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Exploring the link between early constructor involvement in project decision-making and the efficacy of health and safety risk control

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The position of the constructor in communication networks, including those before the commencement of construction, is likely related to the quality of work health and safety (WHS) outcomes realized. In order to examine the extent of this relationship, 23 cases were drawn from 10 participating construction projects in Australia and New Zealand. Social network analysis was used to mathematically and graphically model information exchanges in 13 of these cases. For each case, the quality of WHS risk control outcomes was measured. This measurement was based on an established 'hierarchy of control' in which risk controls are classified in descending order of effectiveness from the elimination of a hazard (the most effective) to the reliance on personal protective equipment (the least effective). Social network metrics were calculated reflecting: (1) the ratio of actual links among parties in the project network relative to the maximum number of links possible (network density); and (2) the extent to which the constructor communicated with other parties in pre-project planning and design stages (the constructors' degree centrality). Network metrics were compared for cases in which the risk control scores were higher and lower than average. The results showed a significant difference in constructors' pre-construction degree centrality for cases with high and low risk control scores. The results provide preliminary evidence as to the potential WHS benefits of ensuring that constructors' knowledge about construction methods, materials, WHS risks and means of risk control, are integrated into pre-construction decision-making.

Keywords: Construction planning and design, constructor involvement, health and safety, risk control.

Introduction

Work health and safety in the construction industry

The construction industry performs poorly in work health and safety (WHS) relative to other industries. In Australia between 2008–09 and 2010–11, 123 construction workers died from work-related injuries. The construction industry fatality rate is 4.26 fatalities per 100 000 workers, nearly twice the national rate of 2.23 (Safe Work Australia, 2012a). Further, in the same period, construction accounted for a disproportionate number of serious workers' compensation claims. Despite employing 9% of the Australian workforce, construction accounted for 11% of serious workers' compensation claims. On average, 39 claims were made each day by construction industry employees who required one or more weeks off work because of work-related injury or disease. As with fatalities, the rate of serious claims is considerably higher among construction industry employees than the national average (19.9 compared to 13.0 per 1000 workers).

Theoretical models developed to explain the occurrence of accidents, injuries and fatalities in the construction industry reflect the fact that accidents can often be traced back to decisions made before construction work commenced (i.e. during project planning and design stages). For example, Suraji *et al.* (2001) describe the complex interaction of factors that contribute to the occurrence of construction site accidents.

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They propose a constraint-response accident causation model. The model holds that the parties involved in each stage of the construction project life cycle (conception, design, and construction) experience constraints on their decision-making. Their responses to these constraints, in turn, constrain the actions of participants in the subsequent stages. Ultimately, unless carefully managed, the cumulative effect of constraints and responses will be experienced as hazardous site conditions, inappropriate work practices, or unsafe actions at the construction site. Thus, accident causes can be traced back from the immediate site level conditions, actions and practices, to the planning and control activities of site supervisors and managers, to subcontractors' constraints and responses, to principal contractors' constraints and responses, and to the constraints and responses experienced by designers and clients in the design and project conception stages (Suraji *et al.*, 2001).

Similarly, a research team based at Loughborough University developed a holistic model of accident causation by carefully investigating the causes of 100 construction accidents (Haslam *et al.*, 2005). The research team obtained information from people involved in accidents, including the victims and their supervisors, to describe the processes of accident causation in construction. Based on their analysis, they developed a construction accident causality (ConAC) model. The ConAC model identifies originating influences affecting accidents in construction as including.

- client requirements;
- features of the economic climate;
- prevailing level of construction education;
- design of the permanent works;
- project management issues;
- construction processes; and
- the prevailing safety culture and risk management approach. (HSE, 2003).

Haslam *et al.* (2005) comment that in almost 50% of the cases included in the analysis, a change to the permanent works design could have reduced the level of risk that preceded an accident.

Early research investigating safety in design in the construction industry sought to establish an empirical link between design activity and WHS outcomes, specifically the occurrence of accidents, injuries or fatalities. This research largely involved retrospectively analysing the causes of accidents to assess whether design was a cause. Retrospective analyses contribute to building the case for safety in design. However, they have limitations. It may not be warranted to conclude that there are direct links between design decisions and a workplace accident. A researcher may attribute a direct link even though the relationship is tenuous, an outcome that Lundberg *et al.* (2009) termed 'what-you-look-for-is-what-you-find'. Retrospective analysis alone cannot illuminate the relationship between implementing safety in design and achieving improved WHS outcomes.

The objective strength of the link between design and WHS performance is still unclear, and remains a subject of debate. Researchers have been justifiably cautious about quantifying the potential for safety in design to produce improved WHS outcomes in construction. For example, Gibb *et al.* (2004) chose their words carefully when stating that design modifications had the potential to reduce the risk of almost half of the construction accidents they analysed, but might not necessarily have prevented those accidents from occurring. Further, in focusing on outcomes (that is, accidents), retrospective analyses tell us little about current safety in design initiatives and tools, or their potential impact on future WHS performance in the construction industry.

Research in 'live' projects is helpful for better understanding the relationship between WHS management activities that take place during a construction project's pre-construction stage and actual WHS performance.

Aim

The aim was to explore the relationship between the flow of communication among project participants in a construction project and the quality of WHS risk controls realized during the ensuing construction stage of the project. This included communication flow prior to the commencement of construction, i.e. in the planning and design stages of a project's life cycle. In particular:

- the quality of controls used to mitigate construction WHS hazards/risks was measured;
- the involvement of the construction contractor in project communication networks was quantified; and
- the relationship between the construction contractor's prominence in the project communication network and the quality of WHS risk control outcomes was assessed.

