MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY: A RAPID REVIEW

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Mental health in perspective

- It is the leading cause of sickness absence
- In the UK, a report found that **70 million sick days** a year are attributed to mental health
- An estimated £25 billion forgone in gross value added to the UK economy in losses through *absence, turnover and productivity*
- The HSE reported **one in four people** will have a mental health problem at some point
Mental health: has it received the attention it deserves?

- Physical OHS has been the dominant focus for construction organisations and researchers.
- It has been argued there is a *clear business case* for implementing positive mental health strategies and preventing mental illness.
- High production pressures, dangerous work, complex decision-making, long supply chains involving transient work, insecure temporary contracts, and long working hours are all factors that can affect worker mental health.
An industry at risk?

- Mental distress in construction workers is **double that of the level of the general male population**
- Male construction workers have a **higher rate of suicide** when compared to males in other occupations
- This has **prompted workplace-based suicide prevention** through intervention programs, such as Mates in Construction
Research approach

- A *rapid review* was undertaken
- A useful approach when there is a *lack of relevant research in a topic*
- Also when a review is *restricted* by *time or space*
- Aim was to review the *current understanding on mental health and wellbeing* within the construction industry
Research method steps

- Defining inclusion/exclusion parameters
  - Studies from 1999 onwards
  - Journal quality – Q1 and Q2 ranked in Scimago
  - Exclusion of grey literature (risk of missing unpublished literature)
  - Only studies in English (risk of missing literature in other languages)

- Consultation with a librarian for database selection – ICONDA and Science Direct (Elsevier)

- Screening, selection and application of a quality framework; and,

- Discussion of papers selected through the process.
Results: the samples

- Relevant studies were found across many continents: Australia, America, Africa, Asia, and Europe.
- 40% investigated the mental health of construction workers (e.g. trades)
- 40% construction professionals (e.g. project managers, architects, engineers)
- 20% had both in their research sample
Results: research approaches

- Typically focused on the *negative aspects of mental health*; these included stigma, psychosocial risk factors, stress and burnout.

- The majority of studies have focused on the *assessment/testing* of the mental health wellbeing of construction employees.

- *Dominance of quantitative methods*, rooted in positivist traditions; and therefore makes a call for the mobilisations of other research methodologies.
Conclusions made from the studies

- High levels of **workplace stress**:
  - Architects more than engineers
  - internal more than consultants
  - construction project managers suffered from high levels of job burnout

- **Harassment and discrimination** were experienced by all surveyed South African construction professions.

- A Dutch study found a substantial amount of bricklayers and supervisors **at risk of common mental disorder**

- Studies concluded there was need for improvement!
How to improve?

- Few studies have explored effective ways to implement improvements.

- Early prevention?
  One study reported a technology that can determine early detection of worker stress.

- Organisational changes?
  Long work hours and six-day work schedules found to being a major factor influencing poor lifestyle behaviours.

- Worker engagement?
  One study suggest ideas for the promotion of health and wellbeing should come from the workforce.
Conclusions

- Mental health has been identified as a **key contributor to escalating costs globally**.
- Hence, there is a **business case for it**, and arguably it should receive **more attention than it has**
- Research methodological approaches have been **narrow in terms of method and scope** (focusing on assessing the negatives)
- Findings suggest there is a **need for improvement in both blue and white collar construction employees**
- Further research is required (under-theorised area!), particularly in how to make successful improvements