Developing an equitable means for peak performance in project organisations: Career management for women in Project Management

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ABSTRACT

Australia has historically enjoyed steady economic growth, but the outlook is now less secure. An increasingly complex business environment is creating challenges in staying globally competitive. Unlocking the full potential of women in project-based organisations within key industries can drive productivity improvements and economic growth for Australia. But the underrepresentation of women in those project-based sectors is a significant challenge. Through interviews with female project managers in construction, this paper examines the underlying structural and cultural barriers to women’s advancement to leadership in those organisations. The findings show that the unique characteristics of project organisations with their perpetuating masculine work practices, embedded masculine logic, gender based bias and masculine organisational culture perpetuates the pattern of underrepresentation.

Keywords: project-based organisations, global business environment, leadership, managing in a changing and complex business environment, managing for peak performance.

INTRODUCTION

With more than 23 years of uninterrupted annual economic growth fuelled by the resources boom, Australia has an impressive record of prosperity (Australian Trade Commission, 2015). However, continuous growth is not assured as the basis of international competition is rapidly changing and Australia faces a challenge of creating a globally competitive, agile economy capable of adopting and operating at its peak performance (McKinsey Australia, 2014). Australia must boost performance through productivity in key industry sectors such as the construction and property development industries that have a significant impact on the country’s economy (Goldman Sachs, 2009). The lack of skilled labour has been attributed to the declining productivity in Australian organisations (Australian Trade Commission, 2015; Goldman Sachs, 2009, McKinsey Australia, 2014; WGEA, 2014), but those industries currently draw on the workforce from only half of the country’s population. The representation of women in those sectors is extremely low at only 11.4%, with even lower numbers of women in leadership roles at 1.2% and the highest rate of gender pay gap
at 20.1% (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, 2014; WGEA, 2015). The current practice of looking offshore for talent could instead be focused on tapping into the already existing pool of highly educated and motivated women in Australia and recognising them as a source of willing and experienced talent. This closing of the gap between male and female employment rates could boost the level of Australian GDP by up to 11% and have significant implications for the economy (Catalyst, 2013; Golden Sachs, 2009; Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, 2014).

The benefits of gender diversity and female representation in organisations have been well documented at the corporate level. Leveraging female talent creates a competitive advantage and improves financial performance of organisations (Catalyst, 2013; Ernst & Young, 2011; McKinsey & Company, 2011). Catalyst (2013) found organisations with at least three female board directors had better financial performance than other companies, delivering 35 per cent higher return on equity and 34 per cent higher total return to shareholders. Studies in Australia across 151 ASX firms found that women had a positive impact on economic growth and social responsiveness and those with two or more female board directors had higher returns on equity, higher market-to-book value, and improved corporate sustainability via higher social responsiveness (Catalyst, 2013). In addition, according to 2010 The Value of Centred Leadership: McKinsey Global Survey results women bring an approach to leadership well suited for the challenges that major organisations face now and in the future (McKinsey & Company, 2010).

So, what causes underrepresentation of women in project organisations? Research suggests that the traditional nature of the organisational practices in project-based organisations creates barriers for women and excludes them from participation in those sectors (Chasserio & Legault, 2010; Legault & Chasserio, 2012; Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Watts, 2009). This paper explores the issue of underrepresentation of women in leadership in project-based organisations in the Australian construction and property development industries.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-based sectors like the construction and the property development industries have the opportunity to improve Australia’s international competitiveness and are perfect candidates for improving the representation of women, tapping into the pipeline of female talent, thereby achieving economic benefit from women in leadership and in turn significantly contributing to the long-term prosperity of Australia. However, some researchers argue that the nature of project organisations creates barriers that hinder women’s participation and career progression (Acker 1998; Evetts, 1992; Watts, 2009). Structural and cultural dimensions representing the characteristics of organisations and professions are closely related to opportunities for organisational career progression (Evetts, 2000; Clerc & Kels, 2013).

