Barriers to Integration and Attitudes towards Cultural Diversity in the Construction Industry

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Abstract

A survey of 1155 construction operatives and 180 supervisors on Australian construction sites indicate that despite positive attitudes among operatives and supervisors towards a multicultural work environment, there are numerous barriers to integration for some ethnic groups. Cultural diversity is taken for granted by supervisors and the problems associated with it are accepted as an inevitable part of daily life on sites. A perverse logic that cultural diversity management is discriminatory towards Australian workers also exists and reflects a strong egalitarian and self-regulating culture. We conclude that it is important to create business incentives for construction companies to be actively involved in the implementation of cultural diversity strategies. This will ensure that current and future influxes of foreign workers into the construction industry can be sustained in a safe, productive, efficient and harmonious way.

Keywords: construction, cultural diversity, management, safety, racism, discrimination.
1. Introduction

In Australia, around 20 per cent of all workers in construction industry are overseas born and half of these are from non-English speaking counties (DIAC, 2009). It is increasingly recognised that a culturally diverse workforce can be an asset in today’s highly competitive and globalized business environment. For example, a number of studies in Australia and overseas have demonstrated that effective management of diversity can have a positive affect on work productivity, problem-solving, creativity and innovation and ultimately competitive advantage (Cox and Blake, 1991; Hoecklin, 1994). Diversity can also be a catalyst for dynamic workplace cultures and provide linguistic resources to access overseas markets. However, some recent international literature also suggests that there are certain aspects of cultural diversity that can have negative implications for organisations. For example, if not managed properly, ethnic diversity can have a negative impact on the efficiency and productivity due to increased workplace conflict, low morale, high labour turnover, lower quality work, absenteeism, stress-related illnesses and a poor corporate image (Hay, 1996; Steele and Sodhi, 2006). Research in construction in numerous countries has also pointed to the difficulties experienced in effectively managing this diversity (Ofori, 1994; Loosemore and Muslmani, 1999; Debrab and Ofori, 2001; Loosemore and Lee, 2002; Loosemore and Chau, 2002; Gale and Davidson (eds.), 2006; Dainty et al. (eds.), 2007). One of the most significant consequences of mismanaging diversity in the construction industry is the increased safety risks on construction sites. There is a considerable amount of research which indicates that construction workers of non-English speaking background (NESB) are exposed to significantly greater safety risks than other workers and can also expose other workers around them to higher safety risks because of their poor training and, inability to understand basic instructions and warning signs etc (Loosemore and Lee, 2002; Trajkovski and Loosemore, 2005; Loosemore and Andonakis, 2006). Another recognised and related problem on Australian construction sites is workplace discrimination. For example, Loosemore and Chau (2002) found that 40 per cent of Asian-Australian operatives had experienced discrimination on construction sites. Nicholas et al. (2001) outline the links between the experience of racism and lower individual productivity within workplaces through reduced worker interaction and morale and it is estimated that 70% of workers exposed to racism would as a consequence take time off work.

In managing these challenges, Dunn and other cross-cultural researchers have found that capturing the potential benefits of cultural diversity in the workforce is complex and challenging (Dunn and McDonald, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2005). For this reason, many firms neglect to address the issue, a trend that appears to be a characteristic of firms in the Australian construction industry where diversity management is not a high priority for many companies (Loosemore et al., 2003; Shen et al., 2009). It is therefore not surprising that the construction industry has struggled to integrate different cultural groups into a harmonious and productive workplace, despite having a long history of employing migrant workers (Shen et al., 2009). The aim of this paper is to explore the attitudinal reasons behind this deficiency.
2. Method

We undertook a survey of operatives and managers on large metropolitan construction sites in Sydney, Australia which were characterised by large multicultural workforces. The survey was administered in two stages. The first stage focused on site operatives and was administered between May and December 2008 on twenty-nine construction sites in the Sydney metropolitan area as well as in the offices of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). The second stage focused on supervisors and was conducted between May and August 2009 on sixteen construction sites in the same geographical area.

Specifically, the questionnaire survey with site operatives aimed to assess the extent and nature of interaction between workers of different ethnic backgrounds, respondents’ feelings about cultural diversity and other cultural groups, and experiences of intolerance and equality of treatment on construction sites. Many operatives were from a lower educational background and had poor English language skills (particularly Chinese and Koreans). So where necessary we translated questions using an interpreter (most subcontractors have a “gatekeeper” who translates for the rest of the group). During the survey sessions which were administered in tea and smoking breaks on site, respondents were also permitted to openly discuss the questions which provided further insights into the issues being investigated.

Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and a total of 1233 questionnaires were collected. However 78 questionnaires were not included in the sample as they were returned incomplete resulting in a total sample of 1155.

The second stage of this research aimed to explore supervisors’ perceptions of cultural diversity on construction sites and to explore the strategies they used to manage diversity. The survey with supervisors also sought to compare supervisors’ perceptions with operatives’ experiences on sites. The survey was administered by hand during weekly subcontractors meetings where all managers, supervisors, foremen and engineers could be found at the same time. Nine respondents returned the completed questionnaire via email. The total length of the questionnaire was seven pages and took about 20 minutes to complete. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and a total of 204 questionnaires were collected. Only three supervisors refused to participate in the survey.

