

Summary for the report - A qualitative study of occupational health and safety among subcontractors in the Australian construction industry

Introduction

This is a summary of RMIT University's report, *A qualitative study of occupational health and safety among subcontractors in the Australian construction industry*. The Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner (OFSC) commissioned RMIT University to undertake the study in 2007. This summary has been developed by the OFSC, and reflects an overview of the RMIT's findings.

It should be noted that the findings are based on qualitative responses from a small sample of subcontractors. As such, the information should be read in this context and not seen to generalise the industry as a whole.

Summary

BACKGROUND

The multi-layered subcontracting system is often cited as one of the structural impediments to the improved occupational health and safety (OHS) performance of the Australian building and construction industry. A greater understanding of the OHS needs and challenges of subcontractor organisations can serve to guide industry policy and inform the development of OHS strategies to assist subcontractors to better understand, and appreciate their safety requirements.

PURPOSE

This project aimed to investigate the OHS issues arising out of the Australian building and construction industry's multi-layered subcontracting system. The study was designed to explore facilitating factors and impediments to an improved level of OHS performance among subcontractors at industry, organisational and project levels. An additional aim was to provide guidance in the development of effective strategies to assist subcontractors with their OHS.

As part of the project, thirty one subcontractor organisations were interviewed concerning their experiences in managing OHS. Overall, the following questions were explored:

1. What are the existing barriers to the implementation of OHS strategies in subcontractor organisations?
2. What factors presently facilitate the implementation of OHS strategies in subcontractor organisations?
3. What initiatives would assist subcontractor organisations to implement OHS strategies?

METHODS

Data was collected using a structured face to face interview. Thirty one participants were purposefully selected as representatives of first level subcontractors commonly engaged by

large commercial building and construction organisations. These representatives were interviewed using a pre-developed schedule of questions and prompts. Interviews were conducted across Australia.

Interviews were recorded, with participants' consent, and recordings were fully transcribed and analysed using the NVIVO 7.0 software package. Thematic content analysis was undertaken by two independent coders. The importance of emergent themes was gauged by counting the frequency with which each theme was mentioned by the participants.

MAIN FINDINGS

An over-arching theme emerging from the data was the notable desire among participants for greater harmonisation of OHS requirements. Overall, participating subcontractors expressed their issues in having to comply with state and territory legislation while also responding to the requirements of varying principal contractors and, in some cases, implementing their own internal OHS Management Systems. Participants responded that such complexity increases the resource requirements of OHS management, and often leads to frustration and subsequently, resistance.

Despite the fact that the implementation of OHS processes was perceived to require a considerable dedication of resources (especially time), over half of the participants indicated they already had a formal OHS management system in place. In this regard, the data revealed a generally high level of OHS awareness among the participants.

In commenting on the reasons for implementing formal OHS management processes, participants cited the need to comply with legislative obligations, client requirements and the positive impact on tendering opportunities. Further, several participants specifically commented upon an interest in being able to tender for state and federally funded construction projects. In reference to the benefits of implementing formal systems, participants noted a reduction in incident rates and an increase level of OHS awareness among site personnel.

A recurring theme impacting the implementation of formal OHS systems, related to the need to devote excessive time and resources to 'making sense' of large quantities of OHS information. Participants repeatedly commented on the need for clear and comprehensive OHS information that was readily available and in a simple, easy to use format. The complexity and volume of existing information was cited by many participants as a constant source of frustration.

The conduct of principal contractors was also noted as impacting the OHS performance of many participating subcontractors. In this case, while some data indicated that principal contractors do adopt a responsible approach towards supporting the development of subcontractors' OHS capabilities, other data indicated that more could be done by the principal contractor to coach and develop subcontractor organisations.

Encouraging long term relationships was one recommendation offered by participants towards the effective management of subcontractors. It was noted that positive long term relationships between principal contractors and subcontractors provides for better trust, communication and coordination with respect to OHS. In this way, the principal contractor should be encouraged to view a positive long term relationship as a 'strategic asset' for reducing uncertainty and promoting positive OHS.

As a final part of the study, subcontractors were asked for their suggestions on appropriate mechanisms in aiming to improve their OHS performance. Frequently mentioned suggestions included greater harmonisation of state and territory OHS requirements, increased monitoring of on-site OHS practices, especially in the residential sector, and an improved level of OHS training and consultation. Also mentioned was the potential for incentives to assist subcontractors in implementing formal OHS management systems.

CONCLUSIONS

The structure of the Australian construction industry, with its heavy reliance on pyramid subcontracting, presents significant challenges for the management of OHS in the industry. The qualitative study of thirty one first level subcontractors has revealed that the complexity of information, the volume and general nature of available OHS information and a lack of uniformity in OHS requirements remain persistent problems for subcontractors. Resource and time requirements associated with the implementation of formal OHS requirements, also creates difficulties for subcontractors.

Despite these issues, the level of implementation of formal OHS management systems by participants was reasonably high. Participants explained that this was often associated with clients' expectations and the link between OHS management processes and tendering opportunities. Participants also highlighted the positive influence of some principal contractors who support and coach the development of OHS capability within the organisations they subcontract.

LIMITATIONS

As noted above, this information is drawn from a qualitative study. Given the relatively small sample size of the study, the main findings can not be generalised to the Australian construction industry as a whole.