

**THE MARGINALISED AND
VULNERABLE WITHIN THE
PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTOR
WORKFORCE**

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Abstract

The advent of globalization and decreasing government labour market within the Western World have wreaked havoc with the concept of what has been thought of as traditional employment. As work becomes increasingly casual, part-time and temporary it also results in a workforce that is increasingly vulnerable to marginalisation and disadvantage. The very nature of this workforce also makes it difficult for unions to access, organize and protect. These concerns are well known and continue to be an important focus of union, social and religious groups. This paper contends that it is a focus that also needs to be extended to work arrangements more typically associated with privilege and advantage – because the reality is often in sharp contrast. The arrangement used to show this is the professional contractor and the solution advanced for discussion is that it is time for a union tailored to the professional peripheral worker to be considered.

THE MARGINALISED AND VULNERABLE WITHIN THE PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTOR WORKFORCE

INTRODUCTION

The changes occurring within employment over the last two decades are both structural and attitudinal, challenging the standard definition of employment as being a full-time, stable job of an indefinite duration (Collins, 1990; Campbell and Burgess, 1993). It is a definition rests on the historical government and legal view that recognized that a man "needed a full-time job on which to live and maintain his family" (Macken, 1992:54). The view that employment is full-time, permanent basis and "in a position which provides access to a wide range of legal and statutory benefits and protections" (Bray and Taylor, 1991:87). Falling outside of the bounds of this traditional view raises problems of access to the benefits and protection built around it that range from security of employment, guaranteed minimum wages and paid leave to training and superannuation.

While most peripheral work arrangements and the consequences associated with them are not new developments, the growth in terms of absolute numbers and as a proportion of the overall workforce is. This is particularly true in Australia, where the degree of workforce change, especially the casualisation that has occurred, makes it notable amongst other OECD nations (ABS, 1996). Around twenty four percent of Australian workers are in positions which, by definition, are associated with a lack of job security and lack of access to standard employment entitlements and protection (Long 1996:11).

It is predicted that by the year 2020, the Australian peripheral workforce will consist of casual and subcontract workers who are less skilled and educated, not unionized and with poorer pay and conditions (HRSC LTS, 1995). It is an issue that raises concerns of dual standards and equity and the potential of these to undermine government labour and social security systems. Thus, peripheral employment:

is directly associated with substantive features of disadvantage... growth is directly integrated into a general arrangement of marginalisation and deprivation... non-standard is directly equated with sub-standard (Campbell and Burgess, 1993:87).

Overall, the themes of marginalisation and disadvantage dominate much of the peripheral literature. However, when the arrangements move to the workers such as the professional contractor, a different view dominates.

THE PLACE OF THE PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTOR WITHIN THE PERIPHERAL WORKFORCE

The privileged position of the professional within the changing world of work has remained relatively unquestioned and their position as 'knowledge workers' (Jones, 1995) and 'symbolic analysts' (Reich, 1992) in the workforce of the future seems to be accepted as fact. Even the advent of redundancies amongst managerial and professional levels in the organizational restructurings of the eighties and nineties, or the mass movement of these groups into non-traditional work arrangements, appears to have done little to challenge such comfortable assumptions. While studies of the growth in non-traditional work arrangements raise the important issues of marginalisation and uncertainty, there is very little research that addresses these within the context of the professional workforce. This lack is surprising given that a fundamental assertion of much of the theoretical literature on the future of work is how suited professionals are to take advantage of it. There are even those who propose that the attributes that characterize such workers will, one day, become the way of the work for the majority (Bridges, 1995; Handy, 1989 & 1996; Herriot & Pemberton, 1995).

Central to these viewpoints are two presumptions; firstly that professionals occupy a privileged labor market position and secondly, that professionals have a 'career' (Atkinson et al, 1996; Goffee & Scase, 1995). It is certainly a view widely accepted in Australia (Crean, 1995; EPAC, 1996; Jones, 1995). Essentially then,

professionals are seen as being 'pulled' into non-standard work arrangements such as contracting because of opportunity – rather than being 'pushed' because of constraints such as redundancy and unemployment.

INVESTIGATING THE PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTOR WORKFORCE

The studies focus on the professional contractor would appear to capture both individuals who have made an active and positive career choice but who also operate at the 'high end' of the peripheral or non-standard labour market. The 'push' versus 'pull' theories of employment, with their origins in the classic economic theories of 'career' (Knight, 1933) versus 'default' (Schumpeter, 1934) are clearly appropriate to this workforce. The decision for the professional is essentially a self-employment/paid-employment choice based on the individual identifying the opportunities and constraints associated with each.