The Australian policy context for safety in design

The construction industry has been identified as an industry requiring priority action in the *Australian Work Health and Safety Strategy 2012–2022* (Safe Work Australia, 2012b). This Strategy establishes ambitious targets over a 10-year period. These targets include:

(1) a reduction of at least 20% in the number of worker fatalities due to injury; (2) a reduction of at least 30% in the incidence rate of claims resulting in one or more weeks off work; and (3) a reduction of at least 30% in the incidence rate of claims for musculoskeletal disorders resulting in one or more weeks off work.

Promoting safety in design is a key action area in the *Australian Work Health and Safety Strategy 2012–2022*. Strategic outcomes to achieve by 2022 are:

- structures, plant and substances are designed to eliminate or minimize hazards and risks before they are introduced into the workplace; and
- work, work processes and systems of work are designed and managed to eliminate or minimize hazards and risks (Safe Work Australia, 2012b).

It is argued that designers are better positioned to make decisions that eliminate hazards before work commences at a construction site. Adopting this perspective has led to WHS legislation in all Australian states and territories which now specifies WHS duties for designers of buildings and structures. This means that responsibility for some aspects of WHS has been pushed up the supply chain and now rests with professional contributors in the planning and design stages. Behm (2005, p. 608) notes:

> While the constructor will always bear the responsibility for construction site safety, utilization of the [safety in design] concept allows design professionals to participate in enhancing site safety.

Structural challenges to integration of WHS

Notwithstanding the growing emphasis on integrating WHS considerations into project decision-making in the planning and design stages of projects, the extent to which WHS has actually been improved by these policy initiatives remains unclear. One challenge lies in the degree to which there is vertical segregation between participants engaged in the initiation, design, production, use and maintenance of facilities (Atkinson and Westall, 2010). In particular, the traditional separation between the design and construction function can impede the development of shared project goals (Baiden and Price, 2011) and can negatively impact on project outcomes (Love *et al.*, 1998). A recent review of WHS in the UK construction industry identifies separation and poor communication between the design and construction functions as a causal factor in construction fatalities (Donaghy, 2009).

The organizational and contractual separation of the design and construction functions reduces the possibility of free flowing communication between constructors and designers (see Atkinson and Westall, 2010). This is a problem because communication is critical to the effective performance of construction project teams.

There is emerging research evidence that design professionals are not sufficiently well versed in knowledge of construction methods and/or WHS to fulfil their responsibilities for safety in design (Yates and Battersby, 2003). Even in the UK, where the Construction Design and Management Regulations have been in place for some 18 years, Brace *et al.* (2009) report that 'many designers still think that safety is "nothing to do with me," although there are a small cohort who want to engage and are having difficulty doing this because they do not fully understand what good practice looks like' (p. 12). Consequently, Donaghy (2009) recommended that accrediting bodies establish specific requirements to embed WHS in the education of all professionals engaged in the delivery of construction projects, particularly those with 'upstream' roles.

It is frequently stated that collaborative or integrated forms of project delivery improve buildability and, by implication, have the potential to also improve WHS (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000; Kent and Becerik-Gerber, 2010). However, Ankrah *et al.* (2009) comment that the procurement method cannot, of itself, create a positive cultural orientation towards WHS. Similarly, Atkinson and Westall (2010) point out that the adoption of an integrated project delivery approach does not guarantee positive safety outcomes.

Integrated project delivery mechanisms create favourable conditions for the integration of WHS into construction project planning and design activities, but actual WHS improvements are likely to occur as a direct result of the increased communication and information exchange among project participants. Little research has investigated the link between communication networks in construction projects and WHS performance. The present research sought to address this knowledge gap.

Social network analysis

Social network analysis was utilized to explore and understand communication in construction project networks. Social network analysis is an analytical tool to study the exchange of resources among actors in a network. Wasserman and Faust (1997, p. 17) define network actors as 'discrete individual, corporate or collective social units'. Using social network analysis, patterns of social relations among actors can be represented in the form of visual models (known as sociograms) and described in terms of quantifiable indicators of network attributes. In a sociogram, actors are represented as nodes. To varying extents, these nodes are connected by links which represent the relationships between actors in the network. Social network analysis is particularly useful in the analysis of relationships, information exchanges and communication patterns among organizations. This is important because previous research has highlighted the way in which inter-organizational relations and social context influence organizational behaviour in the construction industry (see, for example, Harty, 2008; Schweber and Harty, 2010).

Social network analysis has been recommended as a useful method for understanding and quantifying the roles and relationships of actors in construction project coalitions (Pryke, 2004; Chinowsky *et al.*, 2008). The technique has been used to analyse knowledge flows among construction project participants (see, for example, Ruan *et al.*, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Network characteristics have also been used to explain failures in team-based design tasks (Chinowsky *et al.*, 2008) and identify barriers to collaboration that arise as a result of functional or geographic segregation in construction organizations (Chinowsky *et al.*, 2010). More recently, Alsamadani *et al.* (2013) used social network analysis to investigate the relationship between safety communication patterns and WHS performance in construction work crews.

