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Culture in Construction Pilot Projects: Summary Interim Report

March 2024

Background

Culture in Construction is an initiative of the Construction Industry Culture Taskforce (CICT) — comprising the Australian Constructors Association, representing the nation’s largest construction firms, the Governments of New South Wales and Victoria and an academic team of workplace health and gender researchers [1].

CICT members have developed a new Culture Standard to address three major issues impacting the construction industry’s performance and sustainability, i.e., excessive work hours and fatigue, poor health and wellbeing, and difficulty in attracting a diverse workforce.

Since November 2022, data has been collected at five Pilot Projects that are implementing the Draft Culture Standard to understand its impact in the three areas of interest [2].

This summary report presents the combined findings of data collected between commencement of data collection through to the end of July 2023. A summary of data collection activity in this period is shown in Figure 1.

At the end of July 2023, nine data collection interactions had taken place across the five Pilot Projects. This included 158 semi-structured interviews. Two waves of interviews had been conducted at four of the Pilot Projects and a single wave of interviews was conducted at the fifth Pilot Project (due to a later commencement date). In addition, one wave of survey data had been collected at three of the Pilot Projects.

Sixty-six (42%) of the interviews were undertaken with women, while survey respondents (90%) were predominantly men. Most of the survey respondents (74%) were waged workers.

This summary report:

- examines the different ways the Culture Standard has been implemented, and
- explores workers’ experiences of the Culture Standard implementation at the Pilot Projects.

The report also identifies similarities and differences between implementation and experiences at the five Pilot Projects.

Pilot Project	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 23	Apr23	May 23	June 23	July 23
A				Interviews				Interviews Survey	
B					Interviews			Interviews Survey	
C					Interviews			Interviews Survey	
D	Interviews			Interviews					
E									Interviews

Figure 1: Data collection activity

Implementation of the Culture Standard

Time for life

Where possible the Culture Standard suggests sites should operate from Monday to Friday, but where this is not possible organisations should ensure all workers are working a five day per week program. The five Pilot Projects adopted different work schedules in their implementation of the Culture Standard. These differences highlight the ability to customise the Culture Standard implementation to suit the requirements of individual construction projects and reflect the flexibility available to organisations in determining how best to implement the Culture Standard under specific project requirements and conditions.

Two of the Pilot Projects (both 'horizontal' construction projects) combined a 'business as usual' 5-day schedule with alternative work arrangements when adjacent infrastructure needed to be closed down in order to perform specific construction activities (e.g. during occupations or campaigns). Different rosters were implemented during these busy periods. On one of the Pilot Projects a 'six days on: three days off' roster was adopted which was deemed to be tough but manageable for a limited period of time. On another project, workers worked four 12-hour shifts followed by two days off.

The work schedules adopted by the Pilot Projects also reflect varying degrees of 'compression' of work hours into a five-day week. In some instances, some interview participants described how long daily hours of work (between Monday and Friday) can negatively impact family life as well as leaving little time for self-care activities (e.g., exercise, being able to wind down after work etc). This was observed in Pilot Projects in which a high level of work hour compression was observed. Survey participants also reported higher work demands and poorer work-life balance in the Pilot Project at which the work schedule was compressed to the greatest extent.

Importantly, the Culture Standard also advocates for a cap on working hours, requiring organisations to program their projects to: (i) target that all workers work 50 hours or less per week, and (ii) ensure that no workers work over 55 hours per week.

Effect on wages and productivity

Waged workers were asked specifically about the effects of the Culture Standard implementation on their pay. Some waged workers (in the first wave of interviews) expressed some concerns about experiencing a reduction in pay. However, during the second wave of interviews, many of these workers commented that the effects on their pay have been minimal and, even though they may have experienced a small reduction, they considered the benefits of spending more time with their family to outweigh these costs.

"For me, money, work, comes and goes. Money can always be made but time with your children doesn't come back."

