

Raising the profile of human factors/ergonomics in Australia: An example illustrating how opinions have been explored within the profession

Jennifer Long^{a,b}

^aJennifer Long Visual Ergonomics, Katoomba, NSW, AUSTRALIA; ^bSchool of Optometry and Vision Science, University of New South Wales, Sydney, AUSTRALIA

1. Introduction

In 2012, a paper was published in *Ergonomics* stating that the potential for human factors/ergonomics (HFE) is underexploited and that this could be rectified by strengthening the demand for and the application of high-quality HFE (Dul et al., 2012). General suggestions were made in the article for how this could be achieved, and there was a call to ensure that individual members of the IEA federated societies understand the importance of the strategy outlined in the article.

2. Practice innovation

The Human Factors and Ergonomics Society of Australia (HFESA) took up the challenge set by Dul et al, and conducted a 90 minute facilitated workshop at the HFESA Annual Conference in Canberra in 2012. The purpose was to communicate the key findings presented in the *Ergonomics* article and to initiate formal discussion amongst HFESA members on some of the issues facing the profession. The aim of the session was to devise an operation plan to raise the profile of HFE in Australia.

3. Description of the workshop

The workshop was scheduled as one of three parallel streams at the HFESA conference. The structure was a 15 minute introduction by the facilitator, a 20 minute small group discussion, a 40 minute large group discussion, and a 5 minute conclusion. The questions put to the group are given in table 1.

There were 23 participants who elected to attend the workshop, most of whom were members of the HFESA (n=21). Participants were divided into small groups according to their employment status: employees and employers within government and private enterprise (2 groups, n=4 and n=5), academics and educators (n=6), and independent HFE consultants (n=8).

Table 1. Questions put to the small groups for discussion.

Considering the two aspects for improving the profile of HFE (strengthen the demand for high-quality HFE and strengthen the application of high-quality HFE):

- How can it be achieved at an individual level?
- How can it be achieved at a Society level?

Consider these questions as they apply to your employment perspective.

Suggestions should be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely.

4. Findings

Two themes emerged for how individuals can improve the profile of HFE: (1) Individuals need to be better at explaining HFE to non-HFE persons and (2) Individuals should develop case studies illustrating projects or other work which have HFE benefits, and communicate these to business and the broader community.

Two barriers were cited which mitigate against a broader promotion of HFE. (1) In the academic setting there is no code for HFE within principle funding bodies or productivity databases, so HFE work is not labelled and recognised as HFE work. (2) Writing business case studies for publication or conference presentations requires a different skill set to that usually required within business. Therefore, these success stories are infrequently communicated in a formal setting.

Some of these barriers can be addressed at a Society level. For example, the HFESA could provide resources to assist members promote HFE in the broader community and help them to develop writing and presentation skills for capitalizing on these opportunities. Other barriers may need to be addressed at a national or even international level. For example, further investigation is required to determine how government departments and funding bodies categorise their data. Once this is known, then it will be possible to develop a business case for expanding funding/productivity categories to include HFE.

Other suggestions generated in the session included developing social media platforms for promoting HFE, encouraging younger age members to more actively participate in Society affairs and initiating an Innovations Award prize which showcases a practical application of HFE. Steps have already been initiated by the HFESA to implement these suggestions.

5. Discussion

The interactive format stimulated discussion of Dul et al's paper and generated practical ideas for implementation, both at an individual and Society level. It also enabled collegial discussion among individuals working in similar employment settings and the opportunity for individuals to assist the Society with its goal of promoting HFE in Australia. A limitation of the discussion format is that these findings are only the opinion of those who attended and were interested in participating in the session. Nevertheless, the ideas gained from the session have provided a valuable starting point for raising the profile of HFE at a local level in Australia.

References

Dul, J., Bruder, R., Buckle, P., Carayon, P., Falzon, P., Marras, W., et al. 2012. "A strategy for human factors/ergonomics: developing the discipline and the profession." *Ergonomics*, 55(4), 377-395.