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Mates in Construction

Report on the Construction Industry Apprentices' Focus Groups

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Executive summary

Six focus groups were conducted with construction industry apprentices to learn about their needs in order to inform the update of the Life Skills training program. The focus was on problems/issues experienced at work and outside of work, and the types of information and support that would be helpful when they are 'doing it tough'. When asked 'what stops you getting out of bed to go to work?', apprentices generally spoke about very early morning starts, working long hours and being expected to work overtime, travelling long distances to work, working in extreme heat, and low pay. However, the biggest issue that arose across all focus groups was being treated poorly and being bullied by their employer or 'boss'. Another closely related issue was the variation in quality of employers/supervision, with some apprentices describing their employers as excellent, and many others depicted as short tempered, belligerent and unwilling to explain or teach things. Apprentices described an entrenched culture of construction workers (particularly older ones) suppressing their personal problems and instead taking out their stress on those 'lower on the ladder'. In turn, some apprentices themselves spoke of how they would take their own problems home and how this had impacted negatively on their relationships and families. In addition, apprentices spoke of differences in communication and in learning styles between the older and younger workers and how this could be an issue. Apprentices demonstrated a lack of knowledge about suicide and how to respond appropriately to a suicidal person, and a subsequent need for general awareness training. Although some needs were identified, it was extremely difficult to get apprentices to articulate their specific needs or what information or training would be helpful for them. It is likely that due to their mostly young ages and lack of experience, they may not be aware of the types of training or services that might be available, or even of their own needs. The themes in this report are therefore representative of the key issues and problems identified for apprentices in order to inform and guide the development of recommendations for training to address these issues.

Background

The purpose of this study was to learn about construction industry apprentices' needs in order to inform and update the development of the content for the Life Skills training for construction apprentices. The aim was to identify apprentices' needs from their own viewpoints, in order to strategically inform appropriate and practical content for the Life Skills training. The focus of the research was on problems/issues experienced at work and outside of work, and the types of information and support that would help them (and others) when they are 'doing it tough'. It is anticipated that the results of this study will assist in guiding the development of practical and useful training and skills to enable apprentices to build resilience, as well as improve and maintain mental health and well-being.

Method

Six focus groups were conducted in South East Queensland with a total of 57 apprentices (55 male, 2 female). The focus groups varied in size, with between five and 15 apprentices in each group. Two of the groups were comprised of electrical apprentices and four groups were comprised of carpentry and cabinet maker apprentices. Mates in Construction staff assisted with recruitment of apprentices to participate in the groups. The focus groups were conducted by an experienced facilitator (who was also a registered psychologist), with assistance from a Mates in Construction representative. The groups followed a semi-structured format, with following questions used as a general guide.

- What stops you getting out of bed to go to work?
- What do you think stops older workers getting out of bed to go to work?
- Are there issues at work that impact your life outside of work?
- Are there issues in your life outside of work that impact your work?
- What do you find helpful when you are going through issues or just doing it a bit tough?
- Is there anything you can think of that would help you deal with issues that you currently don't have at the moment?
- What could help you help your mates if they are doing it a bit tough?

All focus groups were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying and analysing themes within qualitative data. A data-driven approach was applied, where the researchers identified the key issues, rather than try to fit within a pre-existing coding frame. The study was approved by the Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Reference number 2017/353).

Results

Analysis of the focus group data resulted in seven overarching and inter-related themes. These were (1) Bullying; (2) Variation in quality of employers/supervision; (3) Differences between older and younger workers; (4) Stress management; (5) Mental health and well-being; (6) Suicide prevention awareness training; and (7) Budgeting on a low salary. These themes are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Bullying

Widespread onsite bullying by employers was reported by apprentices both in terms of their own personal experiences or how they witnessed of the bullying of others. First year apprentices described themselves as being 'at the bottom of the food chain' and said that they expected to be bossed around and accepted this as part of the workplace culture. 'Being yelled at' was acknowledged as very common and part of the normal experience for apprentices. When asked about the differences between banter and bullying, apprentices described banter as generally harmless and part of the construction industry culture, while bullying was seen as different and harmful. As one participant put it, *being shouted at is not so much a problem, but being verbally and physically abused is an issue*. Others indicated that they thought both verbal and physical abuse were just something that they had to tolerate - that 'you just have to take it'. Although most examples of bullying were verbal (e.g. being sworn/yelled/screamed at, or abused in front of their work team), there were also examples of physical abuse such as having tools thrown at them or being physically threatened. A number of apprentices across the focus groups described not wanting to go to work due to poor treatment.

There's lots of narky comments, it's not too bad... (but) when someone's really harassing you, if he's going off his nut calling you all these names and stuff, just throwing tools at you and stuff like that, then it gets a bit extreme. But that's what you have to deal with I guess.

