

IOM



working for a healthy and sustainable world

*in collaboration with*

## **Safety, Health & Wellbeing *LIVE***

**PEOPLE.**  
**PLANET.**  
**PROFIT.**



Health and Safety  
Industry Insight:  
What long term  
threat is currently  
being ignored?

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## INTRODUCTION

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Seeking to better understand the long term threats to our workforce, the Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM), as part of the Safety Health and Wellbeing Live conference, explored what long term threat to worker safety is currently being ignored.

This report aims to give an insight into the realities faced by the profession. With suggested actions to take to improve worker health and protect 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 us a snapshot into the challenges facing the industry. The themes offering greater context and food for thought to those committed to improving the safety and health of staff.”* **Tim Else, Director, Safety, Health and Wellbeing Live**

## THEME 1 – THE IMPACT OF FLEXIBLE, TRANSIENT AND LONE WORKING.

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Work has changed. From the predictable environments where a high degree of control could be exercised to one where it is a lot more dependent on self reporting. As a result these environments could be damaging health if not set up or monitored correctly.

There is real concern for the mental health of these workers. A lone worker is much more susceptible to working longer

hours, not taking breaks and lack of two-way communication. All of which lead to feeling disconnected and putting them at higher risk.

The mental health and wellbeing of staff was a core concern for attendees. Seeking more advice as to what they can do to mitigate both the long and short term impact of the change in working environment on staff.



*“Home and remote working creates environments where the rigorous regulations are hard to apply. We recommend an educational programme to clients so that their staff are aware of the risks and are able to address those with the support of H&S managers.”* **Ross Clark, Head of Workplace Protection, IOM**

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## THEME 2 – SICK BUILDING SYNDROME AND RESPIRATORY ILLNESS

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On the other side, for those that need to be in workplaces, there are concerns around sick building syndrome. Sick building syndrome is where the working environment causes symptoms such as headaches, lethargy and respiratory issues. There's no single cause and that's what

makes it such a concern for the health and safety professionals we spoke to. As we have shifted to hybrid working, it is also more difficult to control the working environment within employees' homes.

Due to the ambiguous nature of the symptoms in staff, sick

building syndrome is often overlooked. After all, who reports a headache? The long term impact of these micro exposures may be dangerous, leading to future health concerns. This is particularly prominent if there is dust or mould in the environment.

*“Should a risk be identified within a building it's often difficult to retrospectively make substantial changes to the ventilation or redesign the workplace. Given that these potential risks may be present increases the worry of sick building syndrome presenting itself. We've found that a comprehensive workplace analysis reveals the core factors and small changes can easily improve the health and morale of staff.”*

**David Flower, Senior Occupational Hygienist at IOM**



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## THEME 3 – CULTURE

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Many expressed a view that it wasn't possible to answer the question of this report properly due to the voice of the workers being ignored. This combined with different agendas, differing perceptions of risk and poor working habits created a toxic culture.

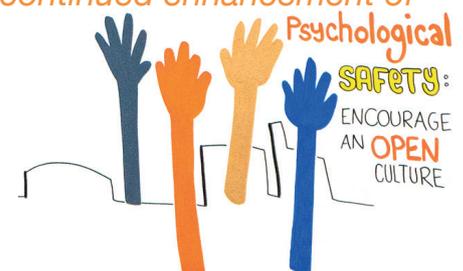
This was exacerbated by the gaps between corporate policy and the reality of the work. Often

corners were being cut, policy and procedure being ignored and control measures not being used properly. The reason given was that this was due to time and budget constraints as well as increasing pressure to perform. As a result, new policy being developed was uninformed and ineffective.

To address this open and honest discussions were

needed throughout companies. Leadership actively listening to and acting on the concerns of their staff. With greater visibility then, and only then, would they be in a position to address the culture and instil behaviours which benefit both staff and clients. From that would stem greater autonomy for the workforce, allowing them to make minor adjustments which would improve their health.

*“To enable more meaningful conversations, a psychologically safe culture environment needs to be created throughout a company. By doing so everyone feels enabled to step forward and contribute to the solving of problems and continued enhancement of process and practices. This in turn will improve working practices and environments as well as benefiting workers, businesses and end users.”* **Rebecca Canham, Principal Scientist in Human Factors, IOM**



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## THEME 4 – JUSTIFYING THE INVESTMENT INTO SAFETY

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A topic which came up in almost every conversation. The biggest threat to worker safety is budget. Respondents talked about how it was easy to access budget to solve immediate problems which were damaging the workforce now. When they looked to address

the cause of those problems the conversation stopped.

Occupational hygiene surveys and other intelligence gathering exercises were shunned. It was felt that this was because if the problem wasn't quantified no action was needed. At a time

when margins are shrinking this investment in long term health was a luxury.



*“People are any organisation’s most important asset. The cost of not looking after them far exceeds any short-term financial benefit. Placing worker health at the centre of a people management plan sees improved productivity - at this very moment the construction sector has a huge recruitment gap so the more we do to support those in the sector already, the better.”* **Nathan Baker, CEO, IOM**

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## CONCLUSION

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The biggest threat to worker health, at the moment, is a lack of understanding in leadership. By informing leaders about how initiatives deliver value and improving internal communication it would give them more information. Knowledge about the threats their workers face

and how those workers perceive those threats. Armed with this awareness, better decisions around people can be made.

To get there, Health and Safety needs to play their part. Supplying them with an understanding of the threats

and the benefits of addressing them early. Slowly at first with existing information and then by conducting surveys and analyses to fully understand them. Only then can we build to a future where we are proactively solving health challenges rather than just reacting!

what DOES  
**GOOD** LEADERSHIP  
IN WORKPLACE  
HEALTH LOOK  
LIKE?



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## DATA

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The data collected for this report summarises a focused survey relating to informal discussions with attendees and engagement in our panel discussion, as well as individual conversations with the live scribing at the event.

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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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