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Culture in Construction: Research to Practice Report

2025

Background

In a unique collaboration, the Construction Industry Culture Taskforce (CICT) was established in August 2018. The Taskforce comprised the Australian Constructors Association – representing the nation’s largest construction firms – and the Governments of New South Wales and Victoria, and leading workplace research scholars. Over its lifetime, the Taskforce membership grew to include broader national representation.

The work of the CICT was driven by a recognition that the construction industry is under immense pressure and is not regarded as an industry of choice. Particular challenges related to the culture of the industry contribute to this, including:

Long working hours: Hours of work in the industry are excessive, resulting in high rates of turnover, absenteeism, and stress-related leave.

Lack of diversity: Failure to attract and retain a diverse range of people narrows the industry’s talent pool and reduces its capacity to deliver projects.

Wellbeing: Stress levels and suicide rates amongst construction workers are high compared to other industries.

Foundational research undertaken by BIS Oxford Economics – the ‘Cost of Doing Nothing Report’ – found that these cultural issues within the construction industry cost the economy close to \$8 billion annually [1].

The CICT members developed a new Culture Standard [2] founded on three pillars: (i) health and wellbeing; (ii) time for life, and (iii) inclusion and diversity, deliberately focusing initially on gender (Figure 1). As indicated, the three pillars are interrelated, and it is acknowledged that addressing one pillar in isolation will not deliver the change the industry needs.

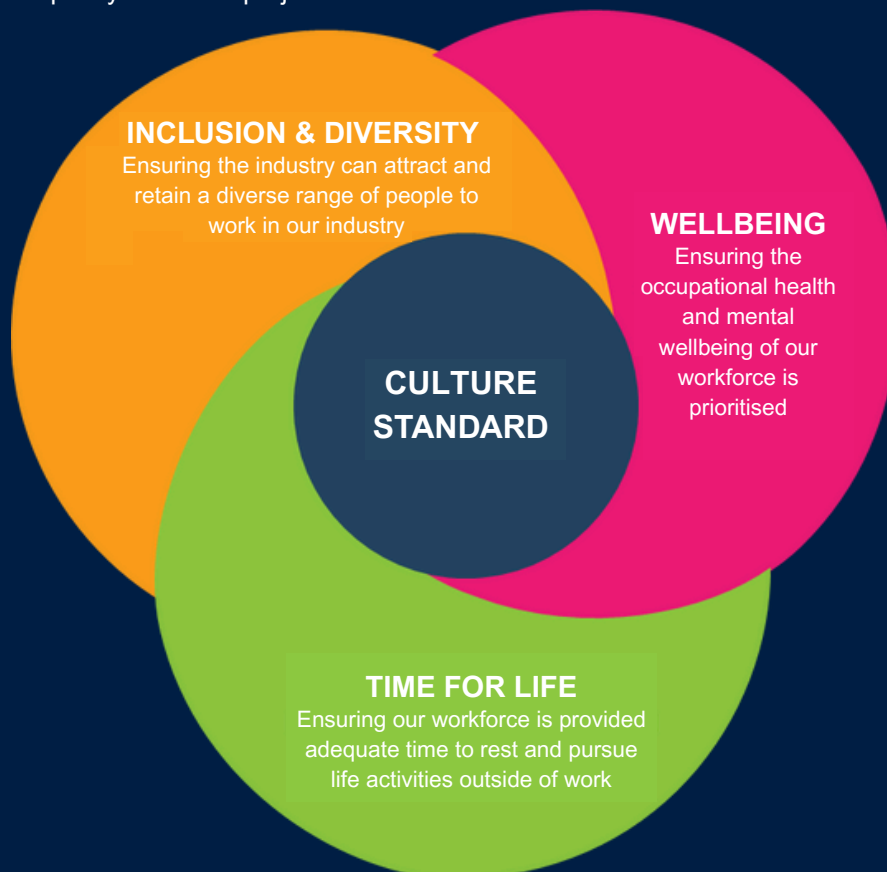


Figure 1: The Pillars of the Culture Standard

Pilot Projects

To ensure that further development of the Culture Standard was based on evidence, the Culture Standard was implemented and evaluated at five Pilot Projects between 2022 and 2024. The Pilot Projects were carefully selected to ensure a mix of vertical (building) and horizontal (road and rail) projects, as well as different project delivery/procurement approaches.