In my case I've had a few and you get called an idiot ra-ra-ra. It's just verbal abuse and sometimes it's physical, like getting spanners or screwdrivers chucked at you from a distance.

At my first post... he actually put a nail gun to my head and threatened to press it - like shoot me in the head with it. That was after 6 weeks of working with this bloke, just me and him. Yeah, it was brutal.

There were days I didn't want to go to work just because I was stressing about the people I was going to be working with.

Reluctance to report bullying

Apprentices generally reported that they were unwilling to be assertive towards their employer or report bullying for fear of losing their apprenticeship. There was an overall outlook that their word doesn't count and that no-one would believe them. Apprentices particularly stressed that they would not speak up for themselves against bullying while on their initial three month probation for fear of losing their job.

Yeah, it's a bit hard when he's your boss and you're an apprentice, you just don't get an apprenticeship ever again.

So being an apprentice we don't have any sort of right to even sort of stand up for yourself. You don't want to lose your job.

A tradesman's word is over an apprentice's always a lot more, and I feel like tradesmen and employers, they forget sometimes that apprentices these days are actually adults and not 16 and 17 year old kids.

Variation in quality of employers/supervision

Linking to the theme of bullying, there was considerable variation in the quality of supervision and training described by apprentices, with many reporting that their bosses were extremely impatient, short tempered and unwilling to explain or teach. This was particularly difficult for first year apprentices with no skills or training, who described being 'constantly yelled at' for lacking knowledge or for asking questions.

Sometimes you just go in there and they expect you to know these certain things and you don't. Then they get like real angry and just start pinpointing you type of thing. It just makes you feel like crap and then you can't do your work properly, all that sort of stuff.

I feel like in the industry a tradesman will go over something real lightly towards you. You have no idea, you haven't done any in your TAFE and you've got no idea how it works and you just try your

best. So you try and do what they've showed you and if you have to ask a question again they get real frustrated with you.

Like if you don't know where something in their ute or something is and you ask them where it is and they just swear at you or something and be like 'you're useless'.

Apprentices reported anxiety over not being confident in doing a job and fearing making a mistake which could prove costly. A number of apprentices also mentioned how they dreaded being humiliated by their boss in front of co-workers as a result.

Like if you do something minor and then you don't really pay attention, like you don't realise that you've done something and you keep going on with it, it's just a domino effect. So you do one little tiny thing wrong and you stuff up a whole circuit.

It just gives you anxiety to screw up again and you don't want to do that. You're scared of failing or disappointing somebody.

Also when one of the tradesmen yells at you for doing something wrong, he does it in front of everyone... that also puts you down. You feel worthless.

When asked what a 'good boss' is like, there were a number of apprentices who said that they could not complain about their employers, who spoke to them respectfully and generally took the time to talk to them and explain things.

I guess he's easy to talk to and respects you. I guess he doesn't really treat you like an apprentice.

My first employer, I had him for a year, he would talk, he'd pull me aside, say once a month and say 'where are you at? What do you want to do next? What tools are you buying next? How's home going? How's your car going' and stuff all about that, actually caring... instead of 'just go dig that hole' sort of thing.

Like I know we're apprentices and obviously we're a bit low in the food chain. But some of your good tradies will show you and actually talk to you like a human being. Then you have other ones - like I

was working with one of the other apprentices here and we were just getting screamed at for taking too long because he had to pay us overtime because we were working 12-hour days.

Anxiety over moving sites

As a result of the wide variation in quality supervision/employers, many apprentices spoke about their anxiety in moving to other sites and not knowing how to expect in terms of how they will be treated and whether they will be bullied.

Because you don't know who your next boss is, what the next boss is like.

If you're somewhere for a week at first you're not going to know who to go to, to ask questions. You don't know who is going to be nice to you or who is going to call you an idiot, tell you to 'fuck off', like that sort of thing.

A bit of anxiety because you don't know what people are like... so you're a bit anxious to talk to them. You're like 'is he going to bite my head off for asking a question or is he going to be cool about it?' If you go up to someone and you ask them something and they bite their head off, you just go 'yeah, righto' and go ask someone else.

Differences between older and younger workers

Without any prompting, many apprentices offered the view that older employers were more difficult, while younger bosses were described as being more patient and understanding. Several apprentices indicated this is likely because younger employers had more recently completed their own apprenticeships and thus had more awareness of the hardships involved. During discussions some apprentices provided their own insights into differences between older and younger construction workers and how this impacted on workplace culture. Older workers were described as 'old school tradies' who don't talk about their personal problems, and instead cope with their stress by taking out their anger on the apprentices. Others suggested that bullying was part of the construction industry culture and seen by older workers as a rite of passage for apprentices to endure.

