

Best Practices for Attracting and Retaining Female Construction Project Managers

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The objective of this study was to determine best practices for attracting and retaining female construction project managers. It was hypothesized that female construction project managers desire different benefits and employer characteristics than male construction project managers. Georgia-based contractors participated in the survey conducted to achieve the objective. Results showed that retaining and attracting quality individuals was a primary challenge for all employers. Male and female construction project managers were surveyed about the qualities they desire from their career and employers. One major conclusion drawn from this study was that diversity, anti-sexual harassment practices, customized work schedules, inclusion in networking events, and community involvement were the most differing values between female and male construction project managers. The intended audience for this study are contractors interested in attracting or retaining female project managers to add diversity to their teams.

Keywords: women, construction industry, project management, retention, organization culture, best practices.

Introduction

The objective of this study was to determine best practices for attracting and retaining female construction project managers. Based on background research, it was hypothesized that female construction project managers (PMs) desire different benefits and employer characteristics than male construction project managers (PMs). The intended audience for this study are contractors interested in attracting or retaining female project managers to add diversity to their teams. The findings of this study provide construction organizations with best practices for retaining and attracting female construction project managers.

Background

Attracting and retaining quality construction project managers is a major challenge in a thriving economy. One way of tackling this challenge is for companies to be more appealing to a wider range of potential candidates. This study focused on strategies for attracting and retaining female construction project managers. In this background section; The importance of a gender diverse team is explained by highlighting the unique characteristics of women and their current and potential contributions to the construction industry. Secondly, barriers between women and the construction industry are discussed to bring awareness to current practices that need to be altered. And lastly, suggestions for attracting and retaining female employees in general are all used to build a foundation for this study.

Women and men tend to possess gender specific competencies. Gender diversity is important in creating a competency diverse team, which is important to the success of construction companies.

According to a study conducted in the Swedish construction industry, male managers score statistically higher than female managers in 'decision making' and 'resilience'. Whereas, female managers score statistically higher in 'sensitivity' and 'flexibility/adaptability' (Arditi, Holmdahl, & Gluch, 2013). Furthermore, women score significantly higher in customer focus, authority and presence (Balci & Arditi, 2009).

How can these characteristics translate to the construction industry? Since the 1970's there has been an increasing number of disputes over construction projects (Civil Engineering Research Foundation. American Society of Civil Engineers, 1996). In many contracts, today, an adversarial attitude between the principal players gets developed from the beginning of the project. Reasons for the attitude arise from the interaction of many factors; one being contentious attitudes, leading to the parties involved becoming averse to the acceptance of liability (Civil Engineering Research Foundation. American Society of Civil Engineers, 1996). The ways women work, their cooperative and collaborative work style, not only often result in a “win-win” situation for all stakeholders, but also improve decision-making processes by producing creative solutions to problems, and thus enhance long-term business relationships for construction businesses. The nurturing instinct of women can be channeled into limiting confrontation, motivating more “can do” approaches to problems, and quality control because of their attention to detail (Jeune & English, 2012).

The skills and characteristics possessed by women, such as; good listening skills, empathy, and organizational skills, can fill deficits that would otherwise exist in construction project management teams. Acknowledging a woman's potential contributions and identifying barriers between women and the construction industry could reduce the chances of adverse relationships.

The wage disparity between men and women in construction is the second lowest of any industry in the United States. The wage penalty for mothers is lower. And most female project managers can return to their jobs after maternity leave, in some cases even earning higher salaries. Yet female participation in construction management remains very low (Bilbo, Bigelow, & Rybkowski, 2014).

Research suggests that the reasons women choose not to enter or stay in the construction industry include the rough working conditions, widespread discrimination against women, inflexible work structures, long working hours, lack of balance between work and family life, tough language used, poor public opinion about the industry, alienation, sexual harassment (Arditi, Holmdahl, & Gluch, 2013) and lack of protective wear suitable for women's physiques (Kolisi & M'Rithaa, 2016).

One of the greatest challenges facing female project managers is their acceptance to the construction industry by their male counterparts. The construction industry is one of the most male dominated industries. Women are underrepresented in the industry due to its ingrained culture, unique nature, and working conditions (Balci & Arditi, 2009).