In projects, the ongoing reproduction of masculine work practices based on rationality, efficiency, control and devotion to the profession represent significant challenges for women (Chasserio & Legault, 2010; Legault & Chasserio, 2012; Lingren & Packendorff, 2006; Powell at al., 2006). Chasserio and Legault (2010) observed that project working conditions drive the widespread practice of long working hours, constant availability and overtime, therefore leading to culture of presenteeism, justified by the rhetoric of professionalism, the commitment and dedication to the profession and the masculine logic embedded within the profession (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; Legault & Chasserio, 2003). Women are particularly affected by such demands for efficiency and commitment due to their caring responsibilities. As a result, women are often seen as unable to meet the “professional” standards of project management, nor to uphold professional reputation (Legault & Chasserio, 2012). Catalyst (1998, 2000) and Chugh and Saghal (2007) claim the lack of career development and planning is one of the main obstacles to women’s advancement. The project-based careers are described as highly reliant on project managers forging their own career paths (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Hölzle, 2010). Shenhar and Dvir (2007) and suggest that project careers are also characterised by a lack of development opportunities, training and status within organisations, therefore limiting progression into leadership roles.
Organisational recruitment and promotion practices characterised by bias and favouritism greatly influence women’s careers (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Oakley, 2000). Recruitment and promotion decisions are often made on the basis of a similarity-attraction bias, driving the most positive evaluations of people whom are seen as similar to the decision makers (Powell, 2012; Byrne & Neuman, 1992). A masculine organisational culture reinforces the uniqueness and difference of women in comparison to men and places the onus on women to ‘fit in’ and adjust to that culture (Gale & Cartwright, 1995). Further, the desire to minimise uncertainty in the executive suite often leads to closing off top management positions to people who are regarded as “different” from the prevalent male managers (Kanter, 1977) leading to exclusion and barriers for women.

Those who have currency with CEOs and the backing of senior management enjoy an advantage in career progression. This is normally reserved for people who participate in the informal networks and who are then favoured for promotions. The ‘old boy’ networks function as vehicles to transfer the power and competitive advantage gained in the formal organisational structure and channelled into friendships and alliances (Oakley, 2000). The heavily politicised environment in project organisations creates another significant barrier to women’s career advancement preventing women from participating in social networks where organisational politics are created and reinforced and where networks are important sources of business contacts, career opportunities, social support, sponsorship, and company information (Perrewe & Nelson, 2004; Chugh and Sahgal, 2007; Oakley 2000; Van Der Boon 2003).

For these reasons women have experienced difficulty in entering the traditionally male-dominated ranks of management in project organisations, which contributes to their continuing to occupy only a small proportion of senior corporate positions. However little is known how women themselves experience these difficulties (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Crawford et al., 2013). This work is designed to investigate how women project managers experience their careers in project-based work environments and to address this gap in the literature. The research question is:

What are the organisational barriers female project managers perceive during their experience in project-based working environments within the construction and property development industries in Australia?
METHOD

This study took an exploratory approach in capturing the perceptions and experiences of career barriers and progression of individual female project managers in project-based organisations. By utilising an interpretive approach to this research, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Burrell and Morgan (1979), we were able to develop a much deeper understanding of women’s career experiences in natural settings. Female project managers with several years of experience, working at middle to senior project levels across construction and property development industries were interviewed for this study.

Table 1 outlines the industry and roles of the participants.

Insert Table 1 here

Table 2 outlines the experience in years of the participants.

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A total of sixteen (16) in-depth interviews were conducted in this study. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face in locations determined by the interviewees or by telephone using a semi-structured Interview Guide developed through the literature search. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participation was voluntary, and the responses were treated as anonymous, and, results were kept confidential. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the majority of participants. In addition snowball sampling was also used to recruit additional participants, who shared the required characteristics of the initial purposeful sample but had not responded to the recruitment announcements. Further, participant connections through the LinkedIn social network were used to recruit the remaining participants.