Methods

Case study design

The research adopted a comparative case study design. A case study approach was favoured for the rich data that it produces (Eisenhardt, 1989; Orum *et al.*, 1991; Yin, 1994; Fellows and Liu, 1997). Data were collected from 10 construction projects in Australia/New Zealand. In each project 'features of work' (i.e. specific building elements) were purposefully identified by project participants in consultation with the research team (see also Table 1). These features of work constituted discrete cases in the analysis. A feature of work was selected if: (1) all participants involved in the design, manufacture, and construction/installation of the feature of work were available and willing to be interviewed; and (2) the feature presented a particular WHS challenge for construction. These criteria were established to provide completeness of data and to ensure that project participants would directly consider the WHS hazards/risks associated with the construction of the feature and make explicit decisions about how WHS hazards/risks would be controlled in each case. Multiple features of work (i.e. cases) were selected from a number of construction projects involved in the research. The total number of cases in the analysis was 23. The number of cases from each construction project ranged between one and four and the mean number was 2.3. Owing to the intensity of data collection and the availability of project personnel, of these 23 cases, complete social network data could only be collected for 13 cases.

Data collection

Data were collected by conducting interviews with project participants involved in the planning, design and construction of the selected features of work. In total 185 interviews were conducted. The average number of interviews per case was 8.04.

Initially interviews were conducted with key project participants, i.e. the client, the principal design consultant and the construction contractors were interviewed. From these interviews, other actors in the network were identified. These 'leads' were followed up if certain criteria were met. These criteria mirror those used by Pryke (2005), namely that (1) the individual was an employee of one of the project actor firms comprising the project coalition and was actively engaged in the project at the time that the data were gathered; and (2) the link between the individual and at least one other actor in the network was significant in terms of frequency and perceived importance of input by other actors. This process of sampling continued until no new leads were identified in actors' interviews. Data were verified by confirming the existence of each network link with both actors. Thus, at least two actors had to confirm that a link between them existed for it to be included in the social network analysis.

All participants were asked to rate the frequency of their communication during pre-construction project decision-making with each other actor. For each identified actor in the network participants were asked two questions. These were: 'How frequently did you give information to this person when [a particular decision] was being made?' and 'How frequently did you receive information from this person when [a particular decision] was being made?' Participants responded to these questions using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (occasionally) to 5 (daily).

Independent variables

Two independent variables were measured, i.e. network density and the degree centrality of the constructor. Network density expresses the ratio of actual links or relationships in a network to the maximum possible number of links the network could have (Borgatti and Everett, 2006). Thus, as proportionally more actors are connected to each other, the density value increases. Degree centrality refers to the extent to

Table 1 Summary of cases and HOC scores

Project	Case/Feature of work	Mean HOC
Centrifuge replacement for sewerage treatment facility	Installation of centrifuge	4.08
	Pipe works	3.73
	Installation of a steel platform	2.44
Theatre demolition	Demolition	3.08
Public space landscaping	Landscaping	3.05
42-storey residential complex	Construction/installation of façade	4.25
	Construction of internal stair egress	3.33
Manufacturing facility	Roof and wall cladding	2.60
	Erection/installation of roof structure	4.50
	Erection/installation of steel columns	4.20
	Construction of foundation system	4.50
Food processing plant reconstruction	Steel columns	3.56
	Sewerage disposal system	3.61
	Fire wall	2.63
Cemetery mausoleum	Construction of basement mausoleum	4.19
Suburban train station	Construction of reinforced concrete columns	4.63
	Construction of ramp access	3.50
	Construction of platform and supporting columns	4.31
Water pumping station upgrade	Construction of wet well	3.50
	Construction of valve chamber	4.00
Flood recovery works	Construction of a retaining wall	2.73
	Construction of a retaining wall	4.25
	Rectification of a pedestrian bridge	4.25

which an actor (a node in the network) is connected to other actors (or nodes). Thus, for each actor, the degree centrality is the ratio of the number of relationships the actor has relative to the maximum possible number of relationships that the actor could have. This measure of centrality provides a measure of an actor's communication activity within the network such that if an actor possesses high degree centrality then this indicates that they are highly involved in communication within the network relative to other actors. Pryke (2005) argues that compared to other measures of centrality (e.g. betweenness and closeness), degree centrality is a useful indicator of an actor's power within the network.

Degree centrality can be measured by combining the number of lines of communication into and out of a node in the network (see, for example, Alsamadani *et al.*, 2013). The former is referred to as in-degree centrality while the latter is referred to as out-degree centrality. However, in this research we chose to measure the constructors' *outgoing* communication only. This was a deliberate choice because the aim was to measure the extent to which construction process knowledge is considered and used in pre-construction (planning and design) decision-making and the implications that this has for the quality of WHS risk control. The construction contractors' out-degree centrality was therefore used as a proxy measure of the extent to which construction process knowledge was available to pre-construction stage decision-makers.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable of interest was the quality of risk control solutions implemented during the construction stage of the project. For each feature of work (i.e. case) in the sample, WHS risks were identified. A common categorization scheme was developed based on the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Occupational Injury & Illness Classification System (OIICS) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). WHS risks relevant to each case were identified and categorized using this classification system (e.g. fall, slip, trip; struck by object or equipment, etc.).

Once WHS risks had been classified for each case, the methods by which each risk was actually controlled were identified. This information was elicited during the interviews and supplemented with site-based observations and examination of project documentation (e.g. plans and drawings). Thus, an attempt was made to verify the information provided during the interviews with onsite observation.

