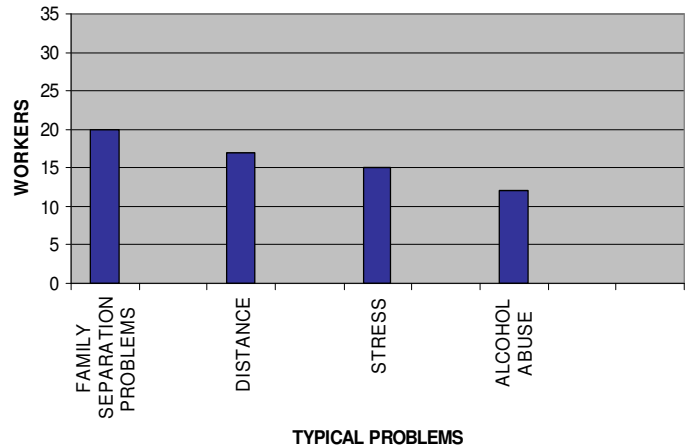


Figure 1. An illustration of the participants' perceptions with regard to their well-being problems.

lives of employees can be a key issue for EAP professionals, as the company loses money due to absenteeism when employees have to attend to personal and family matters.

Stress

23.4% of respondents regarded the long hours and unsafe working conditions in the construction industry as stressful. Ramanathan (1992) found that EAPs are an effective means for helping employees deal with stress, as they are often unable to find a solution and remedy of their own accord; very often they do not even realise that their work performance is being adversely affected.

Alcohol abuse

18.7% of respondents indicated that alcohol abuse occurred over weekends. Construction workers who abuse alcohol and other drugs cause danger, not only to themselves, but also to their colleagues and the general public.

Safety in the construction industry is paramount. Subject to the provisions in the Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993, an employer shall not permit any person who is or who appears to be under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs, to enter or remain at a workplace. Employees who generally perform well, but drink too much, can greatly benefit from EAP counselling and assistance. An EAP focuses on rehabilitating them, which often benefits their work and personal lives.

Implementation of an EAP within the company

97% of respondents indicated the need for the implementation of an EAP as a service within the company, as

Table 1. Respondents' need for the implementation of an EAP.

Variable	No. of participants	Percent
Need for EAP	33	97.1
No need for EAP	1	2.9
Total	34	100

indicated in the Table 1. The literature revealed the demanding working environment of the construction industry. It is therefore imperative that construction companies effectively utilise an EAP to retain these scarce skills and to assist employees in the demanding working environment that they have to face on a daily basis.

Organisations that wish to remain competitive in today's rapidly changing global market-place need to address the issue of achieving productivity and quality through their employees. EAPs are grounded in the humanistic paradigms of Western organisational behaviour that organisations have a moral responsibility to come to the aid of an individual employee when he or she is experiencing difficult times. This paradigm emphasized that organisations should meet the needs of their employees in order for them to remain productive and satisfied despite stressful experiences in their work and non-work lives.

The effectiveness of EAPs for individuals is to improve quality of life and to promote emotional well-being. The benefits of such a programme to employers have been proven in many studies.

Strategy for introducing and implementing an EAP at the medium-sized construction company where the research was done

i) Discuss research results with management, the unions and employees in order to gain support and endorsement for the intended EAP. Senior management must support the programme and take it as one of those programmes that, when properly utilised, will assist the company to attain the employer's strategic goal.

ii) Assignment of EAP advisory/consultative committee and an EAP co-ordinator to draft an EAP policy that is customised according to the client's and the company's values, strengths and desires. Harper (1999) claims a written policy statement defines the purpose of the programme, the organisational mandate, client eligibility, the role and responsibilities of various personnel in the organisation and programme procedures. The EAP policy statement will be made highly visible within the company.

iii) A designated budget should be allocated for employee costs and insurance coverage. EAP personnel should be responsible for financial management and reporting. This financial reporting should be linked to EAP performance and indicators that demonstrate value to the company.

iv) EAP Awareness: An extensive and rigorous marketing

strategy will be put into place and implemented. Employees and their families should be informed about the various methods of utilising the EAP, such as self-referral, supervisory referral and referrals by a colleague or family member, as highlighted in the study. This could also provide the reason why a combination of the in-house and off-site EAP model is a viable option for a medium-sized company in the construction industry. Regular information sessions should be arranged and posters put up wherein employees will be assisted on how to deal with whatever problem they may have.

v) Training of managers/supervisors with regard to the EAP. Intensive training for supervisors about EAP processes and their role in the application thereof is crucial. Supervisors are essential to the EAP, since they are the first to notice any change in the work performance of an employee, and the early identification of problems is key to the success of an EAP. Supervisors who have insight into the functioning of the EAP and who believe in the benefits of the programme will access the services of the EAP and refer appropriately. The training course offered to supervisors should preferably not be part of a general induction programme, but should be offered separately and in a very practical way. Supervisory training for managers and supervisors should be conducted at least once or twice a year to educate them about the EAP services, referral procedures, principles of the EAP and to provide feedback on the operation of the programme.

vi) Confidentiality: Assurances should be given that all problems handled by the EAP will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Employees will be informed on how information is recorded and kept within the EAP unit.

vii) Evaluation of the programme: An evaluation strategy will be implemented as the EAP must be evaluated on a regular basis to determine the effectiveness of the programme. Extensive literature has been reviewed and this confirmed that the evaluation of an EAP is vital to its success.

Standard documents of Employee Assistance Professionals Association prescribe the evaluation of services as a prerequisite for developing an EAP.

The EAP should play a vital role during induction in order to prepare employees and their families emotionally for the demanding working environment in the construction industry.

The EAP should be introduced to address the profound impact of HIV and AIDS interventions in the construction industry.

EAPs should ensure that their target population has access to multidisciplinary services, even if these services are contracted on a need basis.

The EAP staff should be located where employees would feel free to consult with them. Those employees who are not willing to use services rendered by the company should be provided with details of alternative service providers who could be contacted. They should, however, be informed of the advantages and disadvantages

of using an outside service provider as opposed to the one within the company.

Conclusion

The researcher has been able to meet the objectives of the study in that: the well-being problems of the employees had been identified; the perceptions with regard to the implementation of an EAP by employees had also been determined; and recommendations were provided regarding guidelines for the implementation of an EAP in a construction company.

Apart from future research proposed, it is hoped that this study will add valuable research material to the limited literature available on the topic. It is also envisaged that the research findings will be utilised by construction companies. The implementation of an EAP within the construction industry can play a magnificent role in managing the well-being problems of employees.

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