

Mining Magazine



Miners wanted

Mining companies continue to struggle with a high turnover of workers and an inability to attract fresh talent. Nia Kajastie looks at the underlying issues

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There are new challenges on the horizon for the mining industry with the baby boomer generation starting to hit retirement age, mining operations springing up in more remote locations and increased automation affecting the way work is done.

With an increasing number of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers being employed by mining companies, particularly in Australia, the arrangements and conditions surrounding the FIFO model are having a direct influence on turnover rates.

According to the [*Factors linked to the well-being of fly-in-fly-out \(FIFO\) workers*](#) report (Sustainable Minerals Institute & University of Queensland), Western Australia has more than 80 mining operations that use FIFO arrangements, which represent about 50% of the state's mining operations; and in Queensland, it is estimated that FIFO workers account for 40% of the Bowen Basin workforce. This could also be an underestimation, as the report notes that it's hard to obtain exact data on the Australian FIFO workforce.

While the report's findings indicate that the surveyed workers are satisfied with their FIFO work arrangements, 44% still intended to change jobs in the next 12 months, with some of the reasons including wanting better pay, a greater work-life balance and career advancement.

"For those working on remote sites, work-life balance is a key factor," confirms Will Coetzer, managing partner of Stratum International, which provides consultancy, advisory services and executive search for the mining industry.

Referring to Stratum's [FIFO: A Global Perspective](#) report, Coetzer adds: "97% of our respondents told us they were concerned about the impact FIFO working had on their family life.

"Home can feel a long way away and if you're on a roster like 6/2 or especially 8/2 and travelling in your own time, you might only get a week with your family. And with jet lag, the time taken to wind down, and chores and paperwork to catch up on, it might not be a very relaxing week."

Clearly, intelligent roster and shift design and flexible work arrangements are among the factors than can improve the FIFO experience and help workers avoid chronic stress and fatigue.

"Badly designed FIFO rosters, loneliness and isolation, boredom and chronic fatigue all have a massive impact on mental health. This is a critical area that's been taboo for far too long and employers and employees must be more open about the subject," Coetzer emphasises.

"Physical health can also suffer. Diabetes and cardiovascular disease are common issues. So, good, healthy food options, on-site nutritional advice and a well-equipped gym are all good investments."

A majority of the participants (75%) in the Sustainable Minerals Institute research report said their levels of physical and mental health were good or very good; however, 60% agreed that the demands of long-distance commuting work arrangements interfered with their home and family life, while 40% reported feeling lonely or socially isolated.

Coetzer says companies should explore ways to bring families and workers closer together. "This can mean building townships with schools and recreation facilities, but if safety issues preclude that consider nearby locations that can help shorten FIFO rosters."

"Decent communication facilities, so people can feel connected to the rest of the world and talk with their family regularly, are also critical and much easier to arrange these days," he adds.

Talent retention and attraction

The mining industry has been struggling with attracting new and diverse talent, partly due to its cyclical nature, as well as a general perception of mining as a destructive activity. "There's a real PR and employer branding challenge," notes Coetzer.

"Few people recognise that mining has become a technology-driven and innovative sector. We collectively need to be shouting more about this, as well as the environmental and safety initiatives miners are investing in, showing it's a modern, responsive industry."

Christopher Hume and Amanda Cotton, of global mining recruitment company AER International, concur: "Mining is starting to embrace technology changes; this is where the millennials can add real strength to the business by helping drive forward change that the baby boomer generation may not have embraced in recent years."

With new technologies, from automation to AI, taking root in the mining industry, some work roles will change completely. "The mining sector has argued that automation doesn't mean fewer jobs, just different roles," Coetzer remarks.

"Technology will reduce the need for labour but push recruitment up the value chain. Mining companies will need uniquely skilled employees who can do more with less. They will have to pay to find those skills and they will, quite rightly, expect returns on their investments."

AER says it has yet to experience difficulties in sourcing candidates for roles, because the downturn in the industry and the following slow recovery meant that many highly skilled unemployed candidates are still looking to return to work.

Nevertheless, as baby boomer men, who have dominated mining for the last few decades, are reaching retirement age, and with the industry's failure to attract graduates and new talent, a skills shortage could be imminent.