Methods of WHS risk control were classified according to their type. This classification was based on the hierarchy of control (HOC). The HOC is a well-established framework in WHS (see, for example, Manuele, 2006). The HOC classifies ways of dealing with WHS hazards/risks according to the level of effectiveness of the control. At the top of the HOC is the elimination of a hazard/risk altogether. This is the most effective form of control because the physical removal of the hazard/risk from the work environment means that workers are not exposed to it. The second level of control is substitution. This involves replacing something that produces a hazard with something less hazardous. At the third level in the HOC are engineering controls, which isolate people from hazards. The top three levels of control (i.e. elimination, substitution and engineering) are technological because they act on changing the physical work environment. Beneath the technological controls, level four controls are administrative in nature, such as developing safe work procedures or implementing a job rotation scheme to limit exposure. At the bottom of the hierarchy at level five is personal protective equipment (PPE): the lowest form of control. Although much emphasized and visible on a worksite, at best, PPE should be seen as a 'last resort', see, for example Lombardi *et al.*'s analysis of barriers to the use of eye protection (Lombardi *et al.*, 2009). The bottom two levels in the HOC represent behavioural controls that seek to change the way people work (for a summary of the limitations of these controls see Hopkins, 2006).

To ensure consistent classification of the WHS risk control measures, a detailed coding framework was developed. This coding framework identified the options available for controlling various WHS risks and provided the HOC score that should be given for each risk control option. The coding framework was used by two researchers who independently coded the data.

An average HOC score was generated for each feature of work, reflecting the quality of risk control solutions implemented for identified WHS hazards/risks. Each level of the HOC was given a rating ranging from 1 (personal protective equipment) to 5 (elimination). The risk controls implemented for hazards/risks presented by each feature of work were assigned a score on this five-point scale. In the event that no risk controls were implemented, a value of zero was assigned. Using these values the mean HOC score for each feature of work was generated. Thus, if two hazards were identified, one was eliminated and the other controlled by administrative methods, the mean score would be 3.5.

Inter-rater reliability

To ensure that the coding of WHS risk control measures was consistent an inter-rater reliability assessment was performed. A list of WHS hazards and risk controls was sent to an international construction WHS research group based in the United States. The US research group rated the Australian case data using the HOC classification method. The US raters' HOC classification was consistent with the Australian research team classifications in 12 of 14 Australian cases included in the reliability check (85.7%). This suggests an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability.

Data analysis

Data were initially entered into a social network analysis software application. Sociograms were developed for each case (feature of work). Network density was calculated for each feature of work at the pre-construction phase as well as for the overall case (by calculating the ratio of existing information ties to the maximum number of possible ties in the network). Next the constructor's out-degree centrality in each network was calculated by summing the information tie values linking the constructor to other stakeholders in a network. To facilitate the comparison between different features of work, the constructor's degree-centrality value in each network was normalized by dividing it into the maximum possible tie value in that network. The constructor's normalized degree centrality was calculated for each feature of work at the pre-construction (i.e. planning and design) stage of the project, as well as for the overall case.

The 13 cases for which social network data were available were divided into three groups:

(1) cases for which the HOC score was lower than one standard deviation below the mean;
(2) cases for which the HOC score was higher than one standard deviation above the mean; and
(3) cases for which the HOC score was between one standard deviation below the mean and one standard deviation above the mean.

Three cases fell into the higher than average HOC group and three fell into the lower than average HOC group. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the density and centrality values for cases in which the HOC score was above average and those for which it was below average.

The Student's *t*-test has been demonstrated to be feasible for use in very small samples, particularly in situations in which group sizes and variances are equal (Winter, 2013). Levene's test for equality of variance revealed that the variance in the dependent variables (i.e. network density and centrality) could be assumed to be equivalent in high and low HOC groups, i.e. the p value was greater than 0.05.

Winter (2013) performed a simulation study testing the performance of the *t*-test in very small samples. For a two-sample *t*-test (using two samples of three cases) acceptable power (i.e. 1 – beta > 80%) was reached when effect sizes were equal to or greater than four (D = >4). In both our examples of centrality and density, the effect size was greater than this threshold value for statistical power.

Results

Quality of risk control

The quality of WHS risk control solutions implemented was rated for all 23 cases in the analysis. The results of these ratings are presented in Table 1.

The mean HOC score for all 23 cases was 3.69 (SD = 0.67). The maximum HOC score was 4.63 and the minimum was 2.44.

These scores did not differ greatly from the 13 cases for which social network analysis data were available. The mean HOC score for the cases for which social network analysis data were collected was 3.84 (SD = 0.65). The maximum HOC score for cases for which social network data were collected was 4.63 and the minimum was 2.30.

Project network metrics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the 13 cases for which complete social network data were available.

The extent of the construction contractors' out-degree centrality varied considerably between cases. The average score was 11.33 (SD = 7.10). The frequency with which the construction contractor engaged in outward communication with other parties in the project network varied considerably. The average out-degree centrality score was 11.33 (SD = 7.10) in pre-construction project stages and 13.09 (SD = 6.62) for the entire project period. The average network density values were 0.27 (SD = 0.18) in pre-construction stages, and 0.61 (SD = 0.28) for the entire project period.

Relationship between project network characteristics and risk control outcomes

Table 3 shows the results of the comparison of mean social network values between cases with the highest and lowest HOC scores.

Network density was higher in cases with more positive HOC outcomes. This was the case for overall project network density and network density measured only in the pre-construction (i.e. planning and design) stage of the project. However, the independent samples *t*-tests revealed that the difference in network density among cases with high compared to low HOC values was not statistically significant.

