

# **THE EMERGING FIELD OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS: PROFILING THE PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE\***



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Survey Design and Distribution .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Industry Profile of Responses.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Respondent Demographics .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The General Nature of Community Relations Work .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Organisational Arrangements.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>What's it like for Workers?.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Professional Development.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>What Practitioners Want.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Summary of Findings.....</b>	<b>16</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Community relations work is an emerging field of practice in the minerals industry and involves a wide range of activities and responsibilities. Different sites and companies may use other terms, but for the purposes of this paper, the term ‘community relations’ is used broadly to indicate work that involves facilitating and/or managing relationships and interaction between minerals sites and local communities.

Surprisingly little research has been undertaken about people employed by minerals operations to do community relations work. The ‘voice’ of community relations practitioners seems hidden amongst broader debates about the minerals industry, its social and environmental impacts, and progress towards sustainable development. Given the significant effort the industry has expended on responding to external stakeholders, local to global, it is important to understand the perspective of community relations practitioners, as they hold one of the many keys to unlocking the industry’s potential for achieving enhanced corporate social performance on the ground.

This paper presents key findings of an industry survey undertaken in 2004 of community relations practitioners in the Australian and New Zealand minerals industries. It aims to build a profile of this occupational group and stimulate discussion about the nature of corporate community relations from a worker perspective. It also aims to document some of the practical challenges that workers face day-to-day, both personally and professionally. The survey represents Phase 1 of a two-phase study of site-based community relations practitioners.

## **SURVEY DESIGN AND DISTRIBUTION**

The survey comprised primarily closed response questions covering different dimensions of community relations work, including: work activities, site context, organisational arrangements, occupational background and professional knowledge. These were also several open-ended questions about the challenges of community relations work. The survey was designed in consultation with corporate representatives, community relations practitioners and academic advisers. Quantitative analysis was undertaken via the software program SPSS™, primarily through the descriptive statistics function, while the Nvivo™ software program and manual coding was used for qualitative analysis.

The survey targeted personnel working in the Australian and New Zealand Minerals industries whose role included a significant level of responsibility for community relations<sup>1</sup>. At the time of undertaking the survey a consolidated industry list of community relations practitioners did not exist. Neither the Minerals Council of Australia, its counterpart body in New Zealand, nor state industry bodies held such a list. Thus, corporate offices of Australia and New Zealand’s largest mining companies were contacted to create a distribution list. This strategy was based on the assumption that major companies were more likely to employ community relations practitioners than small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Several SMEs and individual sites were contacted directly and included in the list, however responses came primarily from larger companies. External consultants were not included in the sample.

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<sup>1</sup> For clarification a definition of community relations work was provided on the top of the survey.

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While the distribution list was broad, there would have been people undertaking community relations work who did not receive the survey.

The survey set out to capture the perspective of site-based practitioners working in physical proximity to communities in which minerals operations are based. However, as some regional and corporate office-based workers were included in company lists, they also received the survey. While the responses of these groups are relevant to the research, significant parts of this paper focuses primarily on presenting data about the perspective of site-based respondents in particular.

The survey was posted in hard copy to 162 people, 152 of whom were located in Australia and 10 in New Zealand. Hard copy distribution allowed for a greater degree of confidentiality for respondents than electronic return via a corporate email system. Two companies elected to mail the survey to employees themselves. In every case the survey was returned directly to the author at the University of Queensland via a reply-paid envelope. A period of six weeks was provided to complete and return the survey.

While a ‘picture’ of community relations workers has emerged through the survey, the method had limitations. It was not possible to get ‘deep’ insight into the experiences of workers, clarify or validate responses, or understand the full context of answers. These limitations have been addressed in Phase 2 of the project, through the use of ethnographic methods, which have involved workplace observation and in-depth interviewing with seven specialist site-based community relations practitioners. Despite its limitations, the survey does provide important context for the field research, especially given the lack of available information about community relations workers as an occupational group. Phase 2 has been completed, and results are currently being analysed.