"At Stratum we are mandated to place someone in a site-based critical leadership role at least twice a month," Coetzer says. "Even in this market, it's always tough to find top tier general managers. They are business managers often responsible for hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue per year. It's therefore not farfetched to value them as, effectively, in-country CEOs.

"We believe this skill is highly underestimated in its importance in the overall success of a mining company. It's the same for direct reports to a GM. These are all critical skill roles – technical leadership is so critical and it's always difficult to build a good short list of tier 1 candidates."

Scholarships, internships and other career programmes are great ways to reach out to new talent, as long as it's done the right way.

"Programmes that expose new recruits to multiple sites and operations not only overcome the fear of staring at the same patch of dirt for months on end, they also emphasise the opportunity for travel and adventure and prepare people for future leadership roles.

"Our [Demographic Time Bomb](#) research found that succession strategies, coaching or mentoring, career pathways into leadership roles and leadership development skills are all considered important initiatives for addressing the lack of talent coming into leadership roles. 95% of respondents said succession strategies were important for the long-term success of their organisation, yet only 82% of organisations have them in place."

According to Hume and Cotton, mining companies need to think differently about what will attract complementary skills from other industries such as oil and gas, which would help fill the demographic gap.

Gender imbalance

There's also a widely recognised gender gap within the mining industry, which miners are trying to address in different ways. BHP, for example, has set itself the ambitious goal of making 50% of its workforce female by 2025, after figuring out that its more diverse sites were more productive and safe.

AER's June quarter market report ([Mind the Gap – Gender Imbalance in Mining](#)) states:

"Historically, the industry as a whole, has been male dominated. This fact is probably derived from the historic need for strength in a time before large-scale machinery and automation. As the industry has changed and progressed over many years, the workforce gender has remained predominately male, however.

"Women are present in the workforce, but any progress to increase numbers has been very slow going. Previously, there has been a lack of any specific focus or push in place to tackle this subject."

AER is now aiming to target more female candidates through networking sites such as LinkedIn, attracting more female candidates through operating a referral scheme, and working more collaboratively with groups such as the UK-based Women in Mining.

A survey that AER conducted with women registered on its database showed that female candidates didn't have more of a location bias than their male candidates. "If the company is attractive and the offer on the table competitive, difficult location issues can be overcome for the right female candidate," the report notes.

While starting a family continues to be the main reason for women taking a break from the industry, AER's report says its "data confirms female counterparts in the workplace remain in their roles longer than males; therefore, if the right maternity packages and return to work programme are in place, there is every chance a female may be able to return to a site-based role if the geographical location and rotation/FIFO/residential terms allow".

Like in most industries, flexible work arrangements and benefits packages can be very attractive to women. When it comes to site-based work, facilities for families add stability for the workers and thus enhance work satisfaction levels.

Currently, remote site working and FIFO arrangements often only really work for people at certain stages in their lives.

"There are some great opportunities for adventure and learning, and for some these are best taken early, when they are young, free and single. Empty-nesters and single people can also thrive in this kind of environment. When people want a more balanced family life, they may have to look at roles closer to home, or find a forward-thinking employer who is willing and able to invest in sites facilities and infrastructure that allows them to be with their families," says Coetzer.

Stratum's Jane Banks comments: "The solution to making the industry attractive to women is pretty much the same as for anyone else: get the message to schools and colleges, demonstrate the salaries and careers people can achieve in mining, and provide some inspiring role models and mentors.

"Making the industry accessible for women is a little different. For all the progress we've made since the 70s, women are still more restricted – or perceived to be more restricted – by family or caring commitments. So, initiatives such as progressive maternity leave, day care and flexible hours are important and will benefit men and women alike.

"Overcoming historical discrimination, both subtle and overt, is another problem. Company-wide diversity training will help as will assertiveness training for women with the skills but not the confidence to thrive."

Even with the best site facilities available, if employees don't feel welcome or appreciated, which can be due to a lack of clear vision, culture or leadership, mining companies will struggle to retain people.

"Things like a well-designed roster and shift patterns will have a greater impact than others, but it's the combination of benefits that will have the greatest impact," Coetzer adds. Once the basics are in place, investing in a healthy company culture can offer mining companies the greatest return on investment.