The 'push/pull' dichotomy has been enhanced to provide a framework for an investigation of the professional contractor. This model underlying this investigation integrates a number of studies of self-employment to produce the Push/Pull matrix, illustrated in Table 1. Based on the individual's initial decision to enter contracting, the first dimension of the Matrix is the nature of the move - whether it is by a choice or not by choice. While the voluntary versus involuntary nature of this decision is explicit within most studies of self-employment, it is often treated as being of little relevance to the professional. However, a number of studies on the use of contractors in the last decade have indicated the rising employer practice of converting employees into contractors (Casey, Metcalf et al. 1997; Creighton 1994). A number of pilot interviews with professional contractors in the developmental stage of this research indicated that the practice does carry through to this workforce and this provides the reason for the Default 2 option of the Matrix. The second aspect of the decision process that the Matrix addresses is the timing of the move, either direct or delayed. The focus of this research into the professional contract workforce is the antecedence to the original decision and, for this reason, the timing of the move is very important. It is this aspect which should differentiate between individuals who make a planned career move straight into contracting, perhaps from an 'incubator' organization (Birley and Westhead 1993) and those who move due to other reasons such as caring for dependents or a return to studying. It is a distinction made clear within the Default 1 and Push options illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: The Push/Pull Matrix

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor
Contractor By Choice	PULL	DEFAULT1
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT2	PUSH

Structuring survey responses on the issues of choice and the timing of the move into contracting provides the basis for examining how and why in both the traditional economic language, such as money and advancement, as well as through the psychological and sociological notions of choice and satisfaction. The next stage was to desegregate these four options into the key areas of reasoning for moving into peripheral work identified from the literature. The resulting items are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: The Push/Pull Matrix Translated into Survey Items

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor
Contractor by Choice	<p style="text-align: center;">PULL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prefer be own boss • set up own business • set up business with others • more money • always wanted to • flexible lifestyle 	<p style="text-align: center;">DEFAULT*1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • best option available • normal in my profession • balances work & family • voluntary redundancy
Contractor Not by Choice	<p style="text-align: center;">DEFAULT*2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • best option available • normal in my profession • balances work & family • voluntary redundancy 	<p style="text-align: center;">PUSH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involuntary redundancy • employer request • no/few career prospects

NB: Default *1 and *2 options share the same items at this stage

The discrepancy between the empirical literature on non-standard or atypical work and the theoretical literature on professional contractors is highlighted by the dual placement of the same items in both 'Default' quadrants. Thus, according to the empirical literature, the move into contracting, if not the result of direct employer instigated 'Push' factors, is still not largely one of worker choice. In contrast, the theoretical literature on the future of work, where the professional contractor features (see for example Bridges, 1995; Hakim, 1995; Lasch, 1996) emphasizes the choice such workers exercise in moving around a "portfolio career" (Hall, 1996) - while acknowledging the "gaps" that may occur between such moves. The Matrix thus offers a structured framework of the reasons professionals become contractors and uses this to provide the basis for investigating the relationship between these and, in this case, aspects of income.

THE SURVEY RESULTS

This paper presents some results from a survey of two hundred and forty professionals registered as contractors. While the focus of this paper is on results from the survey items on income, a brief review of results from earlier sections that are relevant to this discussion will be outlined.

Survey items on reasons for initially entering contracting revealed that, despite the widely cited 'elite' position of the professional, contracting actually covers a continuum of arrangements. Contracting for the professional appears to operate as:

1. a trap associated with job insecurity, low earnings and periods of unemployment where entry was a defensive move against unemployment to being
2. a transitional form of employment - on the road to more permanent employment arrangements for some, through to
3. being a highly paid career option for the most able and ambitious.

The role of the spouse in supporting the contractor emerged as especially significant for individuals within options 1 and 2 above. Furthermore, the results also indicate that the movements of professionals into self-

employment options such as management consultancies are often the result of organizational retrenchment rather than individual choice.

Overall, the majority of the professionals who took part cited their motive for entering contracting in terms of various 'negative' experiences associated with their previous employee role. Most respondents did not express a strong prior commitment to notions of personal advancement through self-employment and instead, gave reasons related to childcare, redundancy and unemployment as well as dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their previous employment situation.