Constructors' out-degree centrality was higher in cases with more positive HOC outcomes. This was the case for the constructor's degree centrality measured across the project as a whole, as well as the constructor's degree centrality relating to only the pre-construction (i.e. planning and design) stage. In both cases, the independent samples *t*-tests revealed these differences to be statistically significant.

Example cases

The statistical comparisons provide some indication of the relationship between characteristics of the social network and the quality of risk control solutions implemented. However, this statistical analysis does not explain how or why a constructor's position or level of activity within a communication network shaped HOC outcomes. Two cases representing different social network configurations are described below, with reference to the sociograms produced for each case. These cases provide further insight into the way in which the constructors' outgoing communication (particularly during the pre-construction stages) contributed to WHS risk control outcomes during construction.

Case example 1: high rise building façade system

Figure 1 shows the sociogram relating to the planning and design of a self-supporting, architectural façade to be connected to the exterior of a 42-storey building.

Twelve key project participants were identified for this case. The project used a design and construct delivery method in which the preliminary building design was completed by the client's architects and specialist consultants. The tender documents indicated the façade was to be constructed of a lightweight frame structure made of glass reinforced concrete (GRC) with larger vertical sections made of precast reinforced concrete. During the tender process, the contractor raised concerns about the structural adequacy of the GRC frame for a building of this height.

Following the engagement of the design and construction contractor, structural and constructability reviews were conducted to investigate design options and material. A decision was made to use rolled steel sections instead of GRC elements. Consequently, the façade members and connections were redesigned. Using much lighter steel elements reduced material

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for social network characteristics (N = 13 cases)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Pre-construction normalized degree centrality	13	1.76	24.81	11.33	7.10
Overall normalized degree centrality	13	3.33	23.33	13.09	6.62
Pre-construction network density	13	0.074	0.63	0.27	0.18
Overall network density (whole project)	13	0.119	0.61	0.28	0.15

Table 3 Comparison of cases with lower versus higher than average HOC scores

Variable	HOC grouping	Mean	T value	Degrees of freedom	Significance (p)
Project network density (pre-construction stage)	High HOC	0.268	–1.231	3.206	NS
	Low HOC	0.149			
Constructor's normalized degree centrality (pre-construction stage)	High HOC	14.193	–3.636	2.071	0.022
	Low HOC	5.377			
Project network density (whole project)	High HOC	0.168	–1.535	3.085	NS
	Low HOC	0.286			
Constructor's normalized degree centrality (whole project)	High HOC	16.080	–3.148	3.886	0.035
	Low HOC	9.103			

Note: Cases with high HOC scores are those for which HOC > mean +1 standard deviation, cases with low average HOC scores are those for which HOC < mean –1 standard deviation.

handling and exposure to ergonomic hazards. It also eliminated the risk of the façade structure collapsing during or after construction.

The constructor proposed offsite manufacture of the façade. In this way, the construction process would be quicker, and eliminating the need to store materials

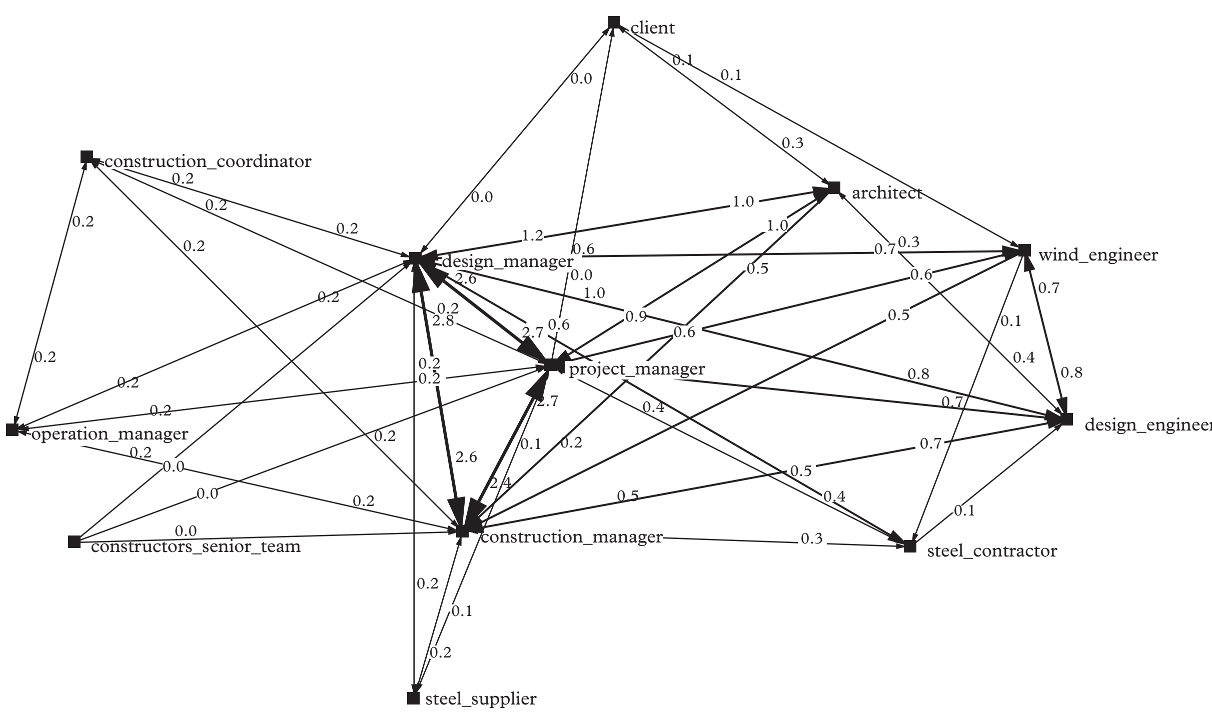

Figure 1 Example communication network for a building façade element
Note: Numbers denote the frequency of outgoing communication between project participants before the commencement of construction work (1 = occasionally, 5 = daily).

reduced congestion on the small inner-city construction site. The offsite manufacture of the façade reduced exposure to the risk of contact with objects and equipment and reduced the risk of falls, slips, and trips.

