

Ups and downs of FIFO

A new survey of fly-in-fly-out mine workers says FIFO is sustainable, if the right balances can be struck

The mining 'FIFO' boom and its side-effects have been relentlessly studied over the past 10 years, so far without producing much clarity about solutions to problems such as social dislocation, unsustainable wage inflation and, for employers, high workforce turnover.

With the building phase of the latest mining investment boom receding in different parts of the world, there will be fewer luminous vests and steel-capped boots in airport lounges, but increased production levels in key mining regions will ensure fly-in-fly-out workers remain a feature of the industry into the future.

London-based mining recruiting firm Stratum International's survey of nearly 600 industry people across the globe, results of which have just been released, highlights general acceptance among respondents of the prevailing fly-in-fly-out culture with its high rewards but often punishing schedules. But it also points to the fact "half of all the people we surveyed believe FIFO systems need a major rethink if they are to be sustainable".

Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) (37% of respondents), North America (20%), Europe (14%) and southern Africa (10%) were home for most of those surveyed, with FIFO jobs mainly in Africa (29%), ANZ (22%), South and Central America (12%), Asia Pacific (11%) and North America (9%).

"Market forces are sometimes majestic and mystifying to observe, and, in the case of fly-in-fly-out rosters, [FIFO] has created an almost insatiable topic of debate," Stratum observed in the introduction to its survey report. "Is there an ideal scenario where employers achieve their objectives safely, while ensuring competitive and sustainable employment conditions in a truly global market for talent?"

So far the evidence suggests many miners and contractors have ticked these boxes, though Stratum's survey feedback indicates 'sustainable' remains to be proven for those actually carting their work gear on long-distance commutes. For mining companies, too, the high cost of workforce turnover, frequent loss of job and corporate memory, and, during boom times, rapidly escalating wage bills, can hardly be described as sustainable.

Stratum's report shows the right FIFO roster is as important as salary for industry professionals considering a position. One mining client recently asked their senior FIFO workers to accept a 15% salary reduction, and this was generally accepted as a necessity.

But a suggestion to change their roster



from six-weeks-on/three-off to six-on/two-off received far greater resistance. This showed again that people are more prepared to accept a lower salary than less time with their families.

With the boom years in mining creating a bigger draw on available talent, combined with pressures from an ageing workforce, there are still "unique opportunities for top-tier professions especially".

"These opportunities, of course, drive the market, and a good FIFO roster is becoming increasingly important as a deal maker or breaker," Stratum says.

In terms of the FIFO workers themselves, those who adapt best to rosters, travel and the job at hand do not necessarily become more valuable commodities, but they are likely to become rarer.

"The industry is heavily dependant on the availability of the best professionals and that global talent pool is shrinking," Stratum suggests.

The latest research does not necessarily point to any longer-term trends, but Stratum believes large 'Western' miners operating long-life mines in remote international locations are recognising that they need to invest more in education and training for the local communities in which they operate.

Ghana was a good example of a country with a well-established industry where money had been invested in education to a point where international miners could source the skills they needed locally and therefore dramatically reduce the need to have expatriate FIFO workers in senior roles.

Localised succession planning would decrease reliance on international FIFO workers, but in the case of most developing countries where miners operate the timescales for this becoming a reality could be more than 10 years.

Stratum also sees technology – communications, smart phones and the internet – making longer stints more palatable to some extent, but it will not change the human fundamentals of people requiring a solid home life to be long-term assets.

"We've found the industry has proven that rosters like 4/2, 5/3, 6/3 work very well in the more challenging locations, depending on logistics of course. So not much will change in that regard," the firm says.

"Any shift involving more than eight weeks away from home is perceived negatively by the majority. The 12/2 roster is, by some margin, most negatively received by the sample, with three-quarters (75%) describing it as unsustainable.

"We would, however, recommend greater flexibility in the FIFO rosters available as it is clear different patterns fit different people. While potentially difficult to implement, such flexibility is likely to be attractive to top talent, will improve diversity and is likely to reduce employee burnout. As such the long-term benefits are likely to outweigh the short-term pain of implementation.

"Employers may begin to consider comfort factors such as offering travelling in company time, better communications and flight connections, etc.

"A common theme was the need to improve communications in remote operations. Infrastructure to give FIFO workers access to reliable communication networks such as Skype would have such a clear positive benefit to emotional wellbeing and consequently employee performance.

"We believe robust personal communications infrastructures should be considered a high investment priority for employers."

Ultimately the mine only worked when people were there to run it. On that score Stratum believes another contributor to better FIFO outcomes is going to be more mentoring and training.

When superintendents – or future leaders – are identified, trained and then mentored, companies might find that not only loyalty improves, but management's time away from site is less disruptive.

"This is indicated in our research, which rates good management/leadership as an important factor when considering a role," Stratum says. – *Staff reporter*