FIFO: time for a rethink

A new report from Stratum International has highlighted the need for change at FIFO operations. MM looks at the key points and how small improvements can have big impacts on retention and employee happiness.

The research, based on a survey of 588 senior mining professionals from all over the world, was commissioned by Stratum International, a specialist recruitment firm for senior professionals in the mining sector.

The survey received responses from people working in mining operations, project development and executive roles.

One interesting nuance to emerge was that those working in exploration perceived higher job security than others. This perception is particularly strong at the most senior levels.

Issues such as the impact on relationships with managers and team-mates, or even the corporate centre, cause little concern for most in the survey had some level of concern and 65% described their concern as ‘strong’ or ‘critical’. This rose to 82% for people working in Australia and New Zealand.

“FIFO workers are pretty pragmatic however, they are much more likely to expect business-class seats for flights of eight hours or more,” says Coetzer.

Some 43% of respondents said that they had ‘strong’ or ‘critical’ concerns about the impact of rosters on their personal productivity and levels of fatigue, making it the second-greatest worry for FIFO workers.

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Lessons for leaders

1. Be fair
"Employees expect consistency and integrity from their leaders," says Coetzer. "This doesn't mean you need to capitulate in the face of every demand, but people do expect a level of consistency. Consistency here is about ensuring you are equally fair to all, not simply applying the same rule to everyone. And the perception is that this is not happening."

2. Be flexible
"Leaders who can find a way of introducing flexibility into their roster design, to meet the differing needs and lifestyles of individuals, while ensuring fairness, will see greater loyalty and motivation, and a more diverse workforce too."

3. Be family-friendly
"Employers need to recognise the impact that FIFO rosters can have on family life," explains Coetzer. "The flexibility we describe is part of that. But one big difference that employers can make is to ensure that there are reliable and accessible communications on-site, so employees can easily Skype or email their families. That alone can have a tremendous impact on that feeling of isolation, yet we're hearing it's not as common as it should be."

4. Forecast before you start
"Many of the challenges faced by FIFO workers are predictable and can be 'designed out' of new projects from the start. It's usually cheaper and easier to address these things as an integral part of the planning process and it will pay off in the long run."

5. Focus your spend
"It's not necessarily about more money," says Coetzer. "Rather how you spend it. Our results indicate that those people flying on short-haul flights will accept business-class flights if they’re offered, but they don't consider them essential. Focusing spend on those areas which matter most, such as good communications, will pay real dividends."

6. Fundamental needs
"Forget the stereotypes. FIFO workers have the same emotional needs as the rest of us. They want a job that gives them responsibility and a sense of achievement. And they want a good line manager, too. These things are more important than more direct benefits like stock options."

7. FIFO works
"Despite the reservations of half of our respondents, FIFO working is here to stay. There are alternatives, such as establishing local communities, but these have drawbacks of their own. Good leaders will sit down with their staff and work out a mutually rewarding way of organising rosters and benefits. In that way, FIFO can remain a sustainable way of working, without so many of the drawbacks we’ve seen highlighted in this report," concludes Coetzer.

The Pilbara in Australia has a high number of FIFO operations
Photo: Bloomberg News

� travel in company time rather than in their own time, or a blend of the two. Overall, one in five of those surveyed travel exclusively in their personal time, whereas this reduces to one in ten for those working in exploration.

Coetzer explains: "This seems to be an example of workers highlighting what matters most to them. Exploration professionals don't need the best seats on the plane, but they want to protect their personal time. By examining this kind of trade-off, employers can begin to shape and individualise their employee value propositions."

WORKING FLEXIBLY

In the light of all this, it is perhaps not surprising that there was no consensus on the perfect roster pattern. Indeed, opinion was so divided, that no one proposed roster pattern was perceived positively by more than half of respondents, although a pattern of four weeks on and two weeks off came closest.

However, a few characteristics of good and bad roster patterns did emerge:
- Shifts involving more than eight weeks away from home are not considered acceptable, irrespective of the time subsequently spent at home.
- Rosters based on a ratio of two-to-one (two weeks in work / one week at home) or one-to-one are the most acceptable.
- Different patterns appeal more to different professions; exploration workers prefer a four-to-two roster, whereas those in established mining operations like a five-to-three arrangement.

"Once again, the need for flexibility comes through loud and clear," explains Coetzer. "Of course, we recognise the challenges of co-ordinating rosters for different groups. But our survey shows there are great benefits in doing so, in terms of attracting and crucially retaining the best talent throughout the project."

Coetzer and his co-author, John Larpent, have drawn out seven "lessons