



IOM



working for a healthy and sustainable world

in collaboration with

futurebuild
the future of the built environment

Construction Industry Insight



Futurebuild Report – Industry perspectives on how could working practices develop in the future to improve the health of workers?

INTRODUCTION

Seeking to better the health of workers across the construction industry, the Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM), as part of the Futurebuild conference, explored how working practices could improve and develop moving forwards.

IOM spoke to people from across the sector, seeking different opinions on this question. These were captured in a questionnaire, from informal conversations with the IOM team and through a panel discussion on 'What if we got people protection right?'. We now present the findings in this report as a collection of themes with commentary from IOM experts.

This report aims to outline new perspectives and insights on the current issues facing the construction industry. With suggested actions to take to improve its future and the health of its workers. Progressing the industry from where it is now to one in which working environments support and develop staff to be effective, productive and healthier.

"This report gives industry a new perspective on how to protect staff both now and in the future. Forming part of wider goals to be more conscious of the impact work is having on both people and planet."

Martin Hurn, Director, Futurebuild



CORE THEME: USING DATA AND TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE WORKING PRACTICES

From critical smart buildings to standardising operations, research shows that digital transformation and the technical innovation of the built environment as it relates to workers and end-users is set to increase rapidly.

Our findings suggest the challenge for the industry is in the adoption of these new

technologies with many citing technology and data as important, but few understanding how to use it to improve worker safety and the work environment. A suggestion in our discussions was to improve safety and monitor staff exposure through wearable technology. The use of alerts could address airborne threats and notify the worker when limits reach dangerous levels.

Looking at the wider industry, remote monitoring provides an opportunity to develop further understanding of those activities which result in unsafe exposure levels. Feedback identified this as being especially important on construction sites where the environment constantly changes throughout the project duration and lifecycle.

"We're seeing more and more clients come to talk to us about remote monitoring, where innovations in technology has enabled us to collect live data. Backed up by expert analysis we can identify and resolve potential hazardous situations even before they occur without compromising the ability of clients to get their job done."

David Flower – Senior Occupational Hygienist, IOM



CORE THEME: HOME WORKING PRACTICES AND ENVIRONMENTS

Many of those asked, reflected on the shift to home and hybrid working and the improvement in their work-life balance as a result, experiencing enhanced wellbeing and positive mental health.

However, there are concerns about this new way of working, the work environment and how

to manage the risks associated with this. Conversations revealed that some are unaware of what a healthy hybrid working environment looks like and highlighted therefore a need for greater education, guidance and training.

More generally, comments were made regarding site-based

training and how this is a core route to improving working practices. As part of this, sharing experience across the sector and implementing this at every level was highlighted. An interesting perspective from one participant was that training should go further, educating building users to use the spaces safely.

"The environment people operate in plays a vital role in health. Minor adjustments such as seating position or improving air quality lead to major improvements in productivity and profit. Our academic research proves this with our consulting team investigating and offering guidance to specific clients." **Ross Clark, Head of Workplace Protection, IOM**

CORE THEME: ALLOWING INDIVIDUALS TO TAKE OWNERSHIP

Contributors reported that individuals in the workplace are the most important in making the work and the workplace environment safer in the construction industry.

The leaders we spoke to were keen to listen more, noting that those on the ground were able to offer greater context and contribute their expertise to provide solutions.

Including employee voice in meetings would ensure that

changes have the anticipated impact. However, for this approach to be successful, there is a need for a healthy workplace culture. Specifically, one which “creates psychologically safe environments for these conversations to be okay” as Rebecca Canham, Principal Scientist in Human Factors, IOM notes.

In supporting a healthy workplace culture, improving the behaviours of younger generations was seen as the best route. As part of this,

Health and Safety Managers and those in leadership and supervisory positions need to personify this culture, role model and encourage safe practices.

The solution this research points to is having open and transparent discussions focused on problem solving. By embracing a variety of perspectives and offering context around the why and how, it enables company-wide buy-in and a willingness to implement change.