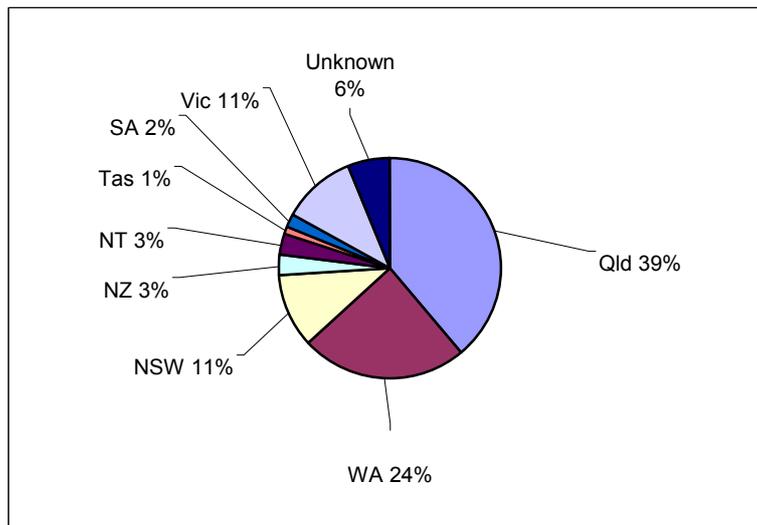
The survey did not inquire about the salary range of community relations workers to enable comparison with other occupational groups and professionals. It may be useful for subsequent research to investigate salaries, and refine the sampling frame.

## ***INDUSTRY PROFILE OF RESPONSES***

In total, 91 responses were received from 13 different companies. This represents a response rate of 56 per cent, which is considered satisfactory given that the distribution list was broad and exploratory rather than narrow and targeted.

The largest proportion of responses was from Queensland (39%), then Western Australia (24%) and New South Wales (11%). There was a small response from New Zealand (3%), Northern Territory (3%) and Tasmania (1%). Responses from South Australia (2%) and Victoria (11%) were primarily from corporate and/or regional offices.

**Figure 1: Respondents by State**



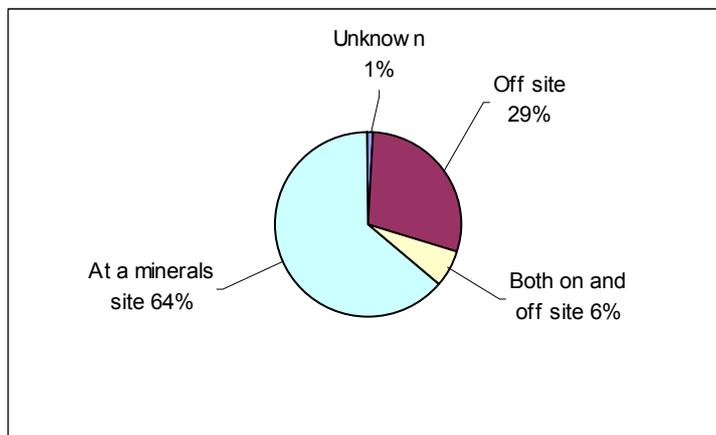
**n=91**

Respondents worked across a range of commodities, with many involved in more than one. The dominant commodities represented were coal (37%) and gold (22%). Iron ore had a 9 per cent representation. Some respondents indicated involvement in bauxite, alumina, aluminium, nickel, copper/lead/zinc and manganese operations. People from corporate offices also indicated involvement in diamonds and natural gas<sup>2</sup>.

Given this profile, the coal industry on the east coast of Australia appears to have been over-sampled, with iron-ore under-sampled, particularly in Western Australia. Responses from the Northern Territory were also low considering the state’s resource profile. It is unlikely that this has significantly influenced results, other than in specific areas such as Indigenous Affairs.

Of the total sample, 64 per cent were site-based workers. This group is the primary focus of this study. Around 29 per cent were located off site, primarily in corporate and/or regional offices. A small percentage of respondents (6%) stated that they were located both on and off site, sharing time between the two.

**Figure 2: Location of respondents**



**n=91**

<sup>2</sup> Some of this was outside Australia and New Zealand

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The majority of site-based workers covered one site (71%). Not surprisingly, the vast majority of off-site workers covered more than one site. Workers who covered more than one site account for the multiple answers to many of the survey questions in this study.