– waged worker

However, a minority of waged workers did indicate a preference to work Saturday and it is noteworthy that one of the Pilot Projects has retained Saturday work but made this optional for workers. It was also observed by participants that workers who choose to work on Saturdays are often younger, in the 'establishment' phase of their careers and have not yet started a family.

Interview participants across the Pilot Projects shared a common belief that productivity is not adversely affected by the implementation of the Culture Standard. Participants explained this in terms of generally lower productivity on Saturdays (across the industry) combined with productivity improvements associated with a workforce that is healthier (as a result of improved recovery opportunities) and more satisfied.

"I think, if anything, when you do stupid hours, like 70 to 80 hours, I don't think you get any more work done. I think you're just less effective and you're tired. I think I haven't noticed us doing less or anything like that at all."

– man in a site-based role

Weekly work hours

The Culture Standard targets that all workers work 50 hours or less per week, and that no workers work over 55 hours per week. When asked how many hours they work each week under the Culture Standard, 53% of survey respondents indicated they work between 46 and 55 hours each week (Figure 2).

Most salaried respondents (55%) indicated they would prefer to work fewer hours, while slightly more than half of waged respondents (52%) indicated their preference is to work the same number of hours as they are working under the Culture Standard. Twenty-seven per cent of waged workers indicated a preference to work more hours (Figure 3).

Interviewees at one Pilot Project indicated that they are able to exert a degree of control over their work hours/schedule by opting in to work on Saturdays or to work night shift if they choose to do so. This is important because control over work timing and duration are important determinants of workers' wellbeing [3].

Flexibility

The Culture Standard also requires that all workers have access to flexible work options and that organisations support and promote flexibility for all project roles including both office and site-based roles. Participants at all five Pilot Projects indicated that they are able to negotiate time off work if they need to attend to personal matters.

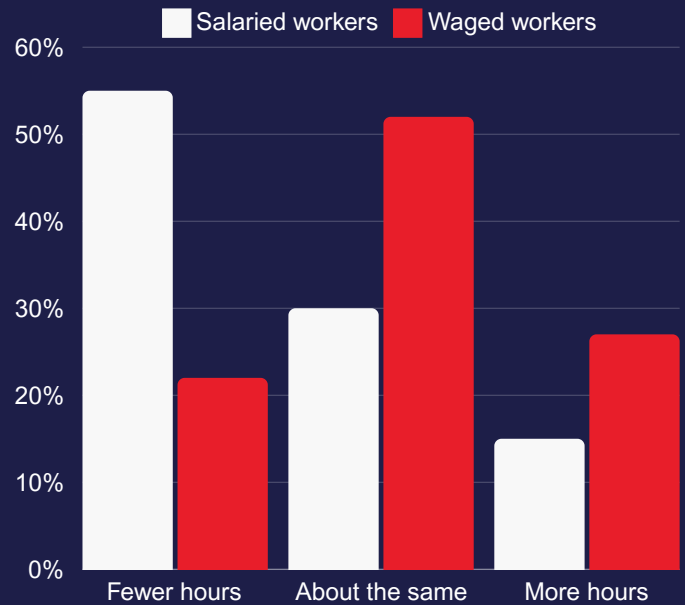


Figure 3: Work hour preferences of respondents

"I just so love it here... that people understand that it's not easy to get a nanny; only millionaires get a nanny, so when your child is sick, it's expected that you'll be working from home, and that's totally okay with management and all, which is great. There's no better place to raise a kid."
– woman with caring responsibilities

