

Five-day work week builds work–life balance in construction

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Construction workers typically work six days a week but research tracking a five-day work week in the industry shows flexibility is key to improving worker well-being, with minimal perceived impact on

productivity.

The interim [report](#), led by RMIT University in collaboration with the Construction Industry Culture Taskforce (CICT), tracked five pilot infrastructure projects trialing a five-day work week to address issues such as the lack of time for life, poor health and well-being, and difficulty in attracting a diverse workforce.

A survey conducted at three of the pilot sites found 84% of workers on an [annual salary](#) and 61% of workers on an hourly wage were in support of a five-day work week compared to a six-day work week.

Project lead, RMIT Distinguished Professor Helen Lingard said having more time for life outside work was the most common reason workers supported the five-day work week.

"We found the majority of workers, irrespective of gender, preferred a five-day work week because it allowed them to spend more time with their family, see their friends or play sports," said Lingard, from RMIT's School of Property Construction and Project Management.

Chief Investigator and RMIT Professor Michelle Turner said having a two-day weekend was important to allow workers to rest properly before another work week began.

"The advantage of being well rested not only helps with productivity but improves well-being and mental health," she said.

Workers interviewed talked about "a better state of mental well-being" and said the shorter work week was "a massive step in the right direction."

This backs previous findings through Lingard and Turner's prior

research with the CICT, which found young people were deterred from joining the construction industry because of the long and inflexible hours and lack of time for life.

"We are seeing a shift in priorities in the next generation of workers, and the construction industry needs to adapt to attract and retain good workers," Lingard said.

Effects on pay, productivity and well-being

Interviews showed some workers were initially concerned the shorter work week would impact project deadlines and reduce pay.

But, for the most part, those views changed once people experienced working a five-day week, Lingard said.

Participants found the five-day work week had minimal impact on productivity, even when site-based construction activity ramped up.

"Many workers we interviewed said Saturday was typically not a productive work day across the [construction industry](#)," Lingard said.

"Some participants said they were more productive working five days because they knew they were not working on the Saturday."

Some participants thought working longer hours actually reduced productivity, instead of increasing it.

"I think, 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," said one worker.

One supervisor said they preferred to have a happy and well-rested team,

which produced a net improvement in productivity.

"When you start the week tired, there's more risk of things going wrong, accidents and stress," they said.

Concerns about pay reductions were also substantially reduced once the projects began.

"Many of those who were concerned about pay actually indicated in their second interview that the slight reduction in pay was worth it because they could spend more time with their families during the weekends," Lingard said.

However, Turner said some of the younger workers liked having the option to work on a Saturday.

"Younger workers who are establishing their careers and do not have [family responsibilities](#) expressed a preference to work on Saturdays to earn more money," she said.

"All these findings point towards the crucial need for more choice and flexibility for workers in construction, which can have positive benefits to well-being.

"A flexible workplace can enable families to share the caring load better, which will help to attract women to the industry and also men who want to participate more actively in family life."

Gender diversity in construction

The report found women, who made up almost half the interview participants in the study, mostly felt respected and accepted while working on the pilot projects.

Lingard said there was still more work to be done, but the initiatives piloted in this project—such as mentoring programs for women and incorporating respect policies in subcontract agreements—demonstrated great potential to change the culture of the industry.

"In order to encourage more women to work in the industry, we need to create a good working environment that is inclusive and respectful to help all workers thrive," Lingard said.

More information: Culture in Construction Pilot Projects: Interim Report. cict.mymedia.delivery/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Culture-in-Construction-Pilot-Projects-Interim-Report-December-2023.pdf

Provided by RMIT University

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