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FINDINGS

On the question regarding the nature of project work, the majority of participants (75%) confirmed that for them it is masculine work practices driven by the relentless demands for efficiency and control; the requirement for total individual role commitment; along with long working hours and a lack of work-life balance that created a culture of presenteeism. These barriers challenged women in their efforts to reconcile both their commitment to work and to their caring responsibilities.

Comments included:

- So it’s very intense so when I come home from work at night I tend to sit in the corner and stare at a white wall. My son has had some drama with his girlfriend or something and I’m like aww...no more people stuff sort of thing (Participant 11C).
- The expectation is that your work life is more important than your private life (Participant 16C).
- I did get a divorce from working too hard (Participant 11C).

The culture of presenteeism was attributed as responsible for the lack of support for women returning from maternity leave. The expectations of full time commitment and full availability prevented many women from returning to their old project roles and forced them to accept demotion into administrative roles and therefore forego a career in project management and potential career advancement. Comments included:

- So when that girl came back she was moved across to a corporate function ... so she got side stepped (Participant 6P).
- They get forced into taking side tracks, either becoming like a client type project manager or moving into estimating or sort of trying to do something else because what you’re trained in just doesn’t work anymore (Participant 9C).

More that eighty per cent (81%) of participants identified a lack of defined career progression paths and support programs leading to progression challenges in project management. They indicated
that the career paths within their organisations seemed ambiguous and confusing, leaving them “feeling lost” (Participant 8C). Further, the participants expressed lack of understanding about the requirements to achieve promotion and advancement in their careers. Comments included:

*I haven’t had anyone help me or say what to do next or anything like that; it’s always been very much driven by myself (Participant 8C).*

*But you know at certain stages you kind of don’t know what you don’t know and you need somebody to provide a little bit of direction or guidance or a road map (Participant 3P).*

*We don’t have transparency in skills and competencies required by different levels for project managers to progress in their career (Participant 1P).*

The participants also questioned the transparency, credibility and fairness of appointment and advancement decisions in project management. For them, promotion practices still seemed to be subject to informal, politicised power plays, favouritism and mateship. Comments included:

*We don’t have transparency in skills and competencies required by different levels for project managers to progress in their career (Participant 1P).*

*They need to have a champion and they need to be given a leg up because it’s not merit...meritocracy does not exist. It is one of the worst used words to disguise favouritism um...a whole...and a lot of the politics (Participant 6P).*

*It depends to a certain extent on how open the employee’s manager or how knowledgeable or how motivated the manager is to assist that person (Participant 10P).*

Three quarters of the participants (75%) identified that within their employment experiences they needed to proactively manage their own careers and be in charge of their own advancement as no support was available at a corporate or industry level. Comments included:

*I’ve had to go seek my own mentors around my progression. I haven’t had anyone help me or say what to do next or anything like that; it’s always been very much driven by myself (Participant 8C).*
I think you’ve got to drive your own objectives and the extent to which the company is receptive and then ... got to start looking elsewhere (Participant 14P).

While the participants confirmed the existence of the linear career paths in project organisations, many believed that the flat organisational structures and types and complexity of projects negatively affected their career progression leading to lack of career scope and advancement opportunities. Comments included:

It’s somewhat reliant on the projects they have at hand and timing as much as anything (Participant 14P).

There just weren’t any roles at that level so that was the problem, they’ll say you can go far, we can see you climbing up the ladder and all that sort of stuff but there was nowhere to climb (Participant 5C).

Further, dual and separate career streams, one for project management and one for general management caused difficulties in moving from project specific work into the executive leadership roles. Through their careers in projects, women built skills and experiences in delivering complex projects but those were not seen as the right skill sets to progress into executive roles. Comments included:

Currently you know it’s from project to project basically but if I want to sort of become...I think taking that to another managerial level I’m really going to have to look at some sort of external study opportunities because I don’t think I’ll actually get that if I just continued on my current path and course (Participant 14P).

