



## LOVES THE DIRTY WORK

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### A KEANE EYE: Lies, damned lies and ...

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#### **NEW data from leading research groups indicate a similar conclusion: the construction industry on the whole is lacking innovation, says Greg Keane**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has recently released data on construction innovation. This was timely, coming months after a similar report issued by the Building Research, Innovation, Technology, and Environment (BRITE) project of the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Construction Innovation.

Dr Karen Manley, leader of the BRITE project, has been busy correlating the findings, and they are consistent – the construction industry ranks poorly as an innovator.



There are only two bright lights: we look better than the Kiwis, and because the ABS figures looked at contractors, and contractors fared relatively poorly in the BRITE report, the whole of industry position may be slightly better than the ABS report indicates. We can probably gain little comfort from the first point: Kiwis working in the Australian industry have, in my experience, been quite innovative, so perhaps the ones left behind are the ones that John West rejected.

While the innovation rate (31%) is second lowest of all Australian industry groups, at least it is double what it was 10 years ago, though, in relative terms, it hasn't changed. The construction industry is significantly below the national average in its level of innovation in goods and services, and in its spending (as a percentage of total) on innovation.

The staggering factor is that the construction industry reports comparatively fewer barriers to innovation than other industries: "lack of skilled staff" is the only area where similar frustration levels are experienced.

One dysfunctional area identified by Manley in the BRITE survey was the way that innovation tends to happen on a project, but the learnings are not formally captured for future use, and tend to die with the project.

The construction industry has a desperate need for innovation: it has a workforce dwindling in numbers and skill, and is being forced to achieve more with less. It often relies on public funds, and with the aging population placing greater demands on health and aged care expenditure, infrastructure spending could be "squeezed", so there is more pressure to achieve economies through innovation.

The recent Australian Construction Equipment Expo (ACE) 2005 exhibition in Melbourne at least showed that innovation still exists in goods and services.

Perth company Agtech International travelled the Nullarbor to show the Longreach Mantis, a long-arm tractor-mounted vegetation management system that has applications well beyond its civil role in vegetation management along creek banks, roadsides, and other rights-of-way. The Mantis was invented by Dante Chiera, and the Moir family of Agtech provided considerable help in refining and commercialising the concept, whereby a range of spraying and cutting implements can be mounted on a longreach arm to chemically and/or mechanically control unwanted vegetation.