INCOME

The focus now moves to the issue of income which most clearly substantiates the contention of this paper – namely, that disadvantage and marginalisation are as much feature of the professional contractor as they are of any other peripheral workforce. The pilot interview carried out in this research indicated the potential importance of income from a partner or spouse so this information was also requested and is used here to gauge a total income. The importance of this combination is borne out in Table 3 where the comparatively low number of individuals with incomes over the \$185,000 level increases from 2.1 percent to over 20 per cent of respondents when total income is examined.

Table 3: Annual Income

	Own Income	%	Spouses Income	%	Total Income
No response	-	-	7	2.9	7
under \$15,000	12	5.0	25	10.4	4
\$15,001-25,000	40	16.7	21	8.8	8
\$25,001-35,000	17	7.1	32	13.3	9
\$35,001-45,000	17	7.1	47	19.6	13
\$45,001-55,000	15	6.3	14	5.8	13
\$55,001-65,000	18	7.5	8	3.3	23
\$65,001-75,000	23	9.6	12	5.0	21
\$75,001-85,000	18	7.5	10	4.2	15
\$85,001-95,000	17	7.1	2	.8	31
\$95,001-105,000	7	2.9	2	.8	10
\$105,001-125,000	10	4.2	2	.8	13
\$125,001-145,000	19	7.9	-	-	7
\$145,001-165,000	12	5.0	-	-	15
\$165,001-185,000	10	4.2	-	-	8
over \$185,000	5	2.1	-	-	50
N/A			58	24.2	
Total	240	100.0			

Placing these results within the Matrix also supports the important role of spouse/partner income. As Table 4 shows, while contractors in the Pull option have the highest average income it is the spouse or partner in the Push option who earn more than their contractor spouse/partner (and are the highest earners for the spouse/partner group).

Table 4: The Push/Pull Matrix and Contractors Average Income

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
Contractor by Choice	PULL	DEFAULT1	CHOICE
	OWN - \$95,000* SPOUSE - \$60,000 TOTAL- \$125,000*	OWN - \$45,000* • men (N=27)** SPOUSE - \$55,000 TOTAL- \$85,000 • women (N=11)***	OWN - \$85,000* SPOUSE - \$60,000 TOTAL- \$105,000*
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT2	PUSH	NO CHOICE
	OWN - \$95,000*** SPOUSE - \$75,000 TOTAL- \$115,000	OWN - \$25,000* SPOUSE - \$65,000 TOTAL- \$45,000*	OWN - \$35,000* SPOUSE - \$65,000 TOTAL- \$65,000*
	DIRECT ENTRY	DELAYED ENTRY	
	OWN - \$95,000* SPOUSE - \$65,000 TOTAL- \$120,000*	OWN - \$40,000* SPOUSE - \$60,000 TOTAL- \$70,000*	

*Results significant at .001 **Results significant at .005 *** Results significant at .05 levels

The role of the spouse/partners' income also exceeds that of the contractors in the Default 1 option - a result that makes sense when examined in terms of gender. While males dominated the higher wage levels of the OWN item (N=27, $p < .005$), the average was brought down by women with dependents (N=11, $p < .01$). Conversely however, the contribution of the woman's partners/spouses increased the SPOUSE item average and significantly impacted on the TOTAL income. Overall, Table 4 clearly demonstrates that greater personal and total income is significantly associated with greater contracting independence and that there is a very wide income differential associated with contracting.

The next item adds to the picture by requesting details of other sources of household income. Table 5 further confirms the importance of working partners, the role of redundancy (in this case, the payments that resulted), as well as the multiple job holdings for some. Within the options provided in this item, shares are generally associated with discretionary income compared to the others that tend to provide for everyday general living expenses.

Table 5: Other Sources of Income

	Source 1	%	Source 2	%	Source 3	%	Total
0	31	12.9	129	53.8	231	96.3	-
Shares/investments..	33	13.8	54	22.5	-	-	87
Another job	15	6.3	2	.8	4	1.7	21
Working partner	148	61.7	6	2.5	-	-	154
Redundancy pay	6	2.5	42	17.5	5	2.1	53
Other	7	2.9	7	2.9	-	-	14
Total	240	100	240	100	240	100	-

Applying the matrix framework to the results revealed Shares were significant for the Pull/Direct Entry options (N=32, p =.015 and N =48, p = .001 respectively) while a Working Partners was a feature of Default1 (N = 30, p = .038) and Delayed entry (N = 70, p = .033). The dual nature of redundancy in terms of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary moves is demonstrated by the Redundancy Payments item. It featured significantly within the Default1 (N = 19, p =.001), the Push (N = 28, p = .000), the No Choice (N = 32, p , >.000) and Delayed Entry (N = 48, p = .000) options. Combining the last two items provides a view of the Pull/Direct Entry options being associated with both greater personal, total and discretionary income and that this decreases significantly as individuals move into the Push sector of the Matrix. Also, the previous item's suggestion that the role of the working partner's income is important for the Default1 contractor is confirmed.