Most site-based respondents were involved in operating mines or plants (95%). Some also worked in other stages of the minerals life cycle, from exploration and construction, to production and closure, but only a very small percentage worked exclusively in these other areas.

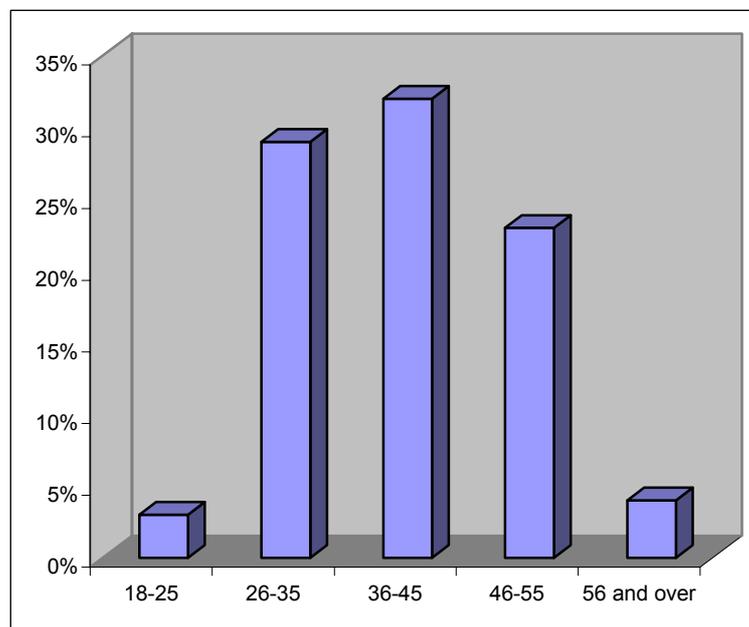
Site-based workers primarily worked in rural locations, either closely settled (29%) or sparsely populated (22%). About one third worked on a remote site (36%), with a minority working in an urban<sup>3</sup> context (16%).

The majority of site-based workers said that the workforce in their location lived locally to the operation (64%), with a minority being camp-based<sup>4</sup> (21%), or a combination of residential and camp-based (16%).

## **RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Few workers were in the upper and lower age groups. There was a fairly even spread between the three middle age ranges of 26-35 (32%), 36-45 (35%) and 46-55 (25%).

**Figure 3: Age Range**



**n=91**

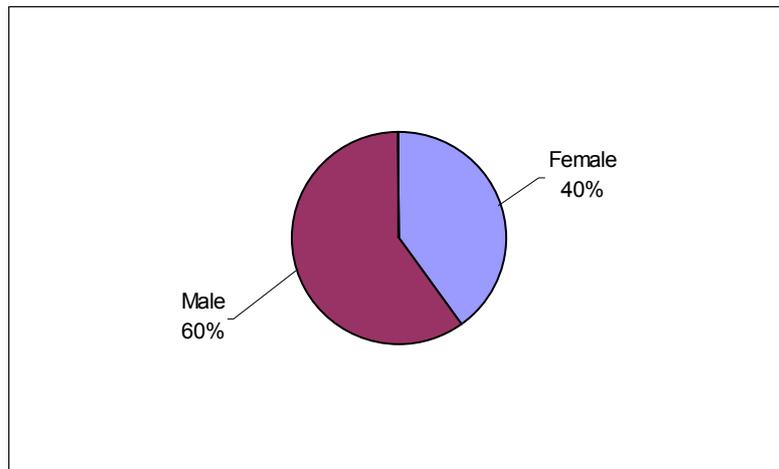
There were more males (60%) than females (40%). However, compared to the industry norm, this area of work appears to have a significantly high representation of women.

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<sup>3</sup> In very close proximity to a city or regional centre

<sup>4</sup> Most likely fly-in/fly-out or drive-in/drive-out.

**Figure 4: Gender Representation**



**n=91**

There were few indigenous respondents (6%) possibly due to WA and the NT being under-represented in the sample.

### ***THE GENERAL NATURE OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS WORK***

Respondents were asked to indicate all their main community relations-type activities. A list of 12 activities was provided. Responses suggest that workers undertake a broad spread of activities, with a mean of six activities nominated. Table 1 shows the pattern of responses.