3. Discussion of results

3.1 Cross cultural interactions

Despite high level of support for cultural diversity among supervisors (97%) and operatives (88%), almost 31% of operatives reported that they did not make an effort to interact with workers from different ethnic background. More importantly, 32% of operatives and 23% of supervisors believed that different groups should stay away from each other on construction sites. The majority of managers believed that there were sufficient opportunities for workers to mix with different ethnic
groups (95.6 per cent). Nevertheless, 64% of the operatives reported that they would like to see more opportunities to mix with people from other ethnic groups while at work. Both supervisors and operatives appear to see diversity is an unavoidable fact of life on construction sites and consider interaction with other cultural groups more a necessity to get work done than a voluntary choice. The contradictory views on cultural diversity could be explained through wide-spread communication problems and conflict among operatives. Supervisors perceive that diversity increases conflict on sites and decreases communication. We also found evidence in discussions with respondents that the dominant social and political discourses within the wider society also play a role in shaping intergroup relations. For example, the long standing rhetoric of “they steal our jobs” often found in the Australian media also emerged as the most explicit manifestation of intolerance towards Asian-Australians found on construction sites. There is also a common belief among workers that Asian-Australians bring with them sub-standard working practices and thereby dramatically reduce safety standards, wages and professional quality in the industry. In this way they are seen as threats to social and economic fabric of the construction industry. Similarly, reported tensions between Anglo-Australians and Lebanese-Australian and Australian-Muslims seem to reflect recent Islamaphobic discourses within broader media and society circulated on construction sites. So it appears that the source of racism towards different cultural groups is motivated by different issues – economic in the case of Asian-Australians and Cultural in the case of Lebanese-Australian and Australian-Muslims.

3.2 Equal opportunity

Respondents of both groups believed that there was generally equality of opportunity in the construction industry (76% supervisors and 66% operatives). Supervisors and operatives concerns relating to any perceived inequality were quite different. For operatives, the strongest level of concern was unequal involvement in decision-making on site, whereas for supervisors it was unequal access for operatives to higher paying jobs and managerial positions. Written comments of supervisors suggest that where there was inequality of treatment it was not seen as an outcome of structural discrimination, rather, it was seen as a consequence of varied levels of individual competency. There was also a common belief among supervisors that operatives experience discrimination mostly because of their limited English skills.

3.3 Racism

Like operatives, there was a common belief among managers that operatives experience discrimination mostly because of their limited English skills. The main form of racism reported by both operatives and supervisors in our survey was ethnicity-based and disparaging humour and name-calling in the workplace. 90% of supervisors reported that there were instances of derogative jokes between operatives, and 80% reported offensive name calling. This corresponded with operatives’ experiences of jokes and name calling. The problem with ethnicity-based humour is that it intensifies current stereotypes by strengthening in-group identity and de-values out-groups which can in turn result in the exclusion of out-groups from social and work activities (Phua, 2004). On the other hand, humour can also be a form of social glue and can help accumulate bridging capital and serve anti-
racist purposes by making light of difference and bringing it to the surface rather than suppressing it. In this way it can reduce conflicts between different ethnic groups. Our field observations suggest that in some circumstances jokes represent a manifestation of friendship between workers from different ethnic groups. In those cases, the problem is not so much about making jokes, but the lack of them.

3.4 Managing cultural diversity

Supervisors were mostly of the view that cultural diversity did not have any adverse impact on staff motivation, stress level and interpersonal relations. However, 25% felt diversity increased levels of stress, 31% said diversity worsened levels of conflict, and 40% said it decreased levels of communication. Communication problems caused by language barriers were listed by supervisors as the major challenge associated with cultural diversity. Supervisors’ comments reveal that the greatest challenges are experienced with Asian-Australians and with trades which are mostly dominated by workers of certain non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) such as Serbian/Croatian-Australians who are specialised in carpentry and Asian-Australians who are mostly Gyprockers and tilers. However, most supervisors have limited information on the number of non-English speakers working on their site which makes it difficult to manage this problem. Specifically, supervisors find it difficult to know whether NESB workers can speak or understand English as they may have limited interactions with them on a one-to-one basis. Around 34% of the managers indicated that these communication problems decreased safety standards. Safety issues were listed as the most significant negative impact from ethnic diversity. Communication problems also pose a significant challenge “during” incidents magnifying the potentially negative impact of language on safety. Like operatives, there was a widespread belief among managers that the Asian-Australians were the most problematic group. While European workers were seen a positive influence on safety standards because of the high standards they bring, Asian-Australian workers were perceived to do the opposite by importing an inferior safety culture from their origin countries. If Asian-Australian workers are broadly perceived to present a safety risk to those around them, then they are likely to be stereotyped in a negative way and be subject to other forms of discrimination as suggested Loosemore and Chua (2001) who identified them as the most at risk group on Australian construction sites.

