The Role of Employer Associations: A Survey of Members in the Australian Printing Industry[1]

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Significant changes in the structures and processes of Australian industrial relations in recent decades have been widely researched and documented. The changes that have occurred in the structures, policies and strategies of employer associations have also been subject to some academic inquiry. Much of this research has been focused upon either how employer bodies have influenced government policy and subsequent structural reform or upon how employer associations have sought to adapt to the implications of such change. Less attention has been directed in the academic literature to the expectations and needs of businesses with respect to their associations. This issue has significant implications for an understanding of the dynamics of Australian industrial relations, including, but not limited to, the dynamics of the relationship between businesses and employer associations.

In this paper, the research findings of a survey conducted among members of the Printing Industry Association of Association (PIAA) are reported and analysed. The analysis suggests that efforts by employer associations to remain relevant to actual and prospective members by expanding their services into a range broader management services beyond their more traditional employment relations focus may not be what their members want.

Introduction

Employer associations are organisations 'consisting predominantly of employers whose activities include participating in the determination of employment conditions on behalf of their members' (Plowman 1982) Formal employer associations arose in response to threats that labour unions and state intervention appeared to pose for employers (Sheldon and Thornthwaite, 2002:1). Australian employer associations have traditionally provided a variety of services to their members in addition to industrial relations representation including political lobbying, public relations and business services including proformas and trade information, research assistance and advice, as well as training and education services (Plowman, 1982; Gladstone, 1984; Sheldon and Thornthwaite, 2002:1). However, the nature of Australian employer associations and the services provided by them has undergone significant change in recent decades.

The peak employer associations in Australia, the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Confederation of Australian Industry (CAI), were enthusiastic advocates of the decentralisation of industrial relations activity and the move towards more enterprise bargaining (ACCI, 1993:8-9; BCA, 1989:8; MacIntosh, 1993:59-62; McLaughlin, 1991:41-68). Such enthusiasm remains somewhat curious in light of their traditional central role under arbitration and their limited experience in the devolved processes advocated. Indeed, were 'employer associations consigning themselves to historical oblivion by advocating their present policies regarding the industrial relations system?' (Mortimer et al, 2002:55).

Australian employer associations have been viewed as traditionally reactive (Plowman, 1988). Perhaps they saw the move to enterprise bargaining as an inevitable trend and their support flowed from a reactive stance, without a clear strategy (Mortimer et al, 2002:55). Certainly, by the mid-1990s it was clear that employer associations in Australia had a variety of different experiences associated with the systematic decentralisation of industrial relations, and that while some had led the process, others had 'suffered them with varying degrees of difficulty' (Sheldon and Thornthwaite, 1999:ix). It has been argued that the trend away from multi-employer bargaining and the declining role of arbitration in Australia caused employer associations to think creatively about their futures (Sheldon and Thornthwaite, 1999:3).

During the 1980s and 1990s, many employer associations operating in Australia restructured, merged, adopted a broader range of services and sought to become more focused on a wider range of business concerns. Some became less membership-based and more commercial by providing elective services on a 'customer' fee-paying basis. A survey conducted by Plowman and Rimmer for the Business Council of Australia (BCA) found that Australian employer associations had expanded their range of activities with deregulation (Plowman and Rimmer, 1992). The survey found that associations had expanded their activities and services in areas such as specialist and company specific services, training and lobbying for public policy changes and that many had introduced 'fee for service' activities (Plowman and Rimmer, 1992:52-4). Whether such a change in focus supports a view of employer associations as reactive organisations, or rather, as more proactive and adaptive organisations that have been stimulated by the decentralisation of the system into developing a new strategic direction, has been subject to some debate (Mortimer et al, 2002).

Although most of the literature dealing with the changing role of Australian employer associations has tended to associate their expansion of services with adaptation or reaction, Mortimer et al (2002), in their longitudinal study of several associations, identified that a contraction of services could be an adaptive strategy. In particular, they note the case of the Australian Retailers Association (RTA) and conclude 'that a return to a traditional industrial relations focus by some associations represents a proactive response to membership needs' (Mortimer et al, 2002:66).

