

W065 - Organisation and Management of Construction

New Task Force

No shortage of attention for construction research but what about the people actually working in the industry? It is timely to take a searching look at their special inputs and to identify areas for current and future research.

W065 is to be commended therefore for its initiative in setting up a new Task Force - The Construction Workforce. The idea by the way first surfaced at the W055/W065 Symposium in Cape Town in 1999.

Dave Langford fills in the background.

The Construction Workforce

Typically, construction employs some 8-11% of the total workforce in most countries. Where a country is undergoing growth in its economy with major investments in construction and infrastructure the proportion of the people employed in that country engaged in construction increases. Aside from this direct employment, the members dependant upon construction for a livelihood will be swollen by those engaged in materials production, education for the construction trades and professions, civil servants and local government officials dedicated to managing construction etc.

Yet, despite this influence, the people who are actually engaged by the industry are seldom themselves the subject of construction research. A quick scan of the Journals which service the construction research community shows that only 3 papers related to construction workers have been published in the last 3 Issues of the Journal of Construction Management & Economics, the Journal of Construction Engineering & Management and the Journal of Management in Engineering. (Two of these in fact related to Safety Management). This represents 4% of the total output of the Journals. In CIB W065 in Glasgow in 1996 some 4 papers out of a total of 161 related to construction workers (as distinct from construction professionals); by the time of Cape Town Symposium in 1999 the position had not improved. We may conclude that this is an under-researched area.

Challenge to Change

The position of the construction workforce is further marginalised by the changes taking place in construction industries around the world. The construction industries of most countries are challenged to undergo radical changes to ensure that clients are better satisfied with the buildings that are built. Moreover, management seeks to drive out waste from the construction process so that buildings are delivered faster, cheaper and with fewer personal accidents.

The beneficiaries of such changes have long been identified as being those corporations which are engaged in the construction process. Certainly clients are driving the agenda for change and see the tangible fruits of the changes through better value for the money they spend on construction. But it is not only clients that are benefiting; constructors, trade contractors and designers are seeking greater profit margins for the work provided to clients.

This drive for increased valorisation of the construction process has not seen the construction workforce as a beneficiary - more as a malleable agent in the construction process. The process changes envisaged such as standardisation, process integration and lean construction techniques have not incorporated the workforce to the agenda of change.

New Task Force Objectives

In order to redress this imbalance in the beneficiaries of research, CIB has created a new Task Force to study the special contribution of the construction workforce. The aim of the new task force which operates inside W065 is to bring together those researchers who are working or who wish to work on construction workforce issues.

The Task Force has the following objectives.

- To act as a coordinator for research currently being undertaken
- To act as a discussion forum for the theories, concepts, models, tools and methodologies for the study of the construction workforce
- To gather, review and compare data on the construction workforce on a global basis
- To produce within 4 years of the establishment of the Task Force a book on the global construction workforce practice and future issues
- To act as an 'agenda setter' for research in this area

It is hoped that the outputs of this Task Force will be able to inventarise what is happening in respect of research in this area and to publicise research which is underway and to synthesise a research agenda with an edited book on the theme of the construction workforce.

Already the task force has a small group engaged in this area which comprises Dave Langford of the Department of Civil Engineering at Strathclyde University, UK, Jan Borgbrant of Lulea in Sweden and Ben Uwakweh of the University of Cincinnati, USA.

Dave Langford