In the original planned sequence of work, the façade frame was to be fitted once the building structure was completed. However, the constructor suggested an alternative sequence in which façade elements were to be fitted floor by floor as the building was being vertically constructed. This eliminated the need to work from swing stages or other mechanical equipment on the outside of the building. Workers were able to install and connect the framing beams from the safety of a finished floor level.

The sociogram shows a high level of connectivity with a lot of direct information ties among the actors. This indicates a fast and easy information exchange pattern in the network. The social network data also reveal a medium normalized degree centrality for the constructor. However, the sociogram reveals high frequency of information exchange among the construction manager, the design manager and the project manager. These actors arguably had the most important decision-making roles in the redesign of the façade and development of the construction/installation sequence. The network shows that these three actors form a triangle characterized with particularly strong ties (indicated by the thickness of the connecting lines) in the core of the network. This suggests that a high level of design and construction information exchange occurred among these actors at the pre-construction stage. The network also reveals some important connections between the three core actors and subcontractors/suppliers, suggesting the involvement of the subcontractors in decisions concerning the design of the façade.

Case 2: bridge column construction

Figure 2 shows the sociogram relating to the planning and design of supporting columns for a pedestrian bridge spanning the railway lines at a new suburban train station. Eight prominent project participants were identified for this case. The original concept plan for the station involved the construction of a new 'island' platform, built between two existing and fully functioning rail lines. The footbridge would provide access to the platform from either side of the tracks.

The project used a design and construct delivery method in which the preliminary bridge design was carried out by an engineering consultant engaged directly by the client. This design comprised a walkway which was to be supported by reinforced walls at each end and three columns in between. As part of the tender submission the design and construction contractor proposed that the number of columns be reduced to two. Eliminating one of the piers would mean that the constructor would be able to reduce the amount of construction work in the railway corridor (a designated area either side of the tracks). Reducing the amount of work within the railway corridor significantly reduced risks associated with train movements and overhead power supply lines. It also increased the separation between construction activities and rail tracks providing more space for crane movement and lifting operations.

The constructor also decided to construct the columns in situ, in three sections using a modular design approach. The first section of the column would be built using standard construction methods, whereby formwork and steel reinforcement bars would be installed, the structure propped and concrete poured. Once the first section was completed it would be used to 'fix and stiffen' the formwork for the next stage. The formwork would be clamped to the completed section and extend up to allow the next three metres of concrete to be poured. This process was repeated until the column reached the required height. Using slip-forms with z-bars to tie the formwork together the constructor was able to eliminate propping of the top two stages of the column. The only section that needed to be propped was the first stage of the column. Working at height issues and manual handling hazards associated with in situ construction were significantly reduced through the use of steel reinforcement 'cages' that could be fabricated at ground level and lifted into position using a crane. The crane was also used to help fit and 'slip' the formwork shutters up the column.

The network pattern shows a high level of connectivity for the constructor with direct information ties between the constructor and almost all the other actors in the network. This suggests a smooth and effective information exchange between the constructor and other stakeholders at early stages of the project.

Given the high risk nature of the project and the specialist knowledge required to undertake the construction work safely, the constructor managed to maintain a high level of health and safety performance through involving the client, the rail authority and the transport operator in decision-making processes. This is evident by the relatively high frequency of communication between the constructor and these stakeholders.

On the right hand side of the sociogram are key 'demand-side' stakeholders with high regulatory/authority power (client, rail authority, transport operator). Owing to the nature of the project and the requirement to maintain the transport operations during the construction phase, the constructor needed to obtain permits to work to ensure all required safety controls were in place. Communication links between the

