



Industry study investigates the origins of, and strategies to deal with, stress in construction

Source: Site Safe

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An industry study conducted by Site Safe and Massey University's School of Built Environment has investigated the negative effects of work-related stress on productivity, and physical and emotional health of construction workers in New Zealand.

The paper, which is the first collaboration under the research Memorandum of Understanding between both organisations, highlights several critical factors that create undue stress among construction workers. It identifies potential mitigation approaches to reducing stressors, as suggested by workers participating in the study.

Site Safe Chief Executive, Brett Murray, says that as well as serving as a confirmatory piece, the paper gives insight into the thought patterns and voices of frontline workers who are often unheard in an industry fraught with danger and unsafe practices.

"We operate in a high-risk industry and trying to bring about a culture of change within health and safety isn't going to happen overnight.

"By talking directly to workers who face these dangers every day, we can better understand what needs to be done to create safer construction sites."

Massey University's researchers for the paper, Dr Andries (Hennie) van Heerden and Dr Gregory Chawynski, agree that successful resolution of the issues identified in the paper is dependent on active and willing engagement from those in positions of authority involved in construction. This extends to well-informed clients, their consultants, and other parties that equally share project risks as principal drivers.

"As a recommendation, the Construction Sector Accord's guiding principles could be made enforceable through its transformation plan. As it currently stands, this would be difficult because it is a voluntary, collaboration-based initiative promoted by the private and the government."

Research participants indicated that lack of collaboration, poor communication, and unrealistic timeframes and budgets on the job were leading to corner-cutting, and health and safety practices being compromised.

In some cases, these self-initiated stress minimisation strategies were not the result of conscious decision-making. High uncertainty in job processes and unclear responsibilities, particularly when multiple contractors were on-site, often led to shortcomings and unsafe behaviour and conflict. It isn't just young workers new to the industry either. There appears to be no increasing tolerance to stress over time, with experienced workers of 20-or-more years no more immune to workplace stress than their less experienced counterparts.

A supportive working environment, greater empowerment of employees in decision-making processes on-site, and regular workload allocation reviews were common themes in the responses, cited by many as ways to reduce stress.

Brett Murray concedes that not every suggestion is a workable solution, however the responses and information in the study form a good basis to progress the discussion further.

"The results of the study clearly reflect the negative influence of stress brought about by an inefficient contracting and supply chain process that creates pressures that are often unable to be resolved by those most impacted.

"That issue has been recognised by initiatives such as the Construction Sector Accord and is, in part, why it is so important that the Accord delivers tangible results."

The Accord was raised by some study participants as a platform through which issues surrounding unethical behaviours causing added stress - like being asked to do something unethical on a project - could be addressed.

There is a strong upside to the industry effectively managing stressors in the workplace, according to Brett Murray.

"We believe that looking after our workers and creating a safer industry can improve productivity, profitability and the industry's long-term appeal as a career prospect.

"The industry is already inherently stressful, so we need to do everything we can do ensure we're not adding to that.

"We want to get people home safe to their whanau every day, both physically and mentally and we will look at all avenues to work towards this."

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For more information and to view the whole paper, click [here](#).

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