An important aspect of Income revealed by pilot interviews for the Survey was that variation over time is a feature of contracting - and for some, one of the difficulties associated with it as an overall lifestyle. This forms the next area of questioning which examines how much and how often income varies. This dual perspective is presented within the Matrix in Table 6 and the results further advance the theme of greater advantage, control and independence for those in the Pull/Direct entry options.

Table 6: The Push/Pull Matrix and Income Variation

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
	PULL	DEFAULT1	CHOICE
Contractor by Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little variation (N=35)* • Varies from year to year (N=27)* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot of variation (N=16)*** • Varies from week to week (N=9)** • Other (N=5)* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little variation (N=56)* • Varies from year to year (N=42)*
	DEFAULT2	PUSH	NO CHOICE
Contractor Not by Choice		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot of variation (N=24)* • Varies from week to week (N=15)* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot of variation (N=32)* • Varies from week to week (N=16)*
	DIRECT ENTRY	DELAYED ENTRY	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No variation (N=25)* • Little variation (N=41)*** • Varies from year to year (N=36)* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot of variation (N=41)* • Varies from week to week (N=24)* 	

*Results significant at .001 **Results significant at .005 ***at .05 levels

This contrasts with the vulnerability to variations in the amount and timing of fluctuations in income for those in the Push/Delayed Entry options. Concentrating on these two opposing Matrix quadrants in more detail reveals stability of income for those Pulled into contracting is associated with males in IT and Engineering aged 40-44 years old. The vulnerability of those Pushed isolates both males, especially those aged 35-39, and females aged 45-49 with two or more dependents. Combining these results with those from the last three items presents a picture where incomes are not only lower for those Pushed into contracting but they are also significantly more unreliable and with fewer alternative income sources to cushion this vulnerability.

The last area draws the issue of income together to provide a comparative focus. Table 7 appears to confirm the common perception that contractors are better paid than company employees performing the same work as just over 64 per cent (144 respondents) indicated that they are either paid better or much better.

Table 7: Comparisons of Contracting Income

Rating*	Employees	%	Prior Contracts	%	Prior Non-Contract work	%
0	4	1.7	14	5.8	13	5.4
N/A	1	.4	12	5.0	5	2.1
unsure	2	.8	-	-	-	-
much worse	2	.8	5	2.1	26	10.8
worse	12	5.0	31	12.9	34	14.2
the same	65	27.1	108	45.0	24	10.0
better	56	23.3	48	20.0	64	26.7
much better	98	40.8	22	9.2	74	30.8
Total	240	100.0	240	100.0	240	100.0

*The numbers 1-7 correspond to the Likert scale presented in the Survey and provide the basis for the mean scores used in Table 8

The advantage of the current contract is further borne out in comparisons to prior contract and non-contract work where over 65 per cent (178 and then 162 respondents respectively) saw their current pay as the same too much better. The now-familiar patterns of advantage versus disadvantage re-emerge when these results are translated into the Matrix. The mean scores presented in Table 8 show that individuals in the Pull sector are paid significantly better than employees and both prior contract and non-contract work.

Table 8: The Push/Pull Matrix and Income Comparisons

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
Contractor by Choice	PULL Employees – better to much better ($\mu = 6.7$)* Prior Contracts – The same to Better ($\mu = 5.39$)* Prior Non-Contract work – better to much better ($\mu = 6.41$)*	DEFAULT1	CHOICE
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT2	PUSH Employees – worse to the same ($\mu = 4.83$)* Prior Contracts – worse to the same ($\mu = 4.26$)** Prior Non-Contract work – much worse to worse ($\mu = 3.39$)*	NO CHOICE
	DIRECT ENTRY	DELAYED ENTRY	

*Results significant at .001 **Results significant at .005 *** .05 levels

Those Pushed rated the three options compared to their current pay as worse to the same. While further analysis revealed that IT professionals once again dominated the Pull results, a significant group of both Architect and Business/Management professionals also emerged within the comparisons of pay with employees and prior contracts. Similarly, females in Health & Welfare and Education featured within the Push options – but only as a significant result when comparing current pay with prior contract work.