The most common community relations-type activity was consultation and engagement (68%), followed by public relations (66%), sponsorship and donations (57%), then community programs (53%) and dealing with community complaints (52%).

**Table 1: Community Relations Activities Undertaken by Respondents**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% (n=91)*</b>
Community consultation and engagement	68
Public relations (e.g. local media liaison, publicity, community events etc.)	66
Sponsorships and donations (including in-kind assistance)	57
Community programs (e.g. community development, capacity building etc.)	53
Community complaints	52
Employee communications re: sustainable development	47
Government relations	45
Indigenous affairs	44
Issues management and crisis communication	43
Community education about the minerals industry	37
Cultural heritage management	35
Other	12

**\*Multiple responses permitted**

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## ORGANISATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

### (a) *Formalisation of Responsibilities*

The survey findings suggest that some workers may benefit from greater formalisation of their community relations responsibilities. Of the total sample, the majority of respondents said their community relations activities and responsibilities had been formalised in their job description. About one third (33%) said their responsibilities had either not been formalised, or were only partially formalised.

### (b) *Departmental Location*

More than one-third of respondents were associated with more than one department, suggesting a complex set of organisational arrangements<sup>5</sup>. Table 2 shows the pattern of responses. Workers were most commonly located in a stand-alone community relations department (29%). The second most common location was within Public Relations/External Affairs (27%), followed by a combination of Environment and Community Relations (14%) and then Environment (13%) and Human Resources (13%).

**Table 2: Departmental Location**

<b>Department</b>	<b>% (n=91)*</b>
Community Relations	29
Public Affairs/External Relations	27
Environment	13
Environment and Community Relations	14
Human Resources	13
Indigenous Affairs	
Other	14
Executive Office (e.g. General Manager or Mine Manager etc.)	9
Exploration	3
Production	1
Legal	-

**\*Multiple responses permitted**

The survey results raise questions about the human resource commitment being made to community relations as compared to other disciplines, particularly in light of the strong corporate commitments being made in this area. Only a minority of the total sample (36%) said they worked exclusively in community relations. Thus, the majority were not a dedicated resource, with about half (51%) also working in environment, and one-third in human resources (33%). Those people who also worked in other areas, spent an average of 28 per cent of their time on community relations.

### (c) *Types of Practitioners*

The survey results point to four broad 'types' of practitioners: specialist practitioners in a dedicated department, and those also working in Public Relations/External Affairs, Environment or Human Resources. Further studies might examine this more

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<sup>5</sup> However, some may have been indicating their sub-department and 'parent' department.

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closely to understand whether organisational location is related to how practitioners see their role.

The frequent location of community relations within Public Relations/External Affairs departments, and the large proportion of respondents undertaking public affairs/external affairs activities may help explain why community relations is perceived by some stakeholders as ‘just PR spin’.

(d) ***Reporting Arrangements***

About half of the site-based respondents (48%) reported directly to a site-based General Manager and 21 per cent to a corporate manager, with 28 per cent of the remainder reporting to another site-based manager. The majority (45%) of those workers located partly or wholly off site reported to a corporate manager and 27 per cent reported to a site-based manager or General Manager. Further research may seek to understand these reporting arrangements, and whether greater or lesser degrees of complexity in reporting exist in other disciplines.