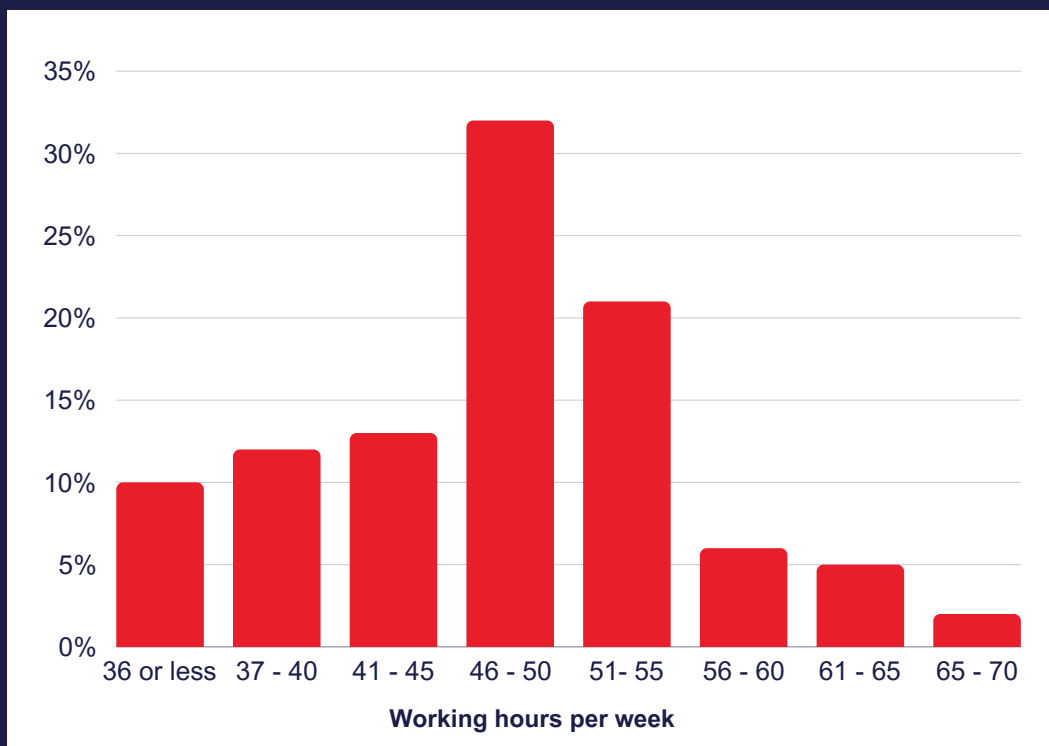


Figure 2: Weekly work hours of respondents

Five-day week

The Culture Standard requires that workers work a maximum of five-days in every seven days and, where possible, this work should be limited to between Monday and Friday.

In the interviews, there was majority support for the five-day week component of the Culture Standard across all five Pilot Projects. The most frequently cited reason that interview participants gave for preferring a five-day week was that it allows them to spend more time with their family, seeing friends or participating in leisure activities. This was difficult when working a six-day week as their work schedule was 'out of sync' with the schedules of family members and friends. Participants also observed that having a two-day weekend allows them to have better rest and recover from the week of work.

The survey results reflect this majority view with 84% of salaried and 61% of waged workers indicating a preference for working a five-day compared to a six-day week. However, a proportion (27%) of waged survey respondents indicated they would prefer to work a six-day week (Figure 4).

"I think you're a lot happier because you know, you get two days off regardless, you can plan your life. So knowing that you don't work weekends, you can plan family time with the kids."

– man in a site-based role

"Do I like it? ... I can't see myself doing another six-day a week job again. I don't want to."

– man in a site-based role



Figure 4: Work schedule preferences among wages and salaried survey respondents

Gender diversity

The diversity component of the Culture Standard focuses on three areas including: (i) increasing the representation of women, (ii) creating inclusive workplaces, and (iii) ensuring equal remuneration between genders.

Specific initiatives implemented to address gender diversity at the Pilot Projects included:

- implementing a mentoring program for women, and
- incorporating a Respect Policy in subcontract agreements.

“I just feel like a person, like a part of the team. I don’t feel like there’s any difference with being male or female, you’re just part of the team”.