We've been encouraged (the younger generation) to speak out and that talk is good. Whereas the older generation, they don't speak up as much as what we would do. They like to keep it quiet, keep

it to themselves, deal with it on their own, type thing. Could be going through a divorce or whatever...

I don't know, it's usually the food chain sort of effect. If they're getting told off over something so we all get the other end of the stick. That's one of the ways of letting it out.

You get the older tradies who half of them feel like they need to treat you like harsher because they were treated like shit when they were apprentices.

Apprentices also spoke of differences in communication and learning styles between the older and younger generations, with most of the opinion that older workers had very entrenched views that were unlikely to change.

I feel like there's new problems with our younger generation. Adults are like 'oh, we can teach you all this stuff', but they've never experienced all our social media and all that, they've never experienced it themselves.

You get the old alpha-dog on site who just tells you to take a teaspoon of concrete.

Well like with that tradesman I work with, because he's old, you just go 'I can't make an old boy change his mind. He's going to die with his beliefs, blah, blah, blah'. They're going to do what they want to do and say what they want to say, even if it's politically incorrect or whatever.

Stress management

When asked about how they manage their stress, there were a range of responses from sport, exercise and hobbies to smoking, drinking, gambling, drugs and going to the pub - the latter described as a strong aspect of construction industry culture. There was also talk of widespread drug and alcohol abuse across the construction industry. Interestingly, apprentices also spoke of how (like the older workers) they tended to take their problems home and snap at others in response to stress. This was described as having a negative impact on their home life and families.

Like I get a bit of anxiety every now and then. If you have a crappy day, like when you're getting yelled at and stuff, you get home and you're like really ready to snap at somebody.

Whatever mood you leave work with you take home. If you have a shit day, you take it home with you.

I was working with this tradesman and he's real old and he's racist, sexist, homophobic, pretty much everything under the sun. He's just always making comments about this and that. It's just like it gets to you after a day. You're just stressed out. You're biting your tongue the whole day sort of thing. I say 'come on, you can't say that' and he'd justify why he can do this and that. For me, I felt real sort of stressed out. I'd come home and be sort of aggravated. At the time I had a missus and I'd just snap over little, little things, like stupid shit.

Yeah, towards the end it just - that relationship faded away because of the stress that I'd bring home from work.

Mental health and well-being

Most apprentices said they would not discuss with their employer if they were feeling stressed, anxious or struggling with problems, and that they would definitely not ask for time off to deal with these problems. Several apprentices described how their employers would become angry if they took sick days and expected them to work regardless of their sickness (e.g. influenza). Others spoke of how they would take a sick leave day to deal with mental health or other issues.

If it is a personal reason, you have to lie and say that you're sick, and get a medical certificate, because there's no mental health days in construction, in training. I reckon half the time I call in sick, I'm not actually sick. It's like just having an off-day or whatever. Still got to get a medical certificate and say 'I've got a sore throat', or whatever. You'd get the sack.

If you're not physically sick they don't care. Tough shit.

How I see it is you get 10 sick days a year, how is having the flu as opposed to maybe you'd just rather be with your family that day, or something.

If you've been with a company for a couple of years you have a lot more confidence... obviously if you've got good tradesmen who you work with, you're going to speak up a lot more. Where if you've got a cranky old bastard who treats you like crap (you're not going to speak up about problems).

When questioned further about help-seeking, some apprentices said they did not want to speak up about struggling with problems because of concerns about being judged. Across the focus groups, showing of emotions or breaking down was considered to be embarrassing by apprentices. Being observed by other co-workers to be seeking help (e.g. talking to a field worker on site) was also seen as embarrassing. Some apprentices were of the belief that asking for help might draw unwanted attention from others.

It would probably make you feel less about yourself.

It would be embarrassing.

People would probably talk about it.

Interestingly though, a number of apprentices indicated that they had enjoyed the discussions about help-seeking. Although several apprentices specified that they would not be willing to talk to 'some random person' and would prefer to talk to their close friends, others indicated it would be helpful if there was a specific person available to talk to about their problems, but stressed that they would be embarrassed if their workmates saw them asking for help.

I feel like if there was someone dedicated to talk to... You just don't want to do it because people are seeing you. Like you go over there and then you have a problem and then people would ask you about like 'oh, what's up' sort of thing.

You might not want to talk to someone about it or something but just knowing that you could (would be good).

Co-workers

When asked about whether they noticed if their co-workers were doing it tough, most apprentices said they could tell if someone was having a tough time. However, most also emphasised that they would not ask another co-worker if they were OK unless they knew them well or they were a friend.

Yeah. If they're having a real shit day you can tell.