I think I need to work on positioning myself for a management role and being seen as a competent manager... I know I can do it it’s just how do you get that opportunity (Participant 4P).

In addition, Gale and Cartwright (1995) argued that masculine management culture reinforced the uniqueness and difference of women compared to men and placed the onus on women to “fit in” and adjust to that culture and the environment of those organisations. While not all the participants
confirmed that, a third of participants (31%) indicated their concern with their own “fit” in their work environment, also expressing their frustration with consequences of lack of “fit”. Comments included:

I believe that I have missed out on opportunities in large projects because I didn’t fit in. I didn’t fit the, ‘what do you call it?…the stereotype’ (Participant 1P).

I also felt like I had to be...a different person at work. I think… I had to fit in especially because I was always the only girl on the team (Participant 8C).

We were ready to go as fiery as the guys are on career progression but our signals are different and our signals are misread and in the end you know it’s just exhaustion from signalling and not getting a response (Participant 6P).

Also a third of participants (31%) reported loss of commercial and promotional opportunities due to gender-based favouritism described by Bazerman (2006) as a tendency to favour members of groups one belongs to and to exclude others and reinforced by the culture of mateship suggested by Sinclair (2005). Comments included:

They’re more than happy to have a coffee with me but when there is a real opportunity they will go to one of the boys (Participant 1P).

I thought I’d demonstrated myself but then I think relationships beat that hands over fists and that’s again where women can struggle because there is a mateship, there is a network (Participant 6P).

Further, the participants reported similarity-attraction bias (Byrne & Neuman, 1992; Powell, 2012) as a barrier to career promotion caused by preferences for hiring and promoting people ‘similar’ to the senior management. Comments included:

I think it’s because they like to work with people who are similar to the … I think it’s easier for them to get along and be mates and it’s part of the buddy, buddy environment (Participant 8C).
I think they put people into a position of power that emulate themselves so single males...predominately males with a stay at home wife and children that might socialise with like go cycling or whatever, that they’re very comfortable around (Participant 16C).

When at the top you’ve got a person that thinks oh you know I need people who can make decisions around me; decision makers are men. So even though they don’t consciously think that, they unconsciously go and choose guys because if feels right (Participant 6P).

The bias is also reinforced by power and status (Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Harrison, 1972). Those who have currency with CEO and backing by senior management get advantage in career progression. According to the participants, this type of advantage is usually reserved for males belonging to social networks and caused by exclusion and favouritism in selection and appointment processes. Comments included:

He had been told by more senior people within the business that a younger male who is having a meteoric rise through the business, may be due to his family connections to the business, his dad used to be a CEO of one of the group of companies, was actually going to be put in as the project manager (Participant 16C).

Off him there were two others platformed off... he’s now at regional level so he’s spring shot over me a few levels (Participant 6P).

Because you know how can a guy who has never had any development experience go into a regional role, which requires massive...like we were all teaching him. It would be like awarding it an assistant development manager; but just because he knows the CEO (Participant 6P).

Over fifty per cent (56%) of participants confirmed their experiences of being excluded from the informal social networks referred to as ‘old boys’ clubs’. Comments included:

There’s probably bit of a...um I don’t know if there is a bit of a men’s club sort of mentality (Participant 3P).
About six or eight of them every second Wednesday went and played golf... that group was selected on who played golf and who they liked to hang out with ... so no I wasn’t invited to that (Participant 16C).

They go ‘it’s a rugby function.’ ‘Yes I know but I’m interested in going.’ My clients get invited and I don’t get invited and I find out that my clients are invited because I look through the list that gets distributed to all the directors and think hang on a second, this is the first time I’ve heard of this and my clients are on the list and I haven’t been invited. ‘Oh sorry, didn’t think you’d be interested in going to the rugby’ (Participant 1P).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide insight into the barriers that women experience in advancing their careers in project-based organisations within the construction and property development industries. The results confirm other research that perpetuating masculine work practices driven by the demands of environmental uncertainty and commitment to the profession (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; Legault & Chasserio, 2003; 2012; Lingren & Packendorff, 2006) create those constraining barriers to advancement. Women’s absence in the middle and upper ranks of management within those industries are the telling signs that the poor selection, recruitment, promotion (Shenhar & Dvir, 2007) together with limited career support programs and practices (Huemann, 2010; Huemann et al., 2007) are in need of a major overhaul.

