

## Safety in numbers

Comment

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Let's be blunt - compared with most industries, construction is not a cushy area to work in.

When was the last time the six o'clock news led with an office worker succumbing to a savage paper cut? But then again, when was the last time a death on a construction site made the news. It is a real problem because, on average, one worker a week dies on construction sites in Australia, and many more sustain serious injuries. There are 9.2 fatalities per 100,000 workers in construction, compared with the national average of 3.1 per 100,000. The only industries more dangerous to work in are transport and storage, and agriculture. The risk is that these statistics will become accepted as the cost of doing business.

The moneyed end of the building and construction industry has stepped up to the plate in a bid to improve safety standards. Engineers Australia and CRC for Construction Innovation (CRCCI) have launched the Guide to Best Practice for Safer Construction. It proposes a framework for improving safety performance at all levels of a project, from planning and design through to construction and post-construction. It also outlines six best-practice principles to manage occupational health and safety (OHS) within client processes. The project was initiated by Engineers Australia, backed by CRCCI, which conducted research and co-ordinated funding.

The unions, which have been the strongest proponents of construction-site safety so far, were not invited to participate, but don't appear to be bleating too hard. The national secretary of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union's construction division, Dave Noonan, says the union received a copy of the document and a briefing on the project. "Some aspects of this proposal have merit, particularly the involvement of designers and engineers in safety," Noonan says. "Any steps that can be taken to improve safety are welcome." He also points out that unless workers are given a democratic say in such issues in the workplace, safety won't be addressed adequately.

The chairman of the Engineers Australia Taskforce on Construction Safety, Bill Wild, says the unions have always had a responsibility for safety but this project engaged those groups who have not so far been stakeholders. "What we're trying to do is pull other people into the group," he says. "Clients have next to no legal responsibility for safety."

In putting the guide together, the group took lessons from the mining industry. It found that, where clients are involved in the process, safety improves. "We certainly want to see [the guide] accepted nationally. Mandatory requirements we don't support," he says. "We're trying to get people to come on board voluntarily."

Perhaps the real triumph of this exercise was in successfully delivering such a document in a politically charged environment and in the lead-up to an election. Focusing on the clients is smart. Irrespective of any post-election turmoil in the building industry, Australia's big listed companies will go to great lengths to avoid a "naming and shaming" campaign on workplace safety. No one wants another problem of the magnitude of the asbestos scandal.

**For more information on the Guide to Best Practice for Safer Construction, go to the CRCCI website: [www.construction-innovation.info/index.php?id=1053](http://www.construction-innovation.info/index.php?id=1053)**