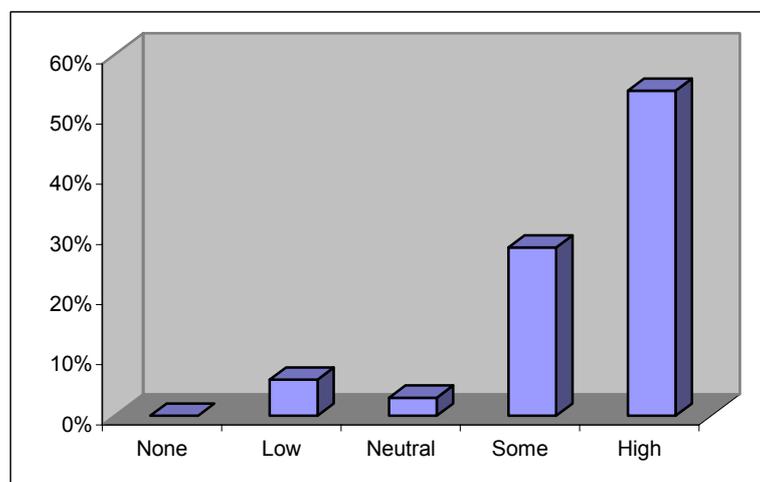
(e) ***Professional Isolation***

Of the total sample, about one third (31%) indicated that they were sole professionals, that is, there were no other people working in a professional capacity in community relations in their location. For site-based workers the figure was 40 per cent. Professional isolation may be an issue for some sole professionals given that they would be working amongst other well-populated occupational and professional groupings (e.g. technical trades, engineering, geology etc.) that would offer collegial support.

(f) ***Management Responsibility***

The majority of respondents in the total sample (78%) said that the community relations function was represented at a senior management level in the location where they worked. The majority of respondents (59%) also indicated that management attached a high level of importance to community relations. While there is still opportunity for improvement, these findings are encouraging from both a worker and a community perspective.

**Figure 5: Level of Management Support**



n=91

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(g) ***Building a Profile***

People undertaking community relations work in the minerals industry are generally well educated and have considerable industry experience. However, the survey results show that the majority has not been tertiary educated in a directly relevant discipline. In addition, the group has a low level of prior experience in community relations-type work, either within or outside the industry. The industry does not seem to be recruiting people from other industries or sectors, as results indicated a low level of lateral entry. Those entering the field from within the industry tend to come from technical disciplines, rather than ‘people professions’.

(h) ***General Industry Experience***

Respondents appeared to have considerable experience within the minerals industry. The average time worked within the industry was 12.5 years, ranging from a couple of months to 37 years. On average, respondents had worked in their current position for about three years. The minimum time worked was less than one month, and the maximum 20 years.

(i) ***Prior Community Relations-type Experience***

Of the total sample, the majority (62%) said they had no experience in community relations-type work outside the minerals industry. About 43 per cent of the total sample said they had no prior experience in community relations-type work within the industry.

Of the total sample, around two thirds (67%) had worked in the minerals industry in another capacity prior to taking up their role in community relations, many in more than one area. Table 3 shows that of those who said they had previously worked in another capacity, the vast majority (90%) had been employed in technical and natural science disciplines, such as environment (33%), geology (20%), engineering (16%), production (16%), metallurgy (3%) and information technology (2%). About 23% had some prior experience in human resource management.

**Table 3: Background of Respondents With Prior Experience in the Industry**

<b>Previous Area of Work</b>	<b>Prior Experience</b>	<b>% (n=60)*</b>
Technical/Natural Science	Environment	33
	Geology	20
	Engineering	16
	Production	16
	Metallurgy	3
	IT	2
Humanities/Social Science/Other	Human Resources	23
	Administration	12
	Supply	5
	Finance	2
	Legal	-

**\* Multiple responses permitted.**

(j) **Qualifications and Education**

About 84 per cent of the total sample held tertiary qualifications. Indicative of their prior work experience, the majority of respondents (60%) held undergraduate qualifications in technical and natural science disciplines, that is, the ‘hard’ sciences. About one quarter (27%) of respondents held qualifications in the ‘soft’ sciences, including arts, communication, sociology, archaeology and education. A significant proportion of respondents had pursued postgraduate qualifications, most of which appeared to be in the same discipline as their undergraduate degree, or in management, such as an MBA.

**Table 4: Tertiary Qualifications of Respondents**

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>% (n=75)</b>
Technical/ Natural Science	Science/Applied	48
	Science/Chemistry/Environmental Science/Geography/	
	Engineering (Mining, Civil etc.)	11
	IT	1
<b>Total Technical/Natural Science</b>		<b>60</b>
Humanities/ Social Science	Arts/Humanities/Social Science/Sociology/ Archaeology/ Anthropology	23
	Education	4
	<b>Total Humanities</b>	<b>27</b>
Other	Business/Commerce/ Management	13
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100</b>

**Note: Table excludes respondents who did not have tertiary qualifications.**

## **WHAT IS IT LIKE FOR WORKERS?**

Several survey questions sought insight into the workplace reality of community relations practitioners to understand what it was like to do this work. The following section starts to form such a picture. Phase 2 of the research builds on this.