But those are not the only causes for female underrepresentation in these industries. This study confirms that the gender based bias (French et al., 2014; Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Lemons, 2001; Watts, 2009) and masculine culture (Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Lingren & Packendorff, 2006) reinforcing the effect of company politics; closed circles of ‘old boys clubs’ and favouritism (Chugh & Sahgal, 2007; Oakley 2000; Perrewe & Nelson, 2004) magnify those limiting barriers holding women back. In order to affect change, those masculine conceptions of work together with the imbedded institutional and individual mindsets and behaviours (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; McKinsey
& Company, 2013; Oakley, 2000) in the profession need to be confronted and changed. They not only prevent women from realising their full professional potential and reaching equal social and economic status, they also hold Australian project organisations back from developing their full competitiveness and, by default, prevent Australia from becoming a globally competitive and agile economy.

This industry sector is behind many others with the poorest record for the number of women managers. Urgent, concerted and meaningful action is required from the corporate suites before the project management profession and the policy-makers are able to bring high-skilled women into management roles and to fully deploy their potential to drive productivity improvement and sustainable economy. While there is research work done on how to overcome these barriers, there is less information on how this can be achieved within these industries (Crawford, 2013; Watts, 2009). More research is needed on what is working in project organising corporations and what women are doing themselves to address these barriers and develop their careers in project management in these industries (Laud & Johnson, 2012). This study contributes to bridging the gaps in knowledge about women’s career experiences in project-based organisations and how they experience their career progression challenges working in construction and property development industries.
REFERENCES


Ernst & Young. (2011). *Women in Leadership: What Will It Take To Get Australia On Target?* Retrieved from Ernst & Young website:


Table 1: Participants’ roles by industry

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Table 2: Participants’ experience by industry

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<tr>
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- The expectation is that your work life is more important than your private life (Participant 16C).

- I did get a divorce from working too hard (Participant 11C).

The culture of presenteeism was attributed as responsible for the lack of support for women returning from maternity leave. The expectations of full time commitment and full availability prevented many women from returning to their old project roles and forced them to accept demotion into administrative roles and therefore forego a career in project management and potential career advancement. Comments included:

- So when that girl came back she was moved across to a corporate function ... so she got side stepped (Participant 6P).

- They get forced into taking side tracks, either becoming like a client type project manager or moving into estimating or sort of trying to do something else because what you’re trained in just doesn’t work anymore (Participant 9C).

More that eighty per cent (81%) of participants identified a lack of defined career progression paths and support programs leading to progression challenges in project management. They indicated
that the career paths within their organisations seemed ambiguous and confusing, leaving them “feeling lost” (Participant 8C). Further, the participants expressed lack of understanding about the requirements to achieve promotion and advancement in their careers. Comments included:

*I haven’t had anyone help me or say what to do next or anything like that; it’s always been very much driven by myself* (Participant 8C).

*But you know at certain stages you kind of don’t know what you don’t know and you need somebody to provide a little bit of direction or guidance or a road map* (Participant 3P).

*We don’t have transparency in skills and competencies required by different levels for project managers to progress in their career* (Participant 1P).

The participants also questioned the transparency, credibility and fairness of appointment and advancement decisions in project management. For them, promotion practices still seemed to be subject to informal, politicised power plays, favouritism and mateship. Comments included:

*We don’t have transparency in skills and competencies required by different levels for project managers to progress in their career* (Participant 1P).

*They need to have a champion and they need to be given a leg up because it’s not merit...meritocracy does not exist. It is one of the worst used words to disguise favouritism um...a whole...and a lot of the politics* (Participant 6P).