– woman in a site-based role

Women at all of the Pilot Projects indicated they have experienced good provision of amenities for women and observed these to be better than they have experienced at previous projects. Women indicated they mostly feel respected and accepted in the Pilot Project workplaces. However, at all but one of the Pilot Projects, women in site-based roles reported experiencing banter and behaviour that is sometimes sexist or inappropriate. Examples of this behaviour ranged from comments made about their appearance and challenges to their capability to more overt forms of sexual harassment.

When women raised concerns about these experiences they were dealt with quickly and effectively by managers at the Pilot Projects. However, in some cases, women described not speaking up about inappropriate banter that ‘crosses the line’ because they perceive this behaviour to be an inevitable part of working in a construction site environment. It is noteworthy that participants indicated this is an industry-wide issue and not specific to the Pilot Projects.

The survey measured three aspects of the workplace culture related to gender diversity: (i) perceived gender-based organisational fairness, (ii) respect, and (iii) the experience of inappropriate banter that ‘crosses the line’. Being treated with respect and organisational fairness was significantly linked with positive mental wellbeing and work engagement, while being exposed to offensive/inappropriate banter was significantly linked with lower mental wellbeing and work engagement.

Health and wellbeing

The Culture Standard requires that organisations support the mental health of workers by implementing programs which identify and prevent mental illness and support good mental health in a stigma-free environment. In addition, the Culture Standard requires that occupational health risks are effectively managed and workers’ wellbeing is prioritised when setting the project’s schedule.

In relation to health and wellbeing, specific initiatives implemented at the Pilot Projects included:

- providing facilities to encourage exercise on site (a basketball court and table tennis table),
- provision of a Wellbeing Board to nominate flexible work days
- enabling office-based workers to nominate one day a week that they will leave work at 3pm
- providing mental health first aiders
- providing a wellbeing allowance and wellbeing days, and
- appointing a health consultant to attend site.

“If this [the Cultural Standard] had have been going ten years ago, it would’ve made the career a lot easier. For all the other jobs I’ve done, it’s been stressful and hard. I think it’s really good for people to start to look at this”.

– man in a site-based role

Participants across all of the Pilot Projects perceived their health and wellbeing to be well-supported by managers. However, the interviews revealed that workers’ experience of job stress across the Pilot Projects varies. At some projects participants reported experiencing less stress than in their previous employment. However, at other projects, participants indicated they are experiencing high levels of stress. In some instances, this was related to the compression of working time and a consequent intensification of work (i.e. some workers reported they struggle to complete six days of work in five days).

Inter-relatedness between pillars of the Culture Standard

The Culture Standard acknowledges that working hours, wellbeing, and gender diversity have “*interwoven causes and effects*” and that addressing one in isolation from the others will not lead to desired culture change and outcomes. The survey data showed clear links between the three pillars of the Culture Standard. Positive mental wellbeing and work engagement were significantly linked to work-life balance, organisational fairness and being treated with respect in the workplace. Conversely, job demands and experiencing banter that sometimes ‘goes too far’ were significantly linked to lower mental wellbeing and reduced worker engagement. These findings highlight the close interrelationships that exist between the three pillars of the Culture Standard, i.e. time for life, health and wellbeing and gender diversity.

Next stages of the research

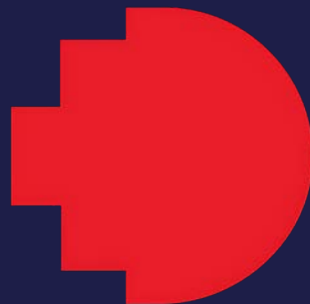
Data collection will continue at the five Pilot Projects and will include both surveys and interviews. A final report will be produced which will incorporate findings from all interactions spanning 2022 to 2024.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Australian Constructors Association.

References

- [1] <https://www.constructionindustryulturetaskforce.com.au>
- [2] <https://www.constructionindustryulturetaskforce.com.au/culture-standard>
- [3] Härmä, M. (2006). Workhours in relation to work stress, recovery and health. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 32(6), 502–514.



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