In this paper, the results of a survey conducted among members of the Printing Industries Association of Australia (PIAA) during 2003 are reported. The survey sought to identify the issues of concern to members and the relative importance to members of services provided or potentially provided by their Association. The survey followed the release in March 2001 of a comprehensive and significant report on the state of the Australian printing industry which was funded by the PIAA, an industry consortium and the Commonwealth Department of Industry, Science and Resources. The survey reported in this paper was conducted by the PIAA to assist them to better understand and meet the needs of their members. The survey results provide useful insights to what members want of their association and thus complement the research undertaken by others which has contributed to our understanding of the changing role of Australian employer associations.

Background to the Survey

The Printing Industries' Action Agenda, known as Print21 Action Agenda, was initiated by the Printing Industry Association of Australia (PIAA) and funded by the Commonwealth

Department of Industry, Science and Resources with support from an industry consortium. Print21 was released in March 2001 and provided a strategic overview of Australia's printing industry including analysis of the state of the industry, the challenges it faces, future growth opportunities and major recommendations for achieving long term sustainable growth. The report and background papers identified the challenges facing businesses in the Australian printing industry including globalisation, falling profits, under-utilisation of technology and a decline in return on assets and provided business diagnostic tools aimed at assisting these businesses more effectively deal with the pressures facing them, including advice for strategic planning. The industry suffers from excess capacity and experienced a ten per cent downturn during 2002 (PIAA 78th Annual Report, 2003:5). The PIAA, 'like many of its members, has had to weather this storm with a reduced income but a greater need to maintain its services for members needing specialist advice, support and representation' (PIAA 78th Annual Report, 2003:5).

The PIAA recognised that many of the challenges identified in Print21 could not be easily addressed in isolation by individual members and sought to identify how best it could assist its members. A survey questionnaire was developed aimed at assessing the relevance for individual members of key challenges and issues identified in Print21 and at identifying how members wanted their Association to assist them in relation to these matters.

Research Methodology

The primary purpose of the research was to identify the relevance for Association members of the key challenges and issues identified in Print21 and how members wanted their Association to assist them in relation to these matters. The report and background papers of Print21 were used to identify key areas that needed to be addressed in the proposed questionnaire. In drafting the survey questions, account was taken of the Association's knowledge of its members' businesses to help shape categories and groupings used in the survey questions, such as those relating to size and business focus. The proposed survey questionnaire underwent a number of revisions and finally a two part survey questionnaire was finalised.

Part A of the survey questionnaire consisted of sixteen questions aimed at identifying important information regarding members businesses and the challenges facing them. Part B consisted of eleven questions aimed at identifying members' information needs including the nature of the assistance sought by them from the Association and how they wished to receive this assistance. A covering letter was prepared and signed by the PIAA's Chief Executive Officer Mr Gary Donnison in which members were informed about the purpose and methodology of the survey and urged to complete and return the questionnaire in the return paid envelope provided. Most importantly, the confidentiality of responses was stressed and the methodology used to ensure this was explained.

For practical resource reasons, it was decided to post the survey questionnaire to a selected range of member organisations. The aim was not to conduct a survey of members randomly selected but rather to ensure that members of differing sizes were surveyed across the range of relevant industry sectors. To assist this process, Regional Managers of the Association were asked to identify 'at least five companies in the twelve sections of the printing industry broken down in to the following categories: large, medium and small'. The definition of size was given as that used by the Association in its other reports: small being less than twenty

employees, Medium being twenty to ninety-nine employees and large being 100 plus employees. A Likert scale of 1-7 was used for most questions as research indicates a 7-point scale tends to provide a more valid response. Most questions required respondents to indicate their response on a scale of 1 (representing 'to no extent' or not at all') through to 7 (representing 'extremely important' or 'significantly'. To access whether an issue was either important or significant, a response of 4 was taken as neutral and responses of 5, 6 and 7 were summed. If more than 50 per cent of respondents indicated that a factor or issue was of a 5-7 value, it has been analysed to be significant.