*It depends to a certain extent on how open the employee’s manager or how knowledgeable or how motivated the manager is to assist that person* (Participant 10P).

Three quarters of the participants (75%) identified that within their employment experiences they needed to proactively manage their own careers and be in charge of their own advancement as no support was available at a corporate or industry level. Comments included:

*I’ve had to go seek my own mentors around my progression. I haven’t had anyone help me or say what to do next or anything like that; it’s always been very much driven by myself* (Participant 8C).
I think you’ve got to drive your own objectives and the extent to which the company is receptive and then ... got to start looking elsewhere (Participant 14P).

While the participants confirmed the existence of the linear career paths in project organisations, many believed that the flat organisational structures and types and complexity of projects negatively affected their career progression leading to lack of career scope and advancement opportunities. Comments included:

It’s somewhat reliant on the projects they have at hand and timing as much as anything (Participant 14P).

There just weren’t any roles at that level so that was the problem, they’ll say you can go far, we can see you climbing up the ladder and all that sort of stuff but there was nowhere to climb (Participant 5C).

Further, dual and separate career streams, one for project management and one for general management caused difficulties in moving from project specific work into the executive leadership roles. Through their careers in projects, women built skills and experiences in delivering complex projects but those were not seen as the right skill sets to progress into executive roles. Comments included:

Currently you know it’s from project to project basically but if I want to sort of become...I think taking that to another managerial level I’m really going to have to look at some sort of external study opportunities because I don’t think I’ll actually get that if I just continued on my current path and course (Participant 14P).

I think I need to work on positioning myself for a management role and being seen as a competent manager... I know I can do it it’s just how do you get that opportunity (Participant 4P).

In addition, Gale and Cartwright (1995) argued that masculine management culture reinforced the uniqueness and difference of women compared to men and placed the onus on women to “fit in” and adjust to that culture and the environment of those organisations. While not all the participants
confirmed that, a third of participants (31%) indicated their concern with their own “fit” in their work environment, also expressing their frustration with consequences of lack of “fit”. Comments included:

*I believe that I have missed out on opportunities in large projects because I didn’t fit in. I didn’t fit the, ‘what do you call it?...the stereotype’ (Participant 1P).*

*I also felt like I had to be...a different person at work. I think... I had to fit in especially because I was always the only girl on the team (Participant 8C).*

*We were ready to go as fiery as the guys are on career progression but our signals are different and our signals are misread and in the end you know it’s just exhaustion from signalling and not getting a response (Participant 6P).*

Also a third of participants (31%) reported loss of commercial and promotional opportunities due to gender-based favouritism described by Bazerman (2006) as a tendency to favour members of groups one belongs to and to exclude others and reinforced by the culture of mateship suggested by Sinclair (2005). Comments included:

*They’re more than happy to have a coffee with me but when there is a real opportunity they will go to one of the boys (Participant 1P).*

*I thought I’d demonstrated myself but then I think relationships beat that hands over fists and that’s again where women can struggle because there is a mateship, there is a network (Participant 6P).*

Further, the participants reported similarity-attraction bias (Byrne & Neuman, 1992; Powell, 2012) as a barrier to career promotion caused by preferences for hiring and promoting people ‘similar’ to the senior management. Comments included:

*I think it’s because they like to work with people who are similar to the ... I think it’s easier for them to get along and be mates and it’s part of the buddy, buddy environment (Participant 8C).*
I think they put people into a position of power that emulate themselves so single
males...predominately males with a stay at home wife and children that might socialise with
like go cycling or whatever, that they’re very comfortable around (Participant 16C).
When at the top you’ve got a person that thinks oh you know I need people who can make
decisions around me; decision makers are men. So even though they don’t consciously think
that, they unconsciously go and choose guys because if feels right (Participant 6P).