The labor market advantage within the Pull quadrant indicated by earlier analysis were borne out in when these results were put in the context of how contractors charged for their services. Explanations for the high pay rates when compared to employees were found to be significantly correlated ($p < .001$) with market rates, setting their own fee or negotiating with the Agency. In contrast, the slightly lower pay from prior contracts correlated significantly with individuals either negotiating directly with clients or having their pay determined by the Agency. The less lucrative nature of contractors negotiating directly with clients was further borne out for those in the Push option where a significant group ($N = 19, p < .05$) emerged in both the prior contracting and non-contracting items. This line of comparison also revealed that higher pay rates than employees tended to be associated with longer-term attachment to contracting - with 28 of those in the Pull option having over 11 years experience compared to a group of 8 in the Push option with only 2 years experience. Furthermore, a group within the Push option with 3-5 years contracting experience all indicated that they were earning less as contractors than they had from non-contract work ($N = 18, p < .05$).

Overall, the advantage of those in the Pull option is further enhanced when comparing pay to employees performing the same work as well as to previous earnings. The disadvantage of those in the Push option is also similarly enhanced, both compared to employees and prior pay rates. The clear polarization emerging indicates that the professional contractor certainly contains elements of the privilege and advantage commonly associated with it, but, just as clearly, there are elements of marginalisation and disadvantage.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results indicate job loss through redundancy (actual or perceived, voluntary or involuntary) was the single major factor associated with the move from previous employment and that this move is associated with significantly lower incomes within the professional contractor workforce. These lower incomes individuals are also significantly more prone ongoing and regular fluctuations creating an unpredictability of work that creates an increased vulnerability. In common with general studies on peripheral employment, such moves are associated with decreased earnings and potentially downward mobility particularly for the recently retrenched, Agency employment and childbearing women.

In contrast, a view of privilege and advantage was substantiated. While clear existence of an 'elite' was found, this group was identified as being dominated by the IT and engineering, and to a lesser extent, architectural, professions. These groups reflect a position of current labour market power due to the high demand and short supply for their skills. They are rewarded with high incomes and appear to exercise considerable control over their contracting careers. While this position also tends to be associated with longer periods of working as contractors, there are results from other sections of the survey that would suggest that even this view of advantage be tempered with caution. While beyond the scope of this paper, the lack of investment in training, very long hours of work and very small social networks are also significant features of this group.

Those in the Pull sector appear to have a clear knowledge of their labor market position – how much they are worth, the level of demand for their skills long term and they view their position from a perspective of sustainable opportunism. There are just as clearly a group of individuals who operate from a marginal position where a short –term attachment to contracting covers the longer-term desire for permanent, traditional employment. This supports findings from earlier parts of the survey where traditional employment was still the desired employment arrangement and where many appeared to be struggling to come to terms with the challenges imposed by working outside the norm.

Overall, there is no indication of any 'visionary' approach for careers in the twenty-first century but rather one of opportunism related to labor market advantage which for some, translates into higher independence and job satisfaction

CONCLUSION

This Chapter has applied the Matrix framework developed within a larger scale research project to test the question as to whether professionals contract from a position of advantage and whether such work arrangements are sustainable. Evidence of the widely cited 'elite' professional was found, but so were the low paid and insecure that typify the literature on the marginalisation of non-standard workers. The results clearly indicate that lack of opportunity and disadvantage are as relevant to professionals in contracting as they are to any worker moving out of traditional employment. There are clearly costs involved in contracting - even where individuals appear to be highly paid and rewarded for their labor. Those stepping outside the bounds of traditional work face ongoing challenges in ensuring their own 'employability'. While the challenges of redundancy, changing labor markets and changing expectations of work have created new opportunities where some individuals adapt and flourish, others clearly do not.

The notion that the professional worker is somehow more adept or proficient at negotiating their way within the peripheral workforce is very clearly not supported by this research. Instead, there seems to be clear indications that professionals are as much in need of assistance, especially in terms of protection from income fluctuation and protection as any other peripheral worker is. These results indicate that there is an opportunity for the union to provide services to a workforce that has perhaps not generally seen itself in need of organized labour initiatives. The fact is that the professional in the peripheral workforce can be just as vulnerable as any other worker and the issues of protection are just as relevant. The challenge for the union movement in this is identical to that they face with any other peripheral worker - firstly finding them and secondly, educating them of the benefits of membership. What it may do is take the union movement in different directions from those they have traditionally taken and into the provision of services more commonly associated with employers. It seems a challenge worth considering given that the forces of globalization which have brought about the increase in the professional contractor workforce seem to be part of the foreseeable future of work.

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