Three Pilot Projects were in New South Wales and two were in Victoria.

The Culture Standard was fully implemented at each of these Pilot Projects with the support of the clients and head contractors.

The CICT engaged a multidisciplinary research team from RMIT University, The University of Melbourne, The University of Sydney and the Australian National University and Frontier Economics to undertake research into the experiences of workers at the Pilot Projects and analyse the costs and benefits associated with implementing the Culture Standard. In addition, interviews with key industry stakeholders were undertaken to explore their perceptions of the Culture Standard.

During the evaluation, 319 formal semi-structured interviews were undertaken with waged and salaried workers of different age groups, family structures and genders and 739 survey responses were collected from workers at the Pilot Projects. Interviews specifically explored participants' views and experiences of working under the Culture Standard, while survey data measured respondents' positive mental wellbeing, perceptions of work-life balance and experiences of respect and gender-related fairness and inclusion at the Pilot Projects. The survey also asked respondents to indicate their preferences in relation to work hours and whether they prefer to work a five- or six-day week. The economic analysis explored the performance of the Pilot Projects relative to industry norms and compared key metrics, e.g. turnover rates, between the Pilot Projects and the head contractor average levels.

This summary report provides key insights from the Pilot Project data collection.



Workers at Transport for NSW, Mulgoa Road Upgrade Project Stage 1

Workers overwhelmingly prefer working under the Culture Standard

A key requirement of the Culture Standard is that all workers work five days in seven, with access to two consecutive days of rest, and no more than 50 hours of work per week. The majority of both waged and salaried workers preferred a five-day work week. 93% of salaried and 71% of waged workers indicated that they prefer to work either a five-day week and have weekends free or a maximum of five in seven days a week (Figure 2).

Interview data revealed that reasons for these preferences were focused on having more time for rest and recovery, being able to spend time with family and friends and being able to engage in leisure or social activities. Many interview participants indicated that they would not want to return to a six-day week having experienced the five-day week.

“I won’t ever go back to six days now that I’ve done the five days. I know a lot of the other people on site are exactly the same.”