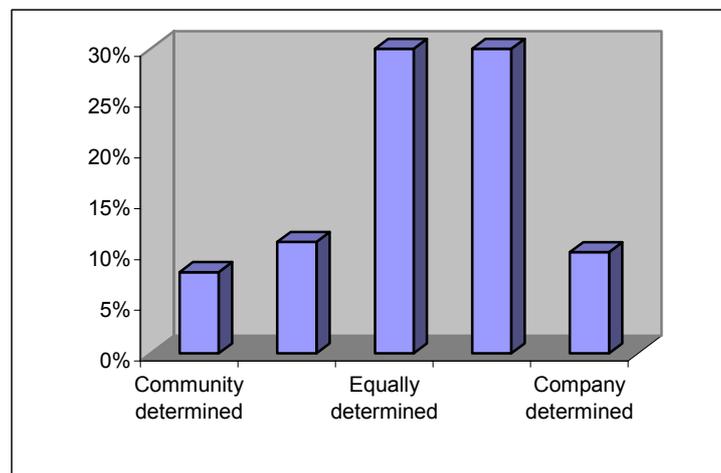
(a) **What Attracts Workers**

Workers were asked an open-ended question about what attracted them to community relations work. Responses revealed two dominant themes of attraction. Firstly, workers were in various ways attracted because the work involved working and/or interacting with people. Secondly, it enabled them to achieve positive outcomes for the community, and in many cases this included the company. Words like ‘creative’, ‘diverse’, ‘passion’, ‘exciting’, ‘interesting’, ‘variety’ and ‘rewarding’ featured prominently in these explanations. Around 15 per cent of respondents indicated that they were not working in community relations because they were attracted to it, but rather, the function ‘came with the role’, or had been imposed upon them.

(b) **Work Priorities**

Respondents were asked to mark on a continuum what influenced their work priorities – the community or the company. Most respondents indicated that they were more influenced by corporate than community priorities (Figure 6). About 33 per cent marked the midpoint between the company and the community.

**Figure 6: Source of Work Priorities**



n=89

(c) **Challenges**

Respondents were asked to describe some of the key challenges they faced working in community relations in the minerals industry. Answers were analysed thematically, rather than quantitatively.

Challenges articulated by respondents were numerous and varied, although there were some commonalities. Respondents suggested that balancing different priorities was a key challenge, for example: the community's desire for cash donations and the company's desire to move towards sustainable contributions; or the company's desire for a profit and the community's desire to preserve their way of life. Other competing priorities included dealing with: production vs community goals; strategic vs immediate issues; internal vs external focus; individual vs collective priorities; rural vs urban priorities; indigenous vs non-indigenous concerns; and a PR vs a community relations focus.

Several respondents indicated that corporate policies had limited local relevance and did not come with clear guidelines for implementation. Many listed communication/engagement processes as a challenge as there were different requirements and different methods to choose from. Other respondents indicated that understanding the community posed a challenge, particularly in terms of complexity, divisions, emotions, conflict, politics and diversity. Some said that dealing with the industry's poor image was a constant challenge, as was dealing with government, particularly regarding provision of services. Respondents also indicated that they often had limited control over their work and ended up 'fixing' problems as a result of past practices. In addition, many said they had limited time and resources to do all that was required of them.

There were several organisational issues that posed challenges for workers, including: internal politics; limited support from middle management; limited understanding of

their work by others; and not being perceived as ‘professional’. Many respondents said they had limited career options, and had been provided with little in the way of training or professional development.

On a personal level, several respondents indicated their biggest challenge was living and working in the local community. Several of the indigenous respondents said that working with indigenous people came with its own set of issues that were seldom recognised.