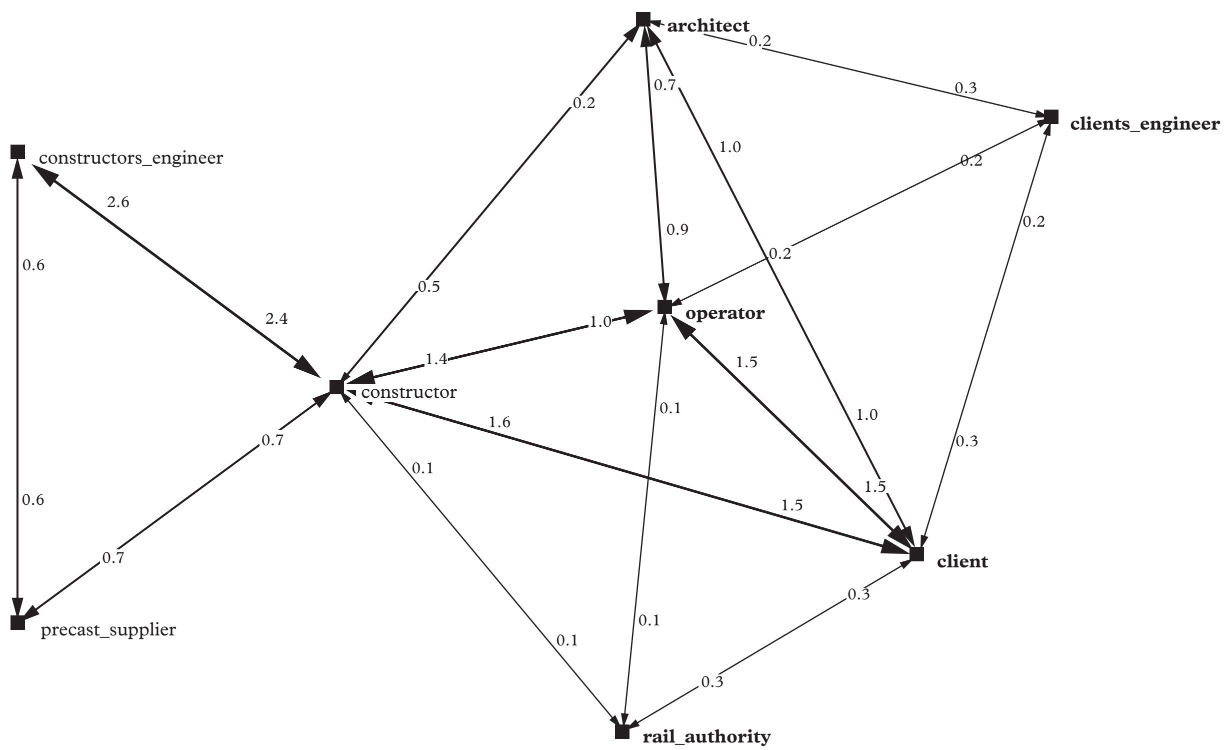

Figure 2 Example communication network for bridge columns
Note: Numbers denote the frequency of outgoing communication between project participants before the commencement of construction work (1 = occasionally, 5 = daily).

constructor and the client and rail authorities were therefore critical. On the left side of the network are key 'supply-side' stakeholders, who had a significant role in shaping decisions about the use of the modular construction systems which contributed to the reduction of WHS risks in the project.

The design and construction contractor (the constructor) is the central actor connecting these two groups. In this central position, the contractor was able to identify constructability issues early in the project and drive the redesign of various components, including the bridge columns.

Discussion

Construction involvement in project planning and design decision-making

An examination was undertaken as to whether the position of construction contractors in project communication networks is related to the quality of measures implemented to control WHS risks.

The results provide preliminary empirical evidence to indicate that the involvement of constructors in project decision-making (including decision-making that occurs before the commencement of construction) is linked to the adoption of 'higher order' WHS risk controls.

The *t*-tests revealed a significant difference in the constructors' out-degree centrality values among cases with above and below average HOC scores. While these findings do not indicate a causal relationship, they do suggest that knowledge about construction processes and methods may be an important and valuable resource that facilitates the adoption of high-quality risk control outcomes in construction projects. Constructors are responsible for the actual construction operations in a project and thus have a strong motivation and interest in ensuring work can be performed with minimal risk to workers' health and safety (Song *et al.*, 2009).

Compared to other project participants, constructors have a high level of construction expertise because of their specialized training and knowledge and experience in the application of construction materials and methods. Constructors are therefore able to provide advice about WHS hazards/risks and ways to mitigate them in construction activities. When this information is fed into 'upstream' decision-making, i.e. during the planning and design stages of a project, it may be particularly useful. Indeed, strategies to elicit constructors' process knowledge during the early stages of a construction project are likely to improve the effectiveness of safety in design activities and facilitate the adoption of technological (rather than behavioural) controls for WHS risk.

The qualitative case descriptions further illustrate the potential WHS benefits that can flow from frequent communication between the constructor and other project participants in communications networks early in the project life cycle. In the case of the façade the contractor made significant changes to the materials and methods used to construct the façade, both of which significantly reduced WHS risks. In the case of the pedestrian bridge the contractor was able to reduce WHS risk by reducing the number of columns required to support the bridge span and adopting a modular design and construction method.

Information exchange network characteristics

In our analysis, the constructor's out-degree centrality was associated with the selection of higher order controls for WHS risks. However, the density of a communications network did not differ significantly between cases exhibiting high, compared to low HOC scores. This finding is in contrast to the results obtained by Alsamadani *et al.* (2013). In their analysis of safety communication in construction work crews Alsamadani *et al.* (2013) report network density (but not centrality) to be related to higher levels of WHS performance. Reasons for this difference are unclear. However, Alsamadani *et al.* investigated communication networks within small construction work crews. In this context the centrality of team members is possibly less important than the extent to which all group members communicate with one another about safety. Our research was specifically focused on the extent to which the actors with construction and/or WHS knowledge shared information with other members of a multidisciplinary team. In this context the overall network density is likely to be less important than the degree centrality of the constructor. However the different findings highlight the need to exercise care and be conceptually clear in the formulation and testing of hypotheses about social network characteristics and WHS outcomes.