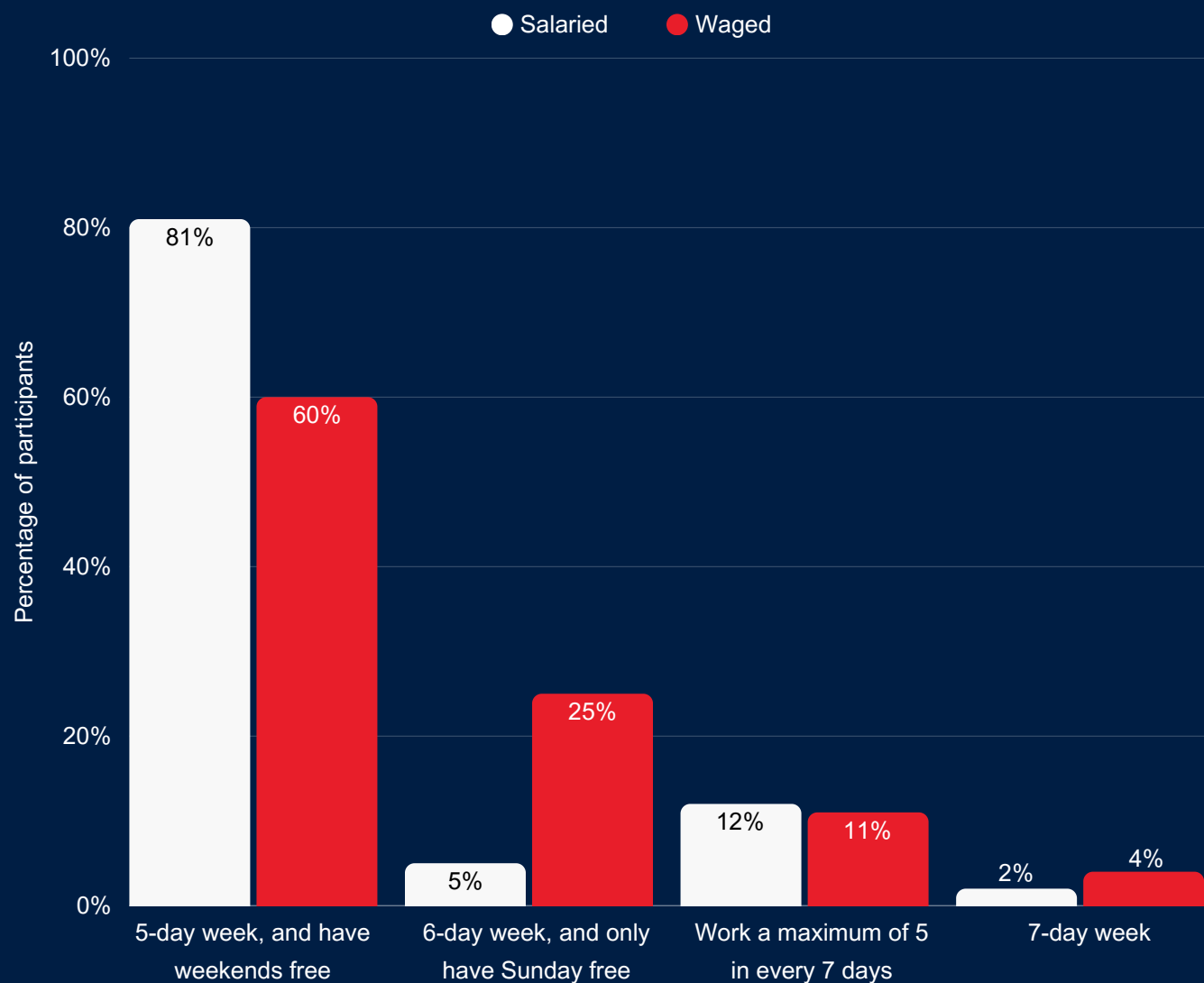


Figure 2: Comparison of preferred work schedule between salaried and waged workers

Working under the Culture Standard does not adversely affect time and costs

The extent to which the Culture Standard impacts on project time and costs was a key concern for some key industry stakeholders who were interviewed prior to the trial of the Culture Standard at the Pilot Projects. Findings of the cost-benefit analysis indicate that there is no observable evidence to suggest that the application of the Time for Life provisions of the Culture Standard increases project duration or the cost of delivering construction projects.

Managers who participated in the Pilot Project interviews explained that, if projects are well planned, working a five-day week does not adversely impact project timelines, particularly because – in many cases – projects are able to work a similar number of hours under the Culture Standard without the need for a sixth day of work each week.

“There was no difference between the 5- and the 6-day. I suppose you plan around 8 hours a day, Monday to Friday, and 6 hours on a Saturday, so that’s 46 hours. And then what happens is, under the Monday to Friday program, you actually plan 10 hours Monday to Thursday and 8 hours on a Friday, so realistically, if you just looked at it on paper, you actually gain 2 hours a week, because you’ve got 48 hours instead of the 46.”

– Project manager

Retention was higher

In four out of the five Pilot Projects, the employee turnover rates were notably lower than the relevant head contractors’ general employee turnover rates. The average annual turnover amongst staff employed on the Pilot Projects was 4.4% lower in absolute terms compared to the average of the workforce at the head contractor organisation. This difference in turnover can ultimately reduce costs associated with onboarding and upskilling new staff.

To give some context to the significance of this change, if this same reduction in turnover could be achieved across the NSW and Victorian sectors as a result of the rollout of the Culture Standard more broadly, then this would generate avoided costs for the industry of between \$386 - 771 million dollars per annum.*

The interview data revealed that the Time for Life provisions of the Culture Standard contributed specifically to the attraction and retention of workers at the Pilot Projects.