In mid May 2003, 270 survey questionnaires were posted to PIAA members from all States, across all identified sectors of the printing industry and of differing sizes in terms of the number of staff employed. The mail posting was followed up by the use of phone calls and emails to surveyed organisations. By mid-June seventy-nine completed questionnaires had been returned representing a response rate of 29.25 per cent. The survey forms were coded and filed so as to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Overview of Survey Results

Many of the issues surveyed concerned aspects of respondents' businesses which are not directly related to employment relations issues and only those of relevance to the role of an employer association will be discussed here. As no significant difference was found in the responses of members by State at a significance level of 0.05, the results are presented for all respondents rather than by State.

Survey respondents

Respondents were spread throughout the identified industry sectors providing the range of identified products, processes and services. The largest identified sector was that of 'General Commercial Printing' (30.4%) and a total of 40.5 per cent of respondents identified that they did provide 'General Commercial Printing'[2]. Results also show that over 80 per cent of respondents employ less than fifty staff and that more than 50 per cent of respondents had an annual turnover of less than $3m in the last financial year (Q2 and 3 Part A). Respondents also operate across all of the States except Tasmania although the largest grouping of respondents came from South Australia (Q 6 and 7 Part A). Although 86 per cent of respondents have their business located in an Australian capital city, over 77 per cent of respondents provide services for customers in regional areas and in other States (Q 8 and 9 Part A).

Nature and health of business

The survey results concerning key aspects of business performance are generally consistent with the findings of Print21. In light of issues raised in Print21 concerning the challenges arising from e-business and globalisation, the high percentage of respondents identifying with 'general commercial printing' services could be seen as potentially problematic for the industry. Seventy-seven per cent of respondents stated that their business was totally focused on the domestic market (Q10 Part A) which also contrasts with the recommendations of Print21 concerning the need for Australian printing businesses to become export oriented. (Q11 Part A). The majority of respondents did not identify with experiencing the nature of threats identified in Print21 and specified in the questionnaire nor were they engaged in activity aimed at securing niche or global markets through e-business, as recommended in

Print21. However, consistent with the industry problems identified in Print21, a significant 60.8 per cent of respondents identified that they had made major investments over the past five years aimed at substantially changing and upgrading the nature of their infrastructure as well as considerable investments aimed at significantly updating existing technology (Q14 Part A). Ninety-five per cent of respondents indicated that that were utilising their technology at less than full capacity while 25 per cent of respondents indicated less than 75 per cent utilisation of capacity (Q15 Part A).

As identified in Print21 and its accompanying background papers, such expenditure on technology may be problematic for the industry. This notion is supported by the survey data concerning profitability, profit margin, return on assets and turnover is considered. The majority of respondents indicated overall that there had been no significant movement in any of these measures over the past five years except for turnover which had increased for a majority of respondents (Q13 Part A). This is consistent with the problems of excess capacity identified in the PIAA Annual Report. (2003: 5)

What respondents want from their association

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important) the importance to them of a list of services provided by the PIAA (Q16 Part A). The cumulative importance (the percentage of 5-7 scores) of the services rated by respondents is shown in Table 1. The results indicate clearly that there are a number of services provided by the PIAA which the respondents rate as being very important to them. The results also show that while the more traditional association role of assisting members in employee and industrial relations matters remains of greatest importance to the respondents, the role of information provider is also extremely important.

Table 1 (AQ16): The Importance To You Of The Following Services Provided By The Printing Industries Association

	Cumulative Importantance (Total of 5-7 scores)
Assist in Employee and Industrial Relations	85%
Keep you informed	82%
Provide industry trend information	62%
Advise / assist / lobby govt grants	59%
Industry training representation to govt, others	52%
Advice and govt representation on environment services	48%
Training and professional development	38%
Provide taxation advice	23%

In Part B of the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate the importance for the future of their business of receiving quality information concerning a range of listed issues. The issues were organised into ten groupings and within each group were a number of specified issues. In Table 2, the highest ten mean scores for all issues are presented. This information is of considerable interest. Although the highest mean scores are associated with employment relations issues, it can be seen that taxation matters and issues concerned with market opportunities also scored very highly. In the context of other responses, this suggests

that although respondents may perceive that they have not yet experienced the pressures forecast in Print21, they are nevertheless concerned to be informed about these issues.

