



Family Relationship Services Australia Brief:

FRSP Workforce Mapping Project

29 January 2010

Background

In June 2008 the joint Government/Sector *Working Group on Workforce Development* was one of three such groups created for the purpose of establishing representative forums for open discussion on specific issues of long standing difficulty and interest between the sector and the Government. The other two working groups were established to deal with *Quality and Performance Management* and *Service Agreements and Funding*.

Late in 2008, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), in consultation with FRSA and the joint Workforce Development Working Group commissioned Colmar Brunton Social Research organisation to undertake a two stage mapping project of the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) sector to provide us with crucial data on the size and nature of the FRSP workforce.

The Mapping Project Objectives

The first stage of the project, an organisational survey was conducted between May and July 2009 and involved a census of all FRSP funded organisations. The second stage survey of individual staff members was conducted in September 2009 to provide more detailed information on how employees felt about their positions, training, opportunities and future intentions.

The objectives for the Workforce Mapping study were to:

- Generate a national map of the sector which can be used to produce a base profile of the FRSP-funded workforce
- Focus on objective aspects of the workforce such as; location of offices, size of organisations, summarised demographics of staff, positions, pay scales, training and professional development, skills and qualifications sought and type of FRSP work
- Investigate individual satisfaction with employment in the Family Relationship Services (FRS) sector, motivations for employment within the sector, and future career intentions either inside or outside the sector, and reasons for this
- Examine more closely specific issues of recruitment and retention reported at the organisational level, and investigate possible reasons for these issues at an individual employee level.

Separate Organisational and Individual Employee Surveys

The core element of the mapping study was to attempt a census of the 104 FRSP-funded organisations. A senior member of each organisation was contacted via email and asked to complete a questionnaire either in hard copy form or online.

Organisational contacts were generally CEOs, Senior Executive or Human Resource Managers. The survey was in the field from May-July 2009. The response rate response rate was 49% or 51 surveys were completed. The demographic profile of the organisations which did respond suggests that this sample should be broadly representative of the industry.



Individuals at the same 104 organisations were contacted again regarding the individual Employee Survey to be completed by FRSP-funded staff within the organisations. The survey was an online survey, and was in the field from Monday 31 August – Friday 2 October 2009. A general access survey was created and organisational contacts were sent the link to the survey to forward to their FRSP-funded staff either directly, or via Program Managers. As the survey was a general access survey, it is not possible to determine the response rate as a percentage of the total workforce.

Key Findings

The Mapping Project report presents an amalgamation of the organisational level data and the individual employee data, focusing on issues surrounding recruitment and retention. The report confirms a number of commonly held views about the FRSP sector including findings that the workforce is predominantly female and aged 40 years or more (over 70%) and over two thirds of people in management positions and between one half and two thirds of those in clinical positions hold a tertiary degree or equivalent. Another finding of note is that most organisations have increased in size by an average of 50% from 5 years ago, despite the vast majority of organisations reporting that staff recruitment is a serious problem.

The main issues within the FRS sector identified specifically by the separate surveys include:

- Employee frustrations with remuneration levels being unbalanced and insufficient compared to stress levels and type of work undertaken;
- Employee frustrations with work conditions, preferring more flexible working hours and days;
- Management frustrations with recruitment and retention of suitably qualified and experienced employees;
- Management frustrations with funding cycles and amounts – causing a disparity between remuneration for positions in the sector compared with other sectors;
- Employee frustrations with the working environment, including management support, inclusion and trust in decision-making, and professional respect.

Remuneration levels

Colmar Brunton found that the FRS sector seek to employ people with a high base of skills, qualifications and experience; however, the pay levels are not competitive with other sectors (e.g. public sector or private sector). The majority of employees (70%) listed pay rates and career opportunities as the two main elements they were least satisfied with in their current roles, despite neither of these two being their key reasons for being attracted to the sector in the first place.

Employee engagement and conditions

Of the 7% of employees intending to leave the sector and 32% who were unsure of their future intentions, aside from pay rates, the main concerns were lack of career path, low level of acknowledgement for work and inflexible hours. Colmar Brunton maintains that 'employee engagement' has been determined to be a key predictor of organisational profitability. Improvements in engagement including staff involvement in decision-making and flexible working hours have been linked to decreases in turnover and absenteeism costs.

Recruitment and retention of staff

84% of organisations reported recruitment of staff as a serious or somewhat serious problem. Salary was listed by organisations as the major barrier to recruitment. In terms of addressing recruitment and retention issues, Colmar Brunton suggests promotion of benefits of the sector would create more realistic expectations and attract employees to the sector. It is important that both potential employees outside the sector, and existing employees within it, have accurate expectations of



work in FRSP funded services. Organisational transparency is essential in promoting employee understanding of the workplace, including an accurate expectation of the sector.

Colmar Brunton reports that it is clear from the Workforce Mapping project that the FRS sector needs to attract new staff to meet growing demand, but there are systematic and expensive barriers to increasing the employee base. Unless these issues can be overcome, then the industry will have to rely on a workforce primarily composed of either people who are willing to put career and pay aspirations relatively low on their priority list, or adopt a “nursery” approach whereby it continually attracts and trains new staff on their way through to other career opportunities.

In addition, to increase organisational retention, Colmar Brunton suggests organisations could identify employees that are looking to move on and leave the sector, and provide a “selective intervention” here. If increasing pay is not feasible, other low cost methods of recognition and employee “participation” could be investigated, such as developing career progression opportunities, developing a rewards and recognition structure for staff within organisations, providing more professional development and training opportunities, and providing flexibility for movement between organisations.

Funding cycles

In the survey, the majority of organisations raised frustration with relatively short funding cycles, uncertainty over future funding, particularly as the end of a cycle draws near and the burden of unnecessary red tape. Each of these can cause challenges for organisations, staff and even clients. Again, the major flow on effect is the difficulty in forward planning and disparity between security and remuneration for positions in the sector compared with that of other sectors.

Workforce development strategy

From these preliminary research findings, a series of possible workforce development strategies have been suggested and will be considered by the Working Group. The aim is for these strategies to enable the Working Group to discuss and develop agreed principles for the development of the Family Relationship Services workforce; and build a case for Government investment in this sector.

It is clear from the report that the most obvious issue to address in terms of retention is the perceived pay disparity between the FRS sector and (in particular) Government; and also the relative pay disparity across organisations within the sector. The working Group will also consider any progress of the National Modern (SACS) Award Test Case to be conducted this year. The Working Group will create a draft workforce attraction and retention strategy that will attempt to address some of the major workforce issues highlighted in the mapping project for the sector and the government to consider.

Next Steps

The Workforce Development Working Group will meet again in March 2010 prior to the FRSA Senior Executives Forum in Canberra in order to present a draft response and Workforce development strategy for consideration and discussion.

Consultation and feedback

FRSA and the Working Group welcome comments from the sector on this Mapping Project Report and will formally call for feedback on the subsequent draft Workforce Development Strategy in late March 2010.