“I just came off another major project where I was a supervisor, and I was just worked into the ground. So, when it came to moving on... I basically had four options. And this one appealed to me the most because I would have time back for myself. Instead of working 70, 80, 90 hours a week, they were saying it would be capped at 55 a week. I’d have my weekends, my RDOs. Basically, a life again... that did entice me to this project.”

– Subcontracted worker in a supervisory role

* Estimates are of value to NSW and Victoria (FY\$25) based on the assumption that broad rollout of the Culture Standard in these states generate outcomes similar to those observed on the Pilot Projects.

Workers felt more productive

Workers interviewed overwhelmingly indicated that they felt they were more productive at the Pilot Projects compared to when working at previous projects. Reasons for this included the widespread view that Saturday is typically an unproductive day at many construction projects, and they are better rested and able to recover from work more effectively with two consecutive days off.

Workers indicated that being recovered after a two-day break enabled them to return to work feeling refreshed, energised and with higher levels of work engagement.

“I find we get more productivity at the workforce level because you get time to relax and just have time for yourself. It's been good. Shows on the project as well. We're up to date with everything.”

There were proportionally more women employed at the Pilot Projects

The analysis revealed that, on average, women made up 32% of staff employed at the Pilot Projects, compared to 24% within the head contractors' workforce more generally. This may reflect a deliberate attempt to meet the requirements of the Culture Standard, which requires organisations to target the employment of women on the project across critical workforce segments, including trade roles and other roles where women are underrepresented. The interviews with women at the Pilot Projects also revealed that the elevated representation of women in the Pilot Project workforces created a more supportive work environment for women.

Another key feature identified as having a positive impact on women's employment in project-based roles in the construction industry is the issue of flexibility. The Culture Standard requires that organisations develop a project flexibility plan outlining how the project will support and promote flexibility for all workers. Women who participated in the interviews frequently identified the availability of flexible work practices and, perhaps more importantly, the acceptance of people who utilise these practices, as being important in the attraction and retention of women.

At the Pilot Projects, men also valued access to flexible work practices which enabled them to actively participate in family life and be more involved with their children.

“Just having female engineers in this team for me has made a phenomenal difference... It's just nice to feel supported by your fellow females. That's definitely a big difference for me.”

– Woman in a site-based professional role

“For females thinking of having families, it's definitely opened up doors for opportunities for us... don't get scared of actually having a family and being accepted.”

– Woman in a managerial role

Support for worker wellbeing was greater than is normal in the industry

The Culture Standard requires that organisations will support the mental health of their workforce. A wide range of health and wellbeing initiatives were implemented at the Pilot Projects and the survey and interview results reflect that workers felt that their work environments were conducive to positive mental wellbeing.

Across all the Pilot Projects, the project leadership teams – and managers at all levels – were identified as playing a critical role in shaping the project culture and creating an environment in which people felt their wellbeing was supported. Frontline leaders, in particular, were identified as playing a critical role in providing both emotional and practical social support to workers, for example, checking in with staff and allowing them to take time off when needed without fear of stigma.

“This is certainly the most focused project towards health and wellbeing I've been on, and it's actually front of mind that they actually communicate that to the whole team. There's a lot of conversations around that, lots of toolboxes around that. I think you just feel like the support is there.”

“We've got a management here, they're good communicators. So, basically, if they see that you're struggling at any time with anything, they'll pull you aside and say 'How you going? What's up?'. So, they have that mentality which is really good and that's why I like working with the crew I'm with at the moment.”