Table 2: Top Ten Mean Scores Re Information Needs (Part B Q1-10)

Legal requirements regarding employment conditions	5.95
Occupational Health and Safety Legislation	5.82
Termination of Employment and Unfair Dismissal issues	5.81
Workers Compensation Laws	5.62
GST and Personal income tax rates	5.33
Survey data on industry conditions and wage movements	5.22
Size and growth in markets and sectors	5.16
Further corporate tax reform	5.15
Evolving print and media markets (changing dynamics)	5.06
Identification of emerging opportunities (onshore and offshore)	5.00

It is apparent from the survey responses that the information processing role of the PIAA is of considerable importance to respondents. The results shown in Table 3 present the cumulative importance ratings (the percentage of 5-7 scores) for workplace relations issues surveyed. They illustrate survey participants' perception of the importance to the future of their business of receiving quality information concerning various workplace relations issues.

Table 3: Workplace Relations Issues (Q1 Part B)

The following percentage of respondents identified that information on these issues was important to the future of their organisation (for example rated 5-7):

Legal requirements/employee conditions	**87%**
OHS Legislation	**85%**
Termination/dismissal	**85%**
Workers compensation laws	**82%**
Workforce education/training	**67%**
EEO and Anti-Discrimination matters	**63%**
Sexual Harassment issues	**63%**
Employer funded protection of worker entitlements	**62%**
Availability of Training	**58%**
Succession Planning	**55%**
Customer focus and service training	**53%**
Education and training for self	**52%**
Computer based training	**48%**
Older employees in workforce issues	**44%**

Only information on workplace relations issues were rated 5-7 on the 7 point likert scale by more than 75 per cent (approximately) of respondents. However, the survey results also showed the importance to respondents of receiving information in a range of areas other than employment relations. The following data represents the highest percentage ratings by respondents (that is, the percentage of respondents that rated issues 5-7 on the 7-point likert scale) across all information areas identified in the survey: GST and personal income tax rates

(75.9%); corporate tax reform (73.4%); size and growth in markets and sectors (72.2%); Environment Protection Agency (EPA) e.g. information on obligations under new environment legislation (69.6%); developing new markets (68.4%); E-Commerce security (65.8%); and federal government industry policy (62%); pressures to utilise environmental friendly alternatives e.g. reduction in green house gases; inks / chemicals / solvent usage; waste minimisation / recycling (58.3%).

Conclusions

The survey results discussed in this paper are based upon only seventy-nine responses and must therefore be viewed with some caution. However, the findings concerning aspects of respondents' businesses demonstrate a consistency with the issues identified in Print21. The survey results also indicate that some major concerns identified in Print21, including the need for businesses to focus on global and niche markets, may not been addressed by survey respondents and the majority of respondents are working harder to maintain profitability.

The survey results demonstrate that there is a range of services provided by the PIAA which are valued highly by their members but industrial relations or workplace relations concerns remain of paramount importance to members. These results challenge the notion that changes in the Australian industrial relations system necessarily require employer associations to adapt by expanding the range of services they provide. Although most of the literature dealing with the changing role of Australian employer associations has tended to associate their expansion of services with adaptation or reaction, Mortimer et al (2002) concluded that a focus on 'traditional' industrial issues may well represent a rational response to a current membership need, rather than a reactive stance. Certainly, the results of the PIAA membership survey indicate the importance for members of their Association's provision of industrial relations services.

The results of the PIAA survey illustrate the importance for employer associations of surveying their members to ascertain what is important for them. While employer associations may choose to adopt a leadership role in directing perceived needed change among their members, their own survival may depend more upon meeting the expectations of their members or at least engaging in a mixed strategy of modifying whilst meeting members' needs.

Notes

1. Sincere thanks to the Printing Industries Association of Australia for allowing the use of their survey data in this paper. All interpretations of data, errors and omissions contained in this paper are attributable only to the author of this paper.
2. That is, although 30.4 per cent of respondents identified their businesses as 'best fitting' the 'general commercial printing' sector, a further 10.1 per cent of respondents identified that they did provide general commercial printing services.

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Regulation, De-regulation and Re-regulation: The Scope of Employment Relations in the 21st century

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of the International Employment Relations Association.