I feel it would have to be how close you are to that certain workmate to even want to open up to them. Like say if just a new apprentice said to you, are you alright mate, you'd be like 'yeah, fuck off mate, leave me alone'. You wouldn't want to open up to some stranger.

I do that with tradesman. I can tell when he's in a shit mood. I ask him what's wrong but he, you know, ah, shrugs it off. I'm like 'righto'.

Despite their perceived difficulties and barriers to offering help to others, most apprentices demonstrated compassion and a willingness to support those in need. A number of examples were also given of how they supported their friends through difficult times.

I think that's what a lot of people forget as well: everyone has feelings.

Me and my mates, we've had our conversations every now and then. We usually just give each other a fucking hug and it's like 'yeah, I've got your back here mate'.

My mate, he's just broke up with his missus and he's real down. He's smoking himself silly. I just said 'take it easy on yourself mate, like it's not your fault. Just because this happened and that happened it doesn't mean it doesn't happen to other people. You're not alone. Have a yarn if you need to have a yarn'.

Suicide prevention training

The discussions on mental health and well-being lead to the topic of suicidal behaviour. Across all focus groups there was much discomfort around the topic, as indicated by inappropriate jokes, laughter and awkwardness. A need was identified for suicide prevention awareness training, with the majority of apprentices stating that they would not know how to talk to or help a suicidal person. Some apprentices indicated they had previous experience with suicidal friends, and others indicating that they would not know how to tell if a person was suicidal.

That 'I actually want to kill myself' sort of thing, that would be a bit of a shock and I wouldn't really know what to say.

It would be a big punch in the face if somebody said that to me. Like 'oh, gees, what do I do now?'

I've had my friends come to me and tell me 'oh, this is how I am, blah, blah, blah'. I just stutter. I don't know what to say. You don't know what you can say to someone. You don't know what's going on in their head.

It's actually hard to see if the person is joking or not about suicide. You know some people are just like 'I'm going to go kill myself'. You're like... I don't know what I'd be able to say to that. I wouldn't know what to do.

When asked by the facilitator if they would like to learn more about suicide prevention and how to respond to a suicidal person, apprentices were generally in agreement. However, as there was a reluctance to undertake more training in addition to their apprenticeships, there was a general consensus that the training should be mandatory and undertaken during working/training hours (in the same way as their CPR training).

Even if it's not your friend, if it's someone on site, someone on the side of the road that you see who's going to go and jump off the cliff, if you can have any way to talk to them and help them then you might as well try and do as much as you can.

At the end of the day your personal time is your time to deal with your own problems. Like your time to deal with the stress from work. If it's mandatory or something like CPR then you'll be like 'yeah, sweet', people will do it and it's a good thing to do. To be real, no-one is going to go yeah, 'I'll take my own time to go and learn'...

Budgeting on a low salary

An issue that arose frequently across all focus groups was that of low pay for apprentices. There were also a number of apprentices who reported they had been paid at an old, lower award wage for some years (but this had since been addressed by their union). Apprentices described how it was difficult to manage on a low salary, particularly as it was necessary to have their own car and take out a loan to buy tools (which previously had been subsidised). Budgeting was understandably more difficult for the first and second year apprentices receiving the lowest level of pay.

When I first started, I got paid fortnightly and it was harder to budget. I found I had money one week and then I didn't the next. So it was just kind of like made me better, I guess, with my money but at the start of your apprenticeship I find people stress more about money than other things.

Oh yeah, I get about 70 bucks after all my expenses a week.

You stress about money a lot more when you're first and second year, I found, but once you're third and fourth year it's pretty easy.

Recommendations

As previously described, the themes in this report are representative of the key issues and problems identified by apprentices in order to inform the development of recommendations for training to address these issues. Based on the key issues/themes identified across the six focus groups it is recommended that the following areas should be included in the Life Skill training for apprentices.

- **General information about rights and responsibilities of both apprentices and their employers.** Including award wages for apprentices for specific fields and years, expected work and overtime hours, sick and other leave entitlements, what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for both parties, and the correct channels for seeking help and/or reporting problems.
- **Communication skills training.** Introductory level communication and assertiveness training. This could include aspects such as differences between assertiveness and aggression; listening, reflection and negotiation skills; and anger management and assertion.
- **Stress management and self-care.** There are numerous types of training packages incorporating the basic principles of self-care and stress management that could be developed specifically for this purpose.
- **Budgeting skills.** This training should be particularly targeted towards the first and second year apprentices who are struggling to live on the lowest level of pay for apprentices.
- **Suicide prevention general awareness training.** Mates in Construction GAT training is the obvious choice, although there is the potential to tailor the training to this younger audience. As indicated by the apprentices' awkward joking and laughter around the topic, there is a strong need to emphasise how to talk safely and appropriately about suicide.