

Health and safety attitudes and behaviour: 2017 survey

WorkSafe's survey, conducted annually, measures health and safety attitudes and behaviour in the country's four highest-risk sectors: forestry, construction, manufacturing and agriculture. The results are likely to be a good barometer of what's happening in other workplaces.

Key themes

Sector variations: The four sectors are performing at different levels. Forestry has faced up to its problems, made wide-ranging changes and leads the way. Construction has been resting on its laurels in many respects, having made few meaningful changes since 2014. Agriculture and manufacturing trail on a number of measures. The challenge is to get all four performing at the same high level.

On a plateau: Performance has stalled in all four sectors. Before the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 took effect, improvements were significant and steady. Since April 2016, progress has levelled off or gone backwards slightly. Everyone needs to work to regain that momentum.

Perceptions gap: Employers and employees have different perceptions about many aspects of workplace safety, and the gap is widening in places. Employers' outlook is generally rosier, suggesting a need for more worker involvement in decisions affecting them, and also more effective two-way communication.

WorkSafe performance: Employer and employee perceptions of WorkSafe are generally positive, especially about its work in helping workers to be safe and businesses to improve workplace safety. But levels of awareness are largely unchanged, and WorkSafe must work harder to raise its profile.

Encouraging findings

- Fewer employers and employees have reported serious incidents in the past 12 months, and three-quarters of employers haven't reported any in that time.
- Nearly all employers say they take action after a serious accident, although workers are far less likely to agree this is the case.
- Employers' awareness of their obligations has risen, as has their understanding of how to comply with these obligations.

Less encouraging findings

- The number of employers who have made significant health and safety changes rose from 40% to 65% between 2014 and 2016, but dropped back to 52% in 2017.
- The number of workers reporting regular health and safety meetings has fallen to 2014 levels, along with the number of regular safety audits.
- About a 10th of workers say they reported a serious accident to their boss, who took no action, while another 10th didn't tell anyone and did nothing.
- About 30% of employers and employees reported at least one near miss at work - unchanged since 2015.
- A fifth of workers say they have never received any health and safety training - unchanged since 2014.

Diverging views

- Nearly two-thirds of employers – but only a third of employees – put safety in their top three considerations.
- 70% of employers say their business praises or rewards staff for working safely, but less than 50% of employees agree with this.
- Almost all employers say they encourage workers to speak up about anything unsafe, although only three-quarters of workers agree with this.
- About four-fifths of businesses think they tell workers how they have considered their views in making health and safety decisions, but only half of workers agree.
- Four-fifths of businesses think they provide easy-to-understand health and safety information, compared with two-thirds of workers.
- Only 48% of workers think machinery and equipment are always maintained, compared with 70% of businesses.
- Employers are most likely to attribute workers' risky behaviour to not having their mind on the job, whereas employees are most likely to say such behaviour is the result of having to work when sick or injured.
- Employers say they have been reporting fewer serious accidents since 2015, but employees say they have been reporting the same number. Serious accidents have dropped since 2015, but near misses have not.

Perception of risk

Barely half of employers and employees think there is a higher or much higher risk of serious injury in their sector compared with other sectors, despite priority-sector workers being about 60% more likely to suffer a serious injury than other workers¹. Only 15% of workers and only 5% of employers feel there is even a moderate risk of serious injury in the next 12 months. This outlook may be explained by workers' very high levels of confidence about having the necessary resources to do their job, and having the knowledge and skills to keep safe.

Sectors at a glance

Forestry: Despite some significant gains since 2014, forestry has changed little since 2016. The notable exception is worker involvement in health and safety, where it tops all measures. The size of forests and whether corporate managers run them have a noticeable bearing on safety attitudes and behaviour.

Manufacturing: Overall, progress has been marginal. Formal health and safety reporting is very high, yet workers are more likely to say they have had a serious accident than those in any other sector, and are more

likely to say they have had a near miss than those in any other sector except forestry. The divergence in employer-employee views is greatest in manufacturing, mainly because employers don't consider work pressures, risks, near misses and serious accidents exist to nearly the same extent as workers do.

Construction: Formal health and safety training for workers is highest in construction. Despite this, few meaningful changes have occurred since 2014. One exception is the proportion of employers who rank health and safety in their top three priorities (up from 57% to 68%). But fewer workers now rate health and safety among their top three priorities.

Agriculture: The sector trails on many measures. Just 26% of workers and 59% of employers rank staying safe among their top three priorities. Agriculture workers have the lowest confidence in their knowledge of their legal rights and responsibilities. Employers' awareness of their legal obligations and how to comply with them is also the lowest of any sector. But unlike other sectors, employees are slightly more positive than employers about worker involvement in health and safety.

WorkSafe

The survey found employer and employee perceptions of WorkSafe are generally positive. After several years of increases, awareness is largely unchanged: 45% of employers and 34% of employees know a reasonable amount about WorkSafe.

About half of employers and employees have trust and confidence in WorkSafe and feel it is making a real difference. About six in 10 employers and employees rate WorkSafe strongly for helping workers understand health and safety problems and risks, and for helping them to be safe and helping businesses to improve workplace safety.

About three in 10 employers and employees say they expect to get a visit from a WorkSafe inspector in the next 12 months – about the same proportion as in previous surveys.

Improvements

Survey participants suggested health and safety improvements that fell into six categories: more encouragement of personal responsibility; more reliance on common sense rather than on rules; more relevant, job-related health and safety training, including familiarisation with equipment; more focus on health and safety, including paying attention to safe work practices; more visits and mentoring by health and safety representatives, including WorkSafe site visits; and simple, workable health and safety policies.

¹ Based on serious injuries per 1,000 full-time-equivalent jobs in WorkSafe's four priority areas compared with all other sectors. Serious injury defined as requiring at least a week away from work.