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Preface

The 11th annual conference of the International Employment Relations Association (IERA) took place at the University of Greenwich Business School in London, England. This was the first IERA annual conference to take place outside of the Asia-Pacific Region and marked a historic coming of age for the Association. It was decided at the 2003 conference that IERA should become a truly international body and the constitution was changed at the AGM to allow regional IERAs to be established in Europe, Australasia, Asia and North America, each with their own officers and annual conference. There will continue to be an annual international conference.

The 2004 conference took place from 8th to 11th July at the University of Greenwich Business School's magnificent home in the Old Royal Naval College on the Greenwich World Heritage Site beside the Thames. This architectural ensemble is probably the finest set of historic buildings in England, designed by Sir Christopher Wren in the early 18th century and painted by Canaletto and Turner amongst others. Delegates were also lucky to experience some distinctly non-English weather with hot sunny days for the length of the conference. The conference was attended by almost 100 delegates and guests from around thirteen countries. The theme for the 2003 conference was 'Employment Relations in the 21st Century: Regulation, deregulation and re-regulation'. Some seventy papers were given over the three days of the conference under various themes – worker representation and union renewal; flexible work and workers; new forms of management/union relations; public sector employment relations; equal opportunities; training and development; privatisation and deregulation; HRM and knowledge management; and employment relations in Asia.

The conference opened with a wine reception where delegates were welcomed by the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University, Professor David Wills. Delegates were serenaded by musicians from the Trinity College of Music that shares the Greenwich site with the university. The conference started with a plenary session given by Professor Chris Brewster of Henley Management College on flexible working practices in Europe. Another plenary session on the Thursday morning brought together speakers from four organisations to give their views on current developments in British and global employment relations. These included Peter Brannen from the ILO, Sarah Veale from the TUC, Mike Emmott from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and Peter Burgess from the IDS European Report.

The conference dinner on Thursday evening was held in the Trafalgar, one of the most famous old inns along the Thames. The delegates were again serenaded but this time by the Andrea Vicari jazz trio. The conference finished on the Friday morning with a plenary session by Professor Anna Pollert, Professor of Employment Relations at Greenwich, who took as her theme 'Women, work and equal opportunities in post-Communist transition'.

Special thanks must go to Dr Susan Corby and Dr Celia Stanworth from Greenwich's academic staff who organised the event and Gill Haxell and Diane Barnett for the very successful administration of the conference. I would also like to thank those Greenwich staff who provided their services as referees for the abstracts submitted. Thanks are also due to Professor Les Johnson, Director of the Business School, for his support for the conference.

Finally I must thank Professor Janet Druker, joint secretary of IERA and Head of the University of East London Business School, who in her previous role as Director of Research at Greenwich did so much to sow the seeds for the success of the 2003 conference.

Many of the delegates attending the conference chose to deliver a paper and submit it for possible publication in the refereed proceedings. All papers for publication were submitted to double blind refereeing. In some cases, this resulted in papers being rejected at this stage. Those who had either abstracts or papers rejected are encouraged to use the IERA network to assist them in developing their papers in future. In some other cases, the referees' comments led to substantial revisions to the papers delivered at the conference before they were accepted. All revised papers were then subjected to further refereeing.

The papers published in these proceedings include only those papers that were accepted by the conference referees. I would like to sincerely thank those IERA members who acted as referees for these proceedings.

- Lyn Bain
- Nikki Balnave
- Steven Barrett
- Deborah Blackman
- Jillian Christie
- Anneke Fitzgerald
- Louise Ingersoll
- Colin Innes
- Doris Kluge
- Priscilla Leece
- Dennis Mortimer
- Ron Shapiro
- Meg Smith
- Keri Spooner

As mentioned at the start of this preface, IERA is now a truly international network of scholars in the field of employment relations with members on four continents. The 2004 conference will be taking place in Queensland, Australia but future annual conferences are planned for Ireland, Denmark and Hong Kong. As Vice-President for Europe I wish the IERA 2004 conference well and trust that they will build on the new international strengths developed in Greenwich in 2003. We will also be happy to greet IERA members at the 2004 European IERA Symposium to be held at the University of Utrecht in late August.

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