The role of the Culture Standard in creating a 'culture of care'

A 'culture of care' was a term used by many interview participants to describe their work environment at the Pilot Projects: *“I think there is a recognition that overall wellbeing is more important than work and, whilst everybody wants a good result, I feel like there is a genuine care for your personhood and that you are generally healthy and happy.”*

Rather than being due to a single factor, multiple factors contributed to the establishment of a culture of care at the Pilot Projects. In a culture of care work environment, workers were able to utilise flexibility initiatives without fear of repercussions, were actively supported to engage in life outside of work, felt safe and supported to seek help for mental health challenges, and had site facilities designed to enable team cohesion. Managers were proactive in supporting workers to stay within their planned weekly work hours. Together with this, the work environment was respectful and collegial.

Strong project leadership and role modelling were key to the development of a culture of care: *“Just the people above me, the general care about the hours, the efforts and consistently doing it as well. Not just a one-off sort of thing. I guess they're making sure you're not overworking and all that stuff.”*

One worker commented, *“I feel like I am well supported. I can see this through the activities they are doing. I can see they are actually putting in effort for everyone's wellbeing and they actually care about whoever is working for the company.”* Another worker noted, *“Managers on this project actually come up to you, talk to you, ask you how you are.”*

A critical aspect of the culture of care work environment is the focus on creating a workplace which protects the health and wellbeing of workers by modifying work characteristics associated with long working hours, lack of diversity, and poor wellbeing. Creating a work environment which protects workers from harm is aligned with a 'gold star' preventative approach, known to be the most effective method of supporting worker's health and wellbeing [3]. A preventive approach to work-based harm is a key feature of the Culture Standard.

Workplaces were more inclusive

The Culture Standard requires that organisations provide workplaces that enable inclusive participation by a diverse workforce, especially women. All Pilot Projects ensured that site amenities had women's toilets across the site that were accessible, clean and private spaces. Women were also provided with PPE which had been designed for women and available in women's sizing. In addition, all Pilot Projects had implemented a respect policy which stipulated zero-tolerance of harassment, foul language, and gender-based discrimination.

In some cases, standards of behaviour related to respect at work were built into subcontractor agreements which helped to ensure that inclusion cascaded down the supply chain. Women at the Pilot Projects said they experienced a more positive and respectful workplace where they felt valued, welcome and safe.

"I don't get sexualised... and if they did, I'd probably pull them up. I'd be like, 'You can't talk to me like that', first warning. Second time they do it, straight to (the organisation)... They'd be like 'See you later'... So that's why I like being here, I feel safe."

– Woman in a trade role

The small hip pocket was worth it

Many waged participants who were initially concerned that working under the Culture Standard would impact their income indicated that the impacts were not as significant as they had expected, and that the benefits of having two consecutive days off work outweighed the costs associated with the modified working time arrangements.

However, some waged workers preferred to work a six-day or seven-day week so as to maximise their income. The current cost of living pressures and workers' life stage (e.g. whether they are making major financial commitments such as taking on a mortgage) were identified as a factor influencing this preference.

Having experienced the benefits of the five-day week, some waged workers indicated they would no longer be willing to work six days per week.

"I think it sort of works out the same. There's probably only a little bit of a difference but I'm trying to work out – there's only a little bit of a difference with the travel for the day. I don't really know how it works but I'm not too worried about it, the \$40 or whatever. To get off the Saturday, I'm happy to spend \$40."

– Bricklayer

Interaction between the three pillars of the Culture Standard

The research showed a strong relationship between the three pillars of the Culture Standard. Workers with high levels of mental wellbeing also experienced their work as being more supportive of their family and work-life balance, as well as being fairer and more respectful. This is depicted in Figure 3.

