

Manawatū Tararua highway initiative focus on worker wellbeing

Heidi Bendikson - Thu, 9 May 2024

A worker wellbeing initiative on the Manawatū Tararua highway project has featured in the first edition of a new health and safety journal.

The initiative aims to build a more adaptive workplace culture, with a survey of workers involved showing they will be able to take their experience to other projects and start to “lead from the front” in areas such as decision-making, goal setting, capacity building and empowerment.

NZ Journal of Health and Safety Practice chief editor Christopher Peace says he has seen the wellbeing of workers become a topic of increasing awareness over the past five years.



International evidence suggests there can be a range of consequences if the wellbeing of workers is not maintained.

“If workers don’t feel happy going to work, if they feel that management is abusive and uncaring, don’t be surprised if they move on, or take their time over jobs, they’re not enthusiastic,” Peace says.

The management of health and safety through integrated management systems is another topic covered in the journal’s first edition – an approach Peace supports.

“I don’t believe in a separate health and safety management system. I think we need one management system that improves profitability and keeps workers safe.”

Social outcomes

Keeping people safe on site has long been an industry focus, but investment into the wider wellbeing of individuals has often been deemed a “nice to have” rather than a prerequisite, the journal’s research paper on the wellbeing initiative says.

The team building the new highway - Te Ahu a Turanga - has a set of social outcomes targets that complement the completion of the development as a safe and efficient piece of roading.

The paper says the project’s alliance partners, which include Fulton Hogan, HEB, Aurecon and WSP, are committed to making a step change in worker wellbeing management in line with a Waka Kotahi requirement set during the tender process.

The project includes a social outcomes management plan that sits under the project governance plan.

Wellbeing

Hemi Heta, one of the article’s authors and wellbeing and culture manager for the project, says the programme has made people feel supported and part of a family.

They were also more likely to come to work, with unexplained absenteeism for the project reduced.

“Our major goal was to enhance the wellbeing of our people while they were on the project and we’ve done that quite significantly.”

Those benefits have been verified with an audit of the programme undertaken by Massey University.

A registered psychologist, Heta told *Inside Resources* that a critical element of the project was having health experts with experience in the local health sector involved, as they were able people with the right local services.

Those services, he says, are available not just to staff but their family members as well, recognising the importance of family to an individual’s wellbeing.

Culture

The project adopted three anchors to help entrench and maintain workplace culture – show up, team up and speak up.

Show up is the expectation that employees should be ready for work, in the right frame of mind, physically fit and ready for the day ahead.

It also includes work ethic and concepts such as being on time, having the right equipment and having the right qualifications, licences or experience.

Team up is about working together, being a part of a workplace “family” and sharing knowledge, skills and understanding.

Speak up is about people feeling confident to say when things aren’t right and being prepared to acknowledge things that are positive.

The project also incorporated aspects of Māori perspectives on wellbeing – something the article notes was positively valued by Māori and non-Māori participants.

Platform

The journal, which is published online by Victoria University, aims to provide a platform for health and safety research as it applies to New Zealand.

Peace says there is a considerable international body of health and safety research, but little information on how to apply that research here.

He says the journal, the first edition of which was released last month, aims to fill that gap.

While technically an academic journal, it aims to be accessible to everyone interested in health and safety, including those working in the extractives and civil construction sectors.

MinEx chief executive Wayne Scott says all resources available to the sector are welcome.

“There is no secret answer to improving health and safety so wider views, opinions and ways of doing things are always welcome pieces of information.”

Peace encourages anyone from the mining or quarrying sector who wants to write about a successful health and safety initiative to get in touch.

He is happy to work with authors who have not written a scholarly article before and authors are asked to write in plain English.

Numbers

As well as editing the journal, Peace is a lecturer in the occupational health and safety school at Victoria. He has worked in the health and safety space since 1974, mostly in risk management.

He says New Zealand's health and safety numbers are dreadful.

About 900 people die at or because of work every year. About 75 or 80 of those are from traumatic events, but the rest die slowly due to an occupational disease – something that there is a growing awareness of.