Integrating mechanisms

Styhre and Gluch (2010) describe how knowledge stocks in construction projects reside within organizations that form a project coalition. They suggest that bridging mechanisms can help to ensure that organizational interflows of knowledge occur. Our results suggest that specific provision of mechanisms to ensure that constructors' knowledge can be accessed might yield positive WHS benefits. Consistent with this view, Hare *et al.* (2006) report that two-way communication between designers and constructors, the early involvement of the constructor, participation in health and safety workshops and collaborative brainstorming are important mechanisms to support the integration of WHS into project planning and design decision-making. It is important to note that some important construction/WHS knowledge may reside with specialty subcontractors. Franz *et al.* (2013) present comparative case study data to suggest that early involvement of specialist contractors produces better WHS outcomes in otherwise comparable projects. Integrating mechanisms should seek to access this knowledge. Opportunities to engage participants with in-depth construction process knowledge early in the life of a project and actively elicit their suggestions for effective ways to eliminate (where possible) or reduce WHS risks are recommended. The input of construction process knowledge could be sought using face-to-face interviews, meetings or workshops, or by developing web-based knowledge-based systems (see, for example, Cooke *et al.*, 2008).

Social network analysis as a practical tool

The results of the research demonstrate that social network analysis can be used to quantify and compare project communication networks. Given the significant link between the constructors' out-degree centrality and the quality of WHS risk control, the analysis of project communication networks could help organizations to improve the integration of WHS into project decision-making (particularly in the pre-construction stages). The measurement of project communication networks could be useful in benchmarking within project organizations (see also Alsamadani *et al.*, 2013).

Social network analysis may also be a useful tool for the analysis and identification of network 'gaps' (El-Sheikh and Pryke, 2010). Used in this way, social network analysis could be used to diagnose network problems and identify opportunities for increasing information exchange to support WHS improvement. In particular, social network analysis is likely to be particularly useful in understanding the pattern of inter-organizational relationships and information exchanges that are important to ensuring that WHS is integrated through the activities of the construction supply chain.

The hierarchy of control

The usefulness of the hierarchy of control as a measure of project WHS performance is also demonstrated. The use of injury rates as a dependent variable in WHS research has been questioned because of their poor reliability and high levels of under-reporting (Lingard *et al.*, 2013). For example, in the United Kingdom, Daniels and Marlow (2005) found that the reporting of non-fatal construction injuries is as low as 46%. Alternative, more reliable measures of WHS performance have been recommended. In particular, the use of 'leading' indicators of WHS performance is advocated. Leading indicators measure the state of WHS before the emergence of WHS risk rather than after the occurrence of undesirable events. As such, they are a more direct measure of WHS than accidents. The research suggests that classifying risk controls using the HOC may be a more proactive (and reliable) way to measure WHS in construction projects. Used in this way, the HOC can provide a practical measure of the quality of the WHS effort, rather than an after-the-fact measure of things that have already gone wrong.

Conclusions

The quality of WHS risk controls implemented in construction projects was measured to determine whether the efficacy of risk control outcomes is associated with the position and role of the construction contractor in project communication networks. Social network analysis was used to quantify two dimensions of the communications network (i.e. network density and the constructors' out-degree centrality). The construction contractors' out-degree centrality was used as a proxy measure of the extent to which decisions were informed by knowledge of construction processes and methods. The quality of WHS risk control was measured using an innovative classification system based on the hierarchy of control (HOC).

The results revealed that in cases in which the quality of WHS risk controls was higher than average the construction contractor's out-degree centrality was significantly higher than in cases in which the quality of risk controls was lower than average. This provides a prima facie case for the establishment and maintenance of strong communication between contractors and other project participants. In particular, the opportunity to seek the input of construction contractors into decision-making during the planning and design stages is recommended as a way to facilitate the adoption of technological (as opposed to behavioural) controls for WHS risk.

The findings have implications for improved practice in the management of WHS in construction projects, in which the traditional separation between design and construction has been identified as a barrier to the effective implementation of safety in design. Arguably the greatest opportunity to implement technological controls for WHS risk, i.e. those that eliminate or reduce a risk by adopting engineering solutions, is present during the early project planning and design stages. The research suggests that realizing these 'high order' technological risk controls is more likely when the construction contractor has a central and active role in project communication networks before construction commences.

Limitations and future research

The research was limited in a number of respects. First, the sample size was very small and consequently the results should be treated with some caution. Notwithstanding this limitation, the results are credible and consistent with qualitative evidence suggesting that construction input into pre-construction decisions has a positive impact on WHS. However, further research with larger samples is recommended to produce more conclusive results.

Second, the measurement of the construction contractors' out-degree centrality only quantified the frequency of outgoing communication. No attempt was made to evaluate the quality or content of the communication. It is possible that the relationship between construction contractors' out-degree centrality and the quality of risk control outcomes will be moderated by the quality of communication. Thus, when valuable information is communicated and when other project participants receive and respond to this communication in a positive way, the relationship between the constructors' out-degree centrality and the quality of risk control outcomes may be strong and positive. However, when communication is about relatively trivial matters and/or if other project participants fail to respond to this communication, then the relationship between the constructors' out-degree centrality and the quality of risk control outcomes may be non-significant (or even negative). Further research using hierarchical regression modelling techniques could test for a moderating effect and is recommended. However, a larger sample size would be required than was achieved in the reported research. Third, the research was limited by focusing solely on the out-degree centrality of the constructor. Future research should examine the WHS influence of the position and activity of other network participants within projects. Notwithstanding these limitations, the research has provided some preliminary empirical evidence to link the extent of inter-organizational communication with WHS outcomes in construction projects.

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