In dealing with the above communication problems, managers rely on multilingual supervisors, workers and alternative language signs, although the use of these strategies is ad hoc at best. Many managers indicated that they could not communicate with the NESB subcontracted workers without the presence of interpreters. This was especially a challenge for daily work, training and induction sessions. The supervisors of subcontracted workers were the main interpreters used in communications. Multilingual video-recordings are also used in inductions on some sites; however, inductions only provide basic information about safety. Site pressures, a highly competitive work environment and a sense of acceptance that NESB operatives are well known to walk onto site with an inadequate understanding of safety risks seem to limit efforts to manage this problem more proactively.
While the majority of supervisors indicated that responsibility for managing cultural diversity belonged to site managers, many felt that supervisors and project managers were also responsible. Human resource (HR) managers, managing directors and CEOs were reported as the least responsible people for diversity management. A considerable proportion of respondents indicated that they did not know who was responsible for diversity management in their companies. This reflects a tendency to give total power to the project manager for all functions including human resources (HR). Our findings show that equal opportunity, gender and sexual, and racial harassment policies were the most widely understood. 90% of respondents reported that equal opportunity policies were implemented in their companies. Affirmative action and Aboriginal employment policies were among those which were the least understood and diversity policies were reported as the least implemented of all policy types. While more than half of the respondents reported the existence of a cultural diversity policy, 28% indicated that they did not know whether it was implemented in their companies. Subcontractors were less aware of ethnic diversity policy at company level. However at a personal level supervisors of subcontractors were more likely to develop and implement their own individual strategies than the supervisors of contractors. This suggests that while subcontractor firms may not have an official diversity policy, at personal level there is an informal commitment to implementing a diversity strategy. The low level of awareness about affirmative action and ethnic diversity policy can perhaps be explained by a lack of training for supervisors in this area. 75% of the supervisors reported that they did not receive any training that aimed to reduce stereotyping and raise awareness of ethnic issues and ways of managing them effectively. Worryingly, diversity training was even less common among the supervisors of subcontractors where the main interface with NESB operatives occurs.

In managing cultural diversity, organizing social events were reported as the most common form of strategy used by the respondents (see Table 1). Training for site workers that aimed to reduce stereotyping and multilingual induction processes was the second most common practice, although more research is needed on how effective this process is in bringing about lasting attitudinal and behavioural change. Multilingual inductions were common in most companies. Many used multilingual video tapes for inductions (mostly in Mandarin, Portuguese, Korean and Spanish), although the effectiveness of such one-way induction processes is questionable. For this reason inductions were sometimes translated by bilingual supervisors, although this is certainly not employed on all sites. Surprisingly, only 11% of the respondents reported multilingual job descriptions and specifications. Indeed, even on sites, there were limited examples of signage being written in several languages. It is surprising that while language problems were well-known by management as an issue, attempts to overcome the problem remain very limited within the construction industry. It is also important to note that 9% of the managers attempted to evaluate the English proficiency of new employees from non-English speaking background. Most of the firms that participated in this project had English tests for the job applicants; however those tests were mostly for engineers or employees other than site operatives where the majority of problems seem to lie.
Table 1: Existing ethnic diversity strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizing social events (such as social gatherings in pubs)</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for site workers that aims to reduce stereotyping and raise awareness of ethnic issues</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual induction processes</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting and encouraging non-English speaking background workers to improve their English</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving workers from non-English speaking background in management</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual provision of information about occupation health and safety</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops for site teams on topics such as interethnic communication, team-building, conflict resolution and ethnic diversity awareness</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of interpreters for workers of non-English speaking background during training sessions and inductions</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible working schemes to accommodate ethnic and religious beliefs and worships</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual job descriptions and specifications</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of English proficiency of new employees from non-English speaking background</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporation of ethnic and ethnic awareness into overall management strategy</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development programmes (eg management skills courses) for ethnic groups that are under-represented in management</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring programs between English and non-English speakers</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations of ethnic and religious festivals and events</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up links with local ethnic groups</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Conclusion

The key findings of this paper are that the vast majority of workers and supervisors are comfortable with cultural diversity. While the majority of respondents believed that there was equality of opportunity in the construction industry, there was evidence of racist acts and experiences, most prominently manifested as offensive graffiti and joke telling which could negatively impact upon worker well-being. Asian-Australians were seen as especially subjected to these forms of inequality, including uneven access to higher paying jobs. Communication problems caused by language barriers stand out as major challenges on construction sites particularly for Asian-Australian operatives. There was also recognition among operatives and supervisors that language barriers presented greater safety risks on construction sites. Despite this perceived link to safety, cultural diversity was perceived to be significantly less important than OHS policies. It appears that the cultural diversity of the industry is taken for granted by supervisors and it appears as if the problems associated with it are accepted as an inevitable part of daily life on sites. While our research did not aim to investigate the impact cultural diversity strategies on work productivity, our findings suggest that it is important to
create business case incentives for construction companies to be actively involved in the implementation of cultural diversity strategies which ensures that current and future influxes of foreign workers into the construction industry can be sustained in a safe, productive, efficient and harmonious way.

References