Women in these career types are affected by the companies' tendency to use the macho culture to their advantage. Companies with macho culture are notorious for organizing processes related with inequalities, such as recruitment methods, organization of work and hours, exclusion of women from informal interactions, and harassment (Ibáñez, 2017). Examples of this culture include, but are not limited to; networking at venues that have a majority male benefaction such as a golf club, shooting or hunting venue, luxury box seating at sporting events, “locker room talk” about body parts and sexual desires, sharing of videos and images, allowing employees to accept and display items such as nude calendars from marketing and sales representatives, sexually suggestive gestures and facial expressions, comments about gender roles, invitations to gentleman's clubs after work, etc. Sexual harassment victims and witnesses experience psychological distress, which invokes them to disengage from their work (Jiang, et al., 2015).

A topic often overlooked when it comes to the male-dominated construction industry is; the lack of product offering for protective wear that is suitable for women's physique (Kolisi & M'Rithaa, 2016). Society's notion of what is feminine and what is masculine can be a factor that can cause exclusion of women from certain construction occupations—not the physical strength demanded by an activity, but rather the concept of masculinity (Jeune & English, 2012). For some this may cause discomfort and lack of confidence hindering performance or deterring women from the industry all together.

Role conditions having the most impact on project managers' work-family interface are: working hours; accountability; and the stress arising from accountability (Mariani & Turner, 2016). Women are fleeing companies that encourage employees to practically live at work (Barger, 2016). A construction project manager position tends to be very demanding of time, requiring long hours daily and often weekend work, and a married woman is likely to have additional demands on their time resulting from their spouse (Bilbo, Bigelow, & Rybkowski, 2014). While being a mother is related to a four and one-half percent wage penalty, marriage is related to a wage penalty of eleven percent (Bilbo, Bigelow, & Rybkowski, 2014). The additional time constraints married women and mothers

experience as their mobility is limited, and they bear the additional responsibilities for the care and nurture of their children and spouse undoubtedly contribute to the wage penalty (Bilbo, Bigelow, & Rybkowski, 2014). Another barrier to women is the industry's intolerance to breaks in service. Women often have greater need for breaks to have and raise children (Jeune & English, 2012). Balancing work and family responsibilities is more difficult in the early stages of career development but becomes easier to manage over time (Adogbo, Ibrahim, & Ibrahim, 2015). This inflexibility could deter female project managers from the construction industry.

An abundance of research supports the fact that company and industry culture have a great influence on a woman's attraction to the construction management role. Fortunately, specific characteristics of the profession itself such as variation in tasks and low level of routine are motivating factors (Cardoso, Dominguez, & Paiva, 2015). What else can contractors do to make these positions more appealing to women? Similar studies suggest; provide flexibility for families, improve company branding and culture, and foster an environment of knowledge sharing.

To attract and keep more women, and thus increase gender diversity in the construction industry, companies need to restructure their positions into more flexible, women and mother-friendly careers (Bilbo, Bigelow, & Rybkowski, 2014). Some researchers suggest that organizations should focus on fostering a female employee's emotional attachment to the organization. Employees with a strong affective/emotional commitment will remain in the organization because they want to (Santosh & Muthiah, 2016). Passion for one's type of work reduces perception of work-family conflict. Work devotion (passion, enjoyment, pride) positively influences experience of the work-family interface (Mariani & Turner, 2016). Alternative work schedules, child care programs, and employee assistance programs reduced turnover because they give employees freedom during the day to handle family obligations. Consequently, this demonstrates that the organization cares about the personal lives of its employees, causing employees to reciprocate by remaining with the organization (Caillier, 2016). Firms should also consider providing career support to the spouse/partner of their employees (Santosh & Muthiah, 2016). And project managers should be provided with more support staff to eliminate obstacles to married women (Bilbo, Bigelow, & Rybkowski, 2014). Choice of schedule can make a positive and significant impact on an employee's perception of work-family balance (Facer & Wadsworth, 2016). Women demonstrate slightly more positive attitudes toward a 4-day schedule (Facer & Wadsworth, 2016). However, the more substantial factor is whether an employee selected his or her schedule (Facer & Wadsworth, 2016). Organizations can boost the satisfaction of programs by tailoring them in accordance to the need of employees instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach (Caillier, 2016). Creating workplaces that have a lot of flexibility, that allow for people to work in a way that fits best with them, boosts creativity and job satisfaction and these are the settings where women stay and thrive (Barger, 2016).