In essence, community relations work appears to be complex, diverse and filled with tension on several levels, including: the conceptual, organisational, professional, and personal. It is important that workers are equipped to deal with these challenges if minerals operations are to achieve enhanced social performance in line with corporate and site policies and community expectations.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

### (a) ***Knowledge Sources***

On the whole, respondents did not appear to be consciously accessing or drawing on established knowledge in sociology, social science, development or other related disciplines in undertaking their work. Instead, they worked largely from a personal orientation, rather than one grounded in social research or theory. This might go some way to explaining why other occupational groups may not regard community relations work as ‘professional’ in the traditional sense.

Workers were asked what they draw on in undertaking their work and were provided with a list of 12 sources. The average number of sources nominated was 6-7. The most common were personal and professional experience (84% and 82% respectively), followed by personal beliefs and values (71%) and personal knowledge (68%). The next most common cluster was corporate and/or site policies (63%) and corporate values (55%). Theoretical knowledge and knowledge generated from research did not rate highly compared to other categories.

**Table 5: Knowledge Sources Utilised by Respondents**

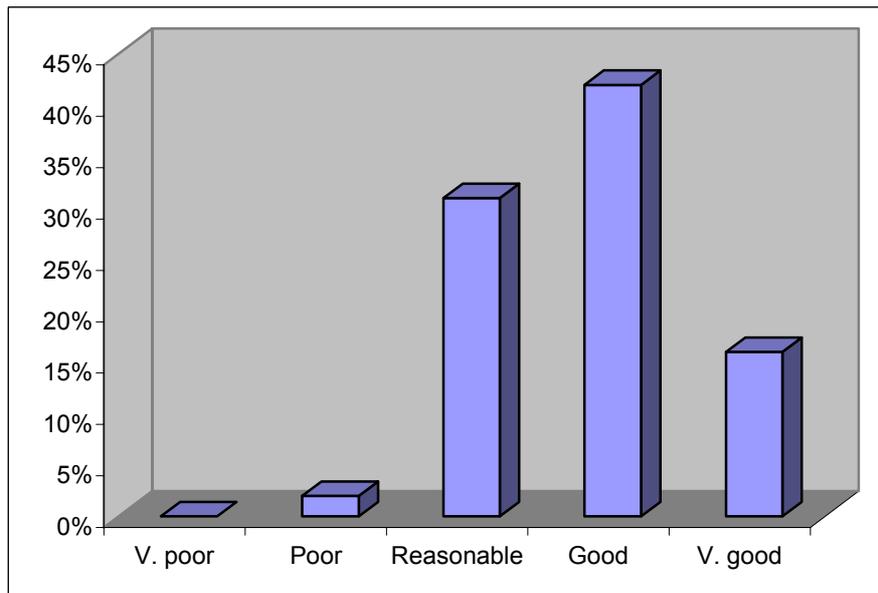
<b>Knowledge Source</b>	<b>% (n=91)*</b>
Personal experience	84
Professional experience	82
Personal beliefs/values	71
Personal knowledge	68
Corporate and/or site policy	63
A colleague	57
Corporate values	55
Research	34
Theoretical knowledge	34
A practice framework(s)	31
A mentor	24
Spiritual orientation	8
Other	3

**\* Multiple responses permitted**

(b) **Knowledge Rating**

Despite the limited use of research, theory and practice frameworks and significant reliance on the personal domain, most respondents rated their knowledge about community relations fairly highly. On a scale of 1 – 5, (1 being the lowest), 80 per cent rated their knowledge as either ‘reasonable’ or ‘good’. About 18 per cent rated their knowledge as ‘very good’ and another very small proportion rated their knowledge as either 1 or 2.

**Figure 7: Self-rated Knowledge of the Community Relations Field**



n=91

(c) **Training and Development**

One of the most notable findings of the survey was that workers had received limited professional development opportunities specific to community relations. The majority (57) of all respondents indicated that they have *never* been offered training specific to community relations in the minerals industry. Only one third (33%) had completed such training<sup>6</sup>. Of those who had completed training, all said it had been either helpful (83%) or partially helpful (17%) to their work.

While community relations work may be a new and developing field of practice, the pace of professional development does not seem to be keeping pace with the emphasis the industry is placing on corporate social performance. Whilst it is acknowledged that site-based community relations work is only one dimension of corporate social performance, it appears that the professional development needs of workers may require greater attention.