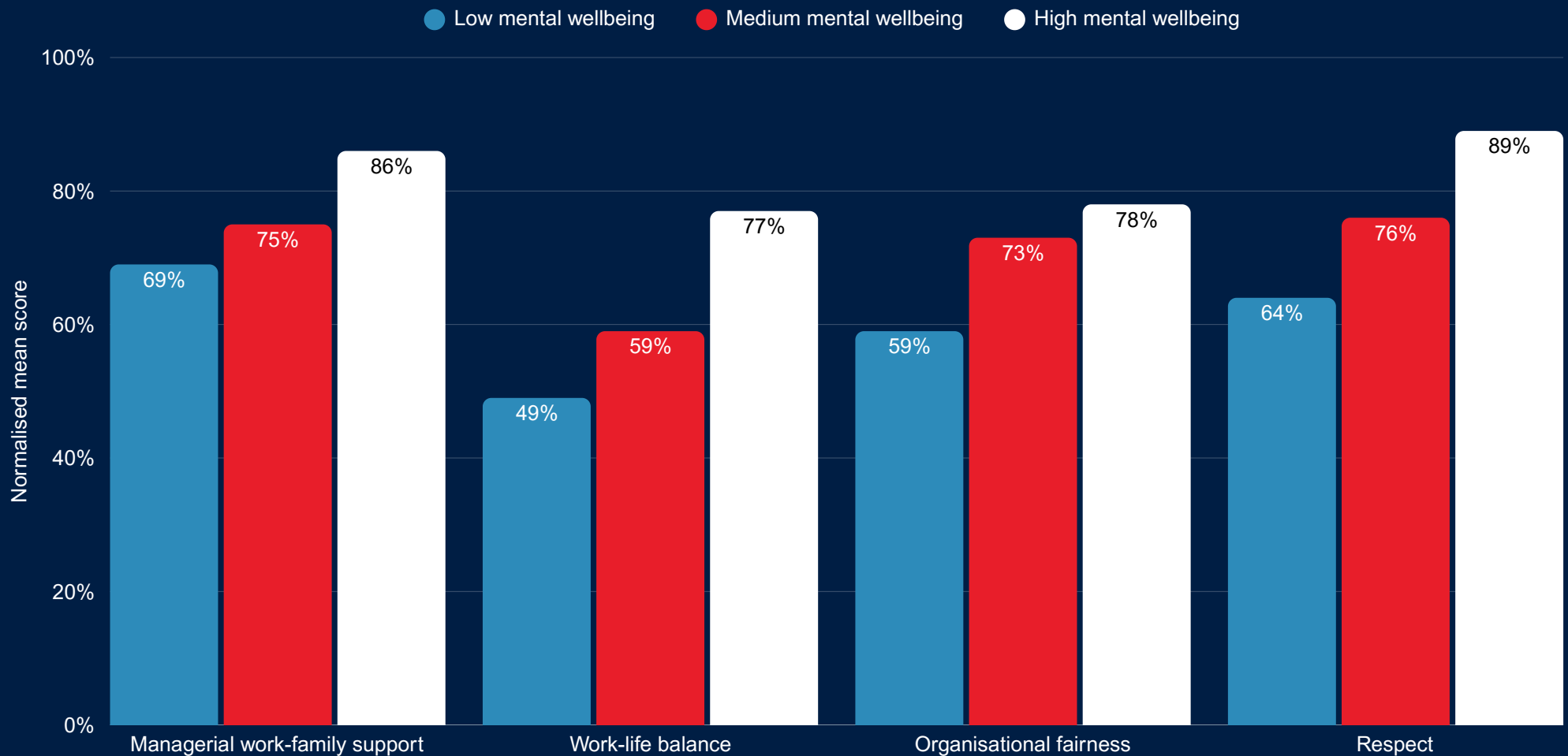


Figure 3: Relationship between work experiences and mental wellbeing

Culture change matters

The results of the Pilot Project evaluation provide evidence that implementation of the Culture Standard had a positive impact on construction workers by helping to address industry challenges relating to long working hours, lack of diversity, and wellbeing. When implemented together, initiatives linked to the three interrelated pillars of the Culture Standard led to benefits associated with workers' health and wellbeing, time for life, and inclusion and diversity.

Key findings of the Pilot Project evaluation will be integrated into the final version of the Culture Standard. The Culture Standard presents an evidence-based framework from which construction organisations can support the health and wellbeing of its workforce, together with leading the change required to make construction an industry of choice that is known for looking after its workforce.

Acknowledgements

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Workers at Brunt Road Level Crossing Removal Project



Workers at Health Infrastructure NSW's Sydney Children's Hospital, Randwick redevelopment

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