Significant change in the image and the culture is necessary to attract and retain more women into the construction industry (Jeune & English, 2012). Image is the external representation of a company such as its branding. Culture is the beliefs and behaviors of the organization. While improving the image of an organization can help attract employees, improving the culture or behavior is what will help retain employees. Research indicates that the perception of attractiveness or unattractiveness of a workplace by women are critical factors in women's decision to apply for positions and their ongoing employment (Loosemore & Sedighi, 2012). However, projecting a more appealing image and culture requires more than updated interiors. It requires diverse marketing strategies and behavior modification of current employees.

To attract female construction project managers, construction companies may consider disseminating knowledge and information about the industry and career opportunities in female-orientated campaigns and developing partnerships with tertiary educational institutions, with an emphasis on female role models (Jeune & English, 2012).

Eliminating the macho-culture and tough image through perceived anti-sexual harassment and anti-discriminatory practices can reduce psychological distress, thereby enhancing engagement and intentions to stay with an organization (Jiang, et al., 2015). Managers must be cognizant of the need to not only implement such practices soundly, but also convey the essence of these practices to personnel in a clear manner, thereby improving worker engagement even among those who have not been harassed (Jiang, et al., 2015). According to studies conducted in Turkey and Latvia; "Recognition/appreciation from management" and "Having a good relationship with colleagues" are the most important attributes of an employer (Alnıaçık, Alnıaçık, Erat, & Akçin, 2014). Women's relationships with their immediate bosses are critical to whether they feel engaged and content. The ideal supervisor is committed to his or her subordinates' advancement and development, assigns stretch projects, and provides necessary support and feedback to help them be successful (Barger, 2016). Providing greater autonomy, greater workers' participation in goal-setting and clear rules about performance and rewards could also lead to a lower turnover rate and reduce

excessive employee mobility, lack of training and low appeal to the younger population, but would also make companies more competitive and increase the opportunity for employees' progression, providing them with skills, and subsequent performance (Cardoso, Dominguez, & Paiva, 2015).

Women prefer workplaces that are collaborative rather than hierarchical (Barger, 2016). And they are more apt to stay in work environments that allow for creativity and flexibility (Barger, 2016). Working in a cooperative setting creates a greater sense of belonging and connectedness, which all adds up to more innovation (Barger, 2016). Learning and development opportunities and being involved with the local community are more preferred by women than men (Loosemore & Sedighi, 2012). Workplace initiatives that offer leadership development, mentoring, and networking for women reap the benefits by retaining women (Barger, 2016). Activities such as mentoring, or volunteering may be crucial for creating and maintaining long-term engagement in one's work (Belanger, Dickman, & Weisgram, 2015). Interdisciplinary mentoring schemes and buddies or informal mentors can provide coaching, listening, advice, or other help that facilitates opportunities for women and aims to empower women to play a leading role through advocacy, training, and support (Jeune & English, 2012). It is critical for managers to maintain a favorable and positive attitude towards knowledge sharing (Zhang & Ng, 2012). Because of the oral culture, much valuable know-how knowledge is confined in professionals' minds, and does not surface until someone seeks the knowledge for problem solving (Zhang & Ng, 2012). Most of construction professionals' knowledge is tacit and embedded in practical experience, thus it may be difficult for professionals to articulate the 'sticky' knowledge. Coaching or mentoring allows junior professionals to imitate actions and acquire knowledge through 'learning by doing' (Zhang & Ng, 2012). It is also important for women to participate in professional bodies, develop further in areas of specialization and seek mentors/role models who can educate them on the best career options available for them in the industry (Adogbo, Ibrahim, & Ibrahim, 2015). Because of the necessity for the construction workforce to build its expertise and keep abreast with latest developments, accent is placed on life-long learning and sharing of knowledge within the industry. The absence of professional development programs erodes the competitiveness of local firms. Therefore, every effort should be made to set up such programs (Debrah & Ofori, 2006). The most positively influential factors for females to remain in a CM undergraduate degree program are: the community of students, lab classes, internships, innovation in the classroom, student organizations, and Job/Career opportunities (Bigelow, Bilbo, Ritter, Mathew, & Elliott, 2016). This may be an indicator that opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and opportunities for growth will also be influential factors in attracting female construction managers.