<sup>6</sup> Respondents were asked to list the course they attended. It was not clear that these courses were necessarily specific to the minerals industry, but they were community relations orientated.

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## WHAT PRACTITIONERS WANT

The majority of respondents (80%) volunteered suggestions about what was needed to better support community relations workers. Additional training and professional development was listed by almost half (45%) of all people who responded to this question. Several respondents also indicated that professional networking and mentoring would assist them (16%). There was an indication that some workers (20%) were seeking greater support from middle management. Workers also suggested that they needed greater resources, both financial and human (15%) and would be more effective if the community relations function was more firmly embedded in organisational systems and processes (10%).

**Table 6: Additional Support Needs Identified by Respondents**

Suggestion	% (n=73)*
Training and development	45
Access to Professional Networks/Mentoring Opportunities	16
Greater support from management and other employees	16
More resources	15
Further embed community relations considerations in policy and practice	10
Greater clarity and direction	9
Better access to knowledge/information/literature in the area	9
Greater rewards and recognition	5
Stronger policies and commitments to support community relations activities	5
More experienced professionals in the area	5

\* Multiple responses permitted.

Workers were clearly asking for training and development above all else. However, it should be noted that implementing training solutions without addressing systemic issues, such as recruitment and selection, professional support, organisational arrangements, management commitment and organisational culture, may not be an effective strategy.

Meeting individual training needs will always be challenging considering the diversity of this occupational group in terms of their prior qualifications and experience, work activities and path of entry into the field of practice, site context and characteristics of the local community. Flexible and individualised training may be necessary, along with other solutions.

There have been recent moves within some of the major companies to identify community relations competencies. While this is an encouraging development, competencies must not become the only focus, as an over-emphasis in this area may relegate community relations to a technical vocation rather than a professional discipline that fosters critical thinking and awareness of the complex arrangements within which community relations takes place. Workers must be provided opportunities to develop not only skills and competencies, but also their knowledge of the social sciences, along with flexible and critical thinking that enables them to build their capacity to understand, respond to and deal with the complexity, diversity and tensions inherent in their work.

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## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **Nature of the Work**

- Community relations practitioners work within a complex set of reporting and organisational arrangements.
- The general nature of community relations work is diverse. The most common community relations activities identified by the survey were: consultation and engagement, public relations, sponsorship and donations, community programs and responding to community complaints.

### **Gender**

- There is much greater involvement of women in community relations work than in the industry as a whole.

### **Organisational Arrangements**

- Some workers would benefit from greater formalisation of their community relations responsibilities.
- Practitioners can be grouped into: 1) specialist practitioners in a dedicated department, and these who work in 2) Public Relations/External Affairs, 3) Environment or 4) Human Resources.
- There was quite a large proportion of ‘sole practitioners’. Professional isolation may be an issue for some of these practitioners.
- The majority of respondents indicated that community relations was a management priority in their location, however a number expressed concern about the lack of support from the human resources area.

### **Experience and Education**

- Community relations practitioners are, on the whole a well-educated group, although most were not tertiary educated in a directly relevant discipline.
- Practitioners have considerable industry experience, but on the whole have low levels of prior experience in community relations, either within or outside the industry.
- The industry has tended to recruit from ‘within’, with limited lateral entry from other industries or sectors.
- Those entering the field from within the industry tend to come from technical disciplines, rather than ‘people professions’.

### **Challenges**

- Common challenges listed by workers included: balancing different priorities, limited local relevance of corporate policies, understanding the community, limited human and financial resources, dealing with the industry’s poor image. Organisational challenges included internal politics, limited support from middle management,

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limited understanding of community relations work by others, and not being perceived as ‘professional’.

### **Professional Development**

- The majority of respondents had *never* been offered training specific to community relations in the minerals industry.
- Only a minority of respondents had completed training specific to community relations in the minerals industry.
- Workers indicated that they wanted more training and professional development.
- Workers also indicated that they wanted access to professional networks, greater clarity and direction, better support from middle management, and further embedding of community relations in policy and practice.