The bias is also reinforced by power and status (Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Harrison, 1972).
Those who have currency with CEO and backing by senior management get advantage in career
progression. According to the participants, this type of advantage is usually reserved for males
belonging to social networks and caused by exclusion and favouritism in selection and appointment
processes. Comments included:

He had been told by more senior people within the business that a younger male who is
having a meteoric rise through the business, may be due to his family connections to the
business, his dad used to be a CEO of one of the group of companies, was actually going to
be put in as the project manager (Participant 16C).
Off him there were two others platformed off... he’s now at regional level so he’s spring shot
over me a few levels (Participant 6P).
Because you know how can a guy who has never had any development experience go into a
regional role, which requires massive...like we were all teaching him. It would be like
awarding it an assistant development manager; but just because he knows the CEO
(Participant 6P).

Over fifty per cent (56%) of participants confirmed their experiences of being excluded from
the informal social networks referred to as ‘old boys’ clubs’. Comments included:

There’s probably bit of a...um I don’t know if there is a bit of a men’s club sort of mentality
(Participant 3P).
About six or eight of them every second Wednesday went and played golf... that group was selected on who played golf and who they liked to hang out with ... so no I wasn’t invited to that (Participant 16C).

They go ‘it’s a rugby function.’ ‘Yes I know but I’m interested in going.’ My clients get invited and I don’t get invited and I find out that my clients are invited because I look through the list that gets distributed to all the directors and think hang on a second, this is the first time I’ve heard of this and my clients are on the list and I haven’t been invited. ‘Oh sorry, didn’t think you’d be interested in going to the rugby’ (Participant 1P).

**DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

The results of this study provide insight into the barriers that women experience in advancing their careers in project-based organisations within the construction and property development industries. The results confirm other research that perpetuating masculine work practices driven by the demands of environmental uncertainty and commitment to the profession (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; Legault & Chasserio, 2003; 2012; Lingren & Packendorff, 2006) create those constraining barriers to advancement. Women’s absence in the middle and upper ranks of management within those industries are the telling signs that the poor selection, recruitment, promotion (Shenhar & Dvir, 2007) together with limited career support programs and practices (Huemann, 2010; Huemann et al., 2007) are in need of a major overhaul.

But those are not the only causes for female underrepresentation in these industries. This study confirms that the gender based bias (French et al., 2014; Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Lemons, 2001; Watts, 2009) and masculine culture (Gale & Cartwright, 1995; Lingren & Packendorff, 2006) reinforcing the effect of company politics; closed circles of ‘old boys clubs’ and favouritism (Chugh & Sahgal, 2007; Oakley 2000; Perrewe & Nelson, 2004) magnify those limiting barriers holding women back. In order to affect change, those masculine conceptions of work together with the imbedded institutional and individual mindsets and behaviours (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; McKinsey
& Company, 2013; Oakley, 2000) in the profession need to be confronted and changed. They not only prevent women from realising their full professional potential and reaching equal social and economic status, they also hold Australian project organisations back from developing their full competitiveness and, by default, prevent Australia from becoming a globally competitive and agile economy.

This industry sector is behind many others with the poorest record for the number of women managers. Urgent, concerted and meaningful action is required from the corporate suites before the project management profession and the policy-makers are able to bring high-skilled women into management roles and to fully deploy their potential to drive productivity improvement and sustainable economy. While there is research work done on how to overcome these barriers, there is less information on how this can be achieved within these industries (Crawford, 2013; Watts, 2009). More research is needed on what is working in project organising corporations and what women are doing themselves to address these barriers and develop their careers in project management in these industries (Laud & Johnson, 2012). This study contributes to bridging the gaps in knowledge about women’s career experiences in project-based organisations and how they experience their career progression challenges working in construction and property development industries.
REFERENCES


Ernst & Young. (2011). *Women in Leadership: What Will It Take To Get Australia On Target?* Retrieved from Ernst & Young website:


Table 1: Participants’ roles by industry

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Table 2: Participants’ experience by industry

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