The current body of knowledge emphasizes the importance of company culture, family friendly schedules, and knowledge sharing for attracting and retaining females in construction and similar industries. This study has compiled these and other strategies in a survey to determine best-practices for attracting and retaining female construction project managers.

Research Methodology

Eighty-one Georgia-based contractors participated in a broad survey titled "2016 Construction Outlook Survey" created by Kennesaw State University and Bennett Thrasher, LLP. The survey was emailed directly to management at each Georgia-based construction company. The results were used to identify areas that needed further research. Among many results, the survey revealed that eighty-seven percent (87%) of Georgia-based contractors reported "retaining and attracting quality individuals" as their primary challenge for 2016.

Georgia-based contractors were also asked "What benefits does your company provide?" Of 58 participating contractors, 81% provide health insurance, 81% provide Holiday bonuses and gifts, 67% provide 401K retirement plans, and 64% provide dental insurance.

Despite the robust benefit packages offered by contractors, they struggle with retention of quality individuals. This could be an indication that the contractors are investing in ineffective recruitment and retention strategies. Therefore, a second survey was conducted to help identify effective strategies for attracting and retaining construction project managers.

The survey titled, "Construction Project Managers, what do you look for in an employer?" contains thirty-three (33) desired employer characteristics. The list of employer characteristics in the survey are original and unique to this

study. The survey was distributed to the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) via email. One hundred-nineteen (117; 10% or 12 male, 90% or 105 female) construction project manager respondents ranked each item on a Likert scale from; one (1) “not at all important to me” to five (5) “very important to me”. The objective was to identify best practices for attracting and retaining female construction project managers. Therefore, the responses were filtered by gender. For each item, the sum of the awarded scores were divided by the total possible score (525 for females, 60 for males) to obtain a percentage score. For example, if all 105 women ranked “competitive salary” as “5-very important to me”, “competitive salary” would receive a total score of 525 or 100%. The scores awarded by females were compared to the scores awarded by males. Similarities and differences were highlighted.

Results

The survey titled “Construction Project Managers, what do you look for in an employer?” revealed that male and female Construction Project Managers both value traditional benefits such as; competitive salary, insurance, and promotions (Table 1). However, men and women showed marked differences in the scores they awarded to diversity, anti-sexual harassment practices, flexible schedules, inclusion in networking events, mentoring and community involvement (Table 2). Table 3 displays all results for all 33 survey items.

Table 1
Top 4 Desired Employer Characteristics Shared by Male and Female Construction PMs

It is important to me that:	Score awarded by Females	Score awarded by Males
My employer offers a competitive salary.	94%	95%
My employer provides constructive feedback directly to each employee and never behind their back.	92%	90%
My employer promotes me when I qualify for a promotion.	91%	88%
My employer provides a competitive health insurance plan.	90%	95%

Table 2
Top 5 Categories in which Male Construction PM’s Desired Employer Characteristics differed from Female Construction PM’s Desired Employer Characteristics

It is important to me that:	Score awarded by Females	Score Awarded by Males	Difference between Females and Males
My employer shows people of my gender and race in leadership roles when using images to market the company.	73%	58%	15%
My employer models anti-sexual harassment and anti-discrimination behavior and emphasizes the gravity and consequences of such behaviors.	88%	75%	13%
My employer allows me to work an alternative work schedule that works for me and my family.	82%	70%	12%
My employer invites me to participate in recruitment and networking events that attract a diverse group of people.	80%	68%	12%
My employer is enthusiastic about community involvement and encourages activities such as mentoring teens on the job and sponsoring community construction projects.	82%	72%	10%

Table 3
All survey items and responses in order of importance to Female Construction Project Managers.