“By creating a psychologically safe environment it allows more meaningful conversations to take place and enables action which tackles the source and contributors of problems. If we get it right culture, practices and work environments will improve and benefit workers, businesses and end users.”

Rebecca Canham, Principal Scientist in Human Factors, IOM

CORE THEME: DESIGNING WORK TO PUT USERS FIRST

When it comes to improved worker health and safety, a recurring theme was designing for safety in advance of the construction phase. Reducing the number of opportunities for harm to the worker through design.

Designing working practices in a way that reduces the impact on users and protects them from harmful exposures was found to be a critical issue. The view

was that offsite manufacturing is the easiest way to do this along with mitigating risks and danger by conducting activities in safe environments.

Equally the design of these workspaces is important. For example, ensuring that there is proper ventilation, well-maintained equipment that can be easily accessed and that all hazards are identified and controlled. This is

a demonstrable way of putting worker health first.

To do this effectively there is a need to consider the following; develop a protective policy, conduct training, identify risks at source, and design workplaces to suit the individual users. This holistic approach plays a key role in the reduction of workplace risk, occupational illness, injuries and accidents.

“The less stress we can put on the bodies and minds of workers the more effective they will be. As a result, we need to be looking at health and wellbeing more holistically. By tackling issues such as air quality, financial wellbeing and job design there is the opportunity to develop complete solutions.”

Mark Cornforth, Deputy Head of Authorising Engineering, IOM

CONCLUSION

Overall, the responses and conversations around the topic of ‘what if we got people protection right?’ varied greatly from the practical to the strategic. The views presented in this report demonstrate a few ways in which the industry is seeking to develop working practices so that workers and users of these environments can lead healthier lives. This combined

with the industry’s push to be more environmentally friendly and adopt more sustainable working practices, as seen at the event, means that there is growing support for change.

Workers equally are becoming more aware of the risks and hazards they are being exposed to, as Fiona King, Head of Occupational Health & Wellbeing at HS2 said on

the panel *“People won’t come into the industry if you believe that you’re going to walk out of it with worse health”*.

Therefore, IOM believes that unless the industry takes action then government and regulators will do so instead. This leaves a simple choice for companies, either act now or be dragged down tomorrow.

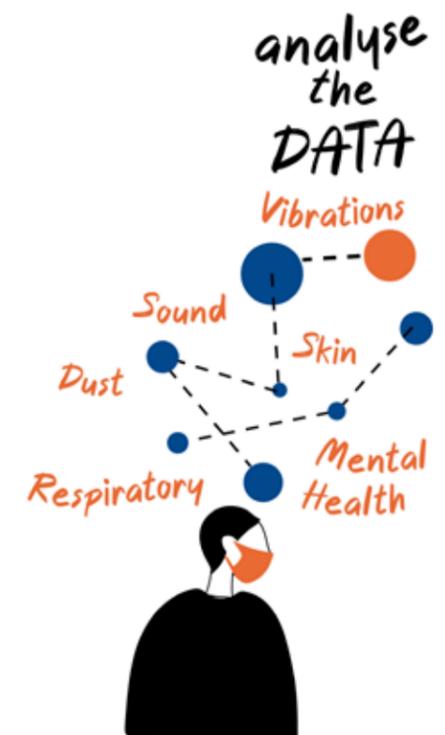
“IOM is committed to improving working environments and it is reassuring that others are doing the same. The industry needs to drive change quicker and focusing on health could be the catalyst for it. IOM’s science and expertise is available to help that happen.” **Nathan Baker, CEO, IOM.**

DATA

The data collected for this study consisted of 81 questionnaire responses, informal conversations at Futurebuild, as well as the panel discussion and individual

panellists perspectives on the topic. Respondents varied in seniority and type of organisation, with those at director level forming 24% of questionnaire responses.

WHAT ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT WITH RESPECT TO WORKER SAFETY ACROSS THE INDUSTRY?





Committed to making the world healthier and safer at work, IOM is a trusted advisor for organisations such as the NHS, HSE and AECOM. We investigate issues, offer independent guidance and provide informed solutions. Talk to IOM and find the solutions to your challenges today.

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