

July 2019

Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing in Construction

[The Bartlett School of Construction and Project Management](#), University College London, has recently published a survey report entitled: "Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing in Construction Culture - Systems and Procedures in a Changing Environment".

The construction industry is facing multiple challenges due to a variety of factors:

- Clients are more sophisticated, which is reflected in their demands
- Projects are becoming more complex
- There is an increasing number of 'megaprojects'

For contractors, this means numerous challenges in ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of their employees and supply chains. This report provides a highly informative view of the issues faced in Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing (OHSW) in the construction industry, and the changes needed to overcome the challenges. The following bullet points provide a summary of the key points: the full report can be downloaded [here](#).

- Safety statistics have plateaued in the UK: there is a view that improving wellbeing could have a positive effect on performance
- Although wellbeing is moving up the construction agenda, it is difficult to implement and measure because it is so ill-defined
- A number of institutional matters need to be addressed: government; regulatory; and advisory institutions need to encourage a more balanced approach to OHSW
- OHSW templates are lacking in international contractors' and subcontractors' operations: better consistency is needed, along with enhanced learning and the sharing of good practice
- Despite the espoused values that health and safety is a top priority, it's actually commercial and financial criteria that remain the top priority: during projects, OHSW remains below commercial criteria
- Senior management is largely driven by legal compliance: OHSW measurement was found to be driven by compliance. It's difficult to quantify how much duty is towards legal compliance and how much is towards people
- Measurement can have the effect of encouraging isolated initiatives: many initiatives were reported to be short-lived
- The transactional contractor business model is broken - it provides little room for OHSW manoeuvre. A holistic and strategic view of the firm is necessary to develop transformational business models for commercial survival, and incremental transition is needed to remove barriers to OHSW improvement
- The business model needs to change operational practices in order to address issues such as: working long hours; undertaking long commutes; and working away from home
- Workplace factors such as mental health and fatigue can affect performance and site safety – including on the roads – which affects OHSW. These factors can both cause and exacerbate mental health problems

- OHSW practices are mainly procedural; prescriptive; developed top-down; and implemented inconsistently
- Management doesn't necessarily understand how operations are conducted safely on site
- The 'one size fits all' solution needs to be discarded: there needs to be a bottom-up approach to capture learning and experience from all levels - operatives and supervisors – to integrate their knowledge into procedures
- Systems are weak, as is communication and coordination – one of the causes of this is 'silo working'
- Contractor programme management is poor in some areas
- Too much responsibility is placed on individuals
- Safety management systems (SMS) were primarily about awareness creation and information communication
- Knowledge management systems (KMS) were rudimentary, having an almost entirely technical focus, and low engagement levels from staff
- Main contractors and subcontractors had good SMS for information processing and as a basis for knowledge transfer through KMS, yet the two were not linked: this provides a place to build the transformative organisational and project capabilities needed to overcome the shortcomings of the two individual systems and so benefit OHSW – the residual "bolt on extra" aspect of OHSW needs to be addressed
- Imposing, rather than embedding, H&S policies down the supply chain by client organisations causes disruption and leads to increased costs, and failure to embed practices. Main contractors do the same to their subcontractors
- There are different views of OHSW in construction. Management have failed to adequately align these different views (from multiple voices, such as senior management; mid-management; site management; operatives; and supply chain members) to ensure that project and construction managers, who currently act relatively autonomously, engage with OHSW in consistent ways as part of the service design
- Operatives stated that site conditions are variable regardless of size of contract and contractor, with some sites failing to be legally compliant. The provision and maintenance of basic facilities such as clean, warm and dry toilets, locker rooms, canteens, and showers cannot be guaranteed some ten years after they became a requirement
- Site management scope their responsibilities differently towards subcontractors. Some are concerned with direct employees, while others included employees in the supply chain. This difference was most evident between main and subcontractors, where subcontractor staff were of ethnic origin and there were language barriers
- Ensuring a cultural approach to OHSW requires procedures, including:
 - a strategy and business model using a consistent template, which accommodates a degree of nuanced flexibility for the project context and different types of tasks for employees, subcontract, and contract staff
 - training and induction for management, and induction and toolbox training for operatives that is currently more comprehensive, including ways to manage cultural barriers posed by ethnicity and language
 - taking care when intervening not to be too invasive into matters beyond immediate working practices
- The use of those digital technologies permitted on site needs clarification. Also, video production and its use on site require precise, but not necessarily standard, protocols