It is important to me that my employer...	Score Awarded by Females	Score Awarded by Males
...offers a competitive salary.	94%	95%
...provides constructive feedback directly to each employee and never behind their back.	92%	90%
...promotes me when I qualify for a promotion.	91%	88%
...shows appreciation for my effort and achievements.	90%	87%
...provides a competitive health insurance plan.	90%	95%
...encourages collaboration across departments and hierarchical levels within the company.	90%	85%
...invites me to all team meetings, seeks out my opinions and ideas, and utilizes my ideas and opinions.	89%	83%
...model's anti-sexual harassment and anti-discrimination behavior and emphasizes the gravity and consequences of such behaviors.	88%	75%
...enforces and model's standards beyond the legal requirement to ensure safety.	88%	80%
...invests in as much education and professional development as I would like to obtain.	87%	80%
...provides me with support staff so that I can complete my job tasks during my regular work hours.	84%	80%
...models a pleasant tone of voice and uses polite language and expects employees to do the same.	84%	85%
...encourages work-life balance by supporting and encouraging my hobbies.	83%	83%
...provides Personal Protective Equipment that fits properly, is attractive, and makes me feel professional.	83%	75%
...includes me in informal team interactions.	83%	78%
...encourages knowledge-sharing by linking entry level project managers with senior project managers for mentor-ship.	83%	88%
...allows me to work an alternative work schedule that works for me and my family.	82%	70%
...provides monetary rewards for achievements.	82%	85%
...is enthusiastic about community involvement and encourages activities such as mentoring teens on the job and sponsoring community construction projects.	82%	72%
...greet each employee with a smile and encourages employees to do the same to one another.	82%	73%
...invites me to participate in recruitment and networking events that attract a diverse group of people.	80%	68%
...strives to be the most innovative	78%	83%
...allows me to change positions and roles within the company and on projects very easily.	76%	70%
...invests in keeping our office building interior and exterior organized, clean, and well decorated.	74%	70%
...shows people of my gender and race in leadership roles when using images to market the company.	73%	58%

...makes relocation easy on families by providing moving services, education transfer assistance, supplementary education services, spousal/partner employment support, and a sense of community support within the company.	70%	67%
...is active in improving the public opinion of the construction industry by taking public opinions into consideration prior to bidding on projects.	69%	68%
...ensures I do not exceed the number of hours I agreed to work.	64%	68%
...provides opportunities for travel.	61%	55%
...provides a company automobile.	59%	82%
...strives to have the highest annual revenue of all companies in the country.	59%	80%
...provides tickets to sport events as incentives and rewards for accomplishments.	51%	53%
...provides on-site child care.	35%	38%

Conclusion

If construction companies want to attract and retain quality female construction project managers to add a diverse set of competencies to their project management teams, they must continue to provide traditional benefit packages such as competitive salary and insurance plans. Concurrently, they must improve company culture by; providing constructive feedback and opportunities for promotions, showing diversity in leadership roles, modeling anti-sexual harassment behavior, customizing work schedules, including women in all events, and supporting women in community service and mentoring endeavors.

One interesting finding is that both men and women ranked “It is important to me that my employer provides constructive feedback directly to each employee and never behind their back.” in their top four along with “competitive salary”, “insurance”, and “promotions”. This is an intangible and free benefit that employers can practice and enforce to improve company culture and retain quality employees of any gender. On the other hand, if employers were considering adding “on-site childcare” to their list of benefits/expenses, they would be interested to know that it ranked least important to both males and females.

The differences in desired employer characteristics between men and women seem to reflect their unique experiences. Women are not as well represented in marketing images, experience more sexual harassment, are more affected by family-work balance challenges, and experience exclusion in the industry. Therefore, they understand the impact and importance of these employer characteristics. On the other hand, men may take the same employer characteristics for granted if they have never been without them.

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