

Work and Health in the Irish Construction Sector Ireland



The project objectives were to introduce a positive health care policy and promote a healthy lifestyle amongst construction industry workers. Project partners were the Irish Cancer Society, the Construction Employees Health Trust (CEHT), the Irish Heart Foundation and the Construction Group of Unions.

Background of the project

The construction industry in Ireland is characterised by a myriad of contractors and subcontractors which are by and large, SMEs. Permanent contracts are rare. Given this situation, the best strategy to ensure that SMEs and their employees are reached is to adopt a so-called “shot gun” targeting approach to WHP, essentially undertaking an industry-wide campaign, with the focus on directly targeting all workers engaged on selected building sites. The main findings highlighted that some general health indicators of construction industry workers were relatively poorer than national averages e.g. obesity levels, cholesterol levels, and the prevalence of smoking - on average 44% of them smoked, while the national average was 31%. An unhealthy diet (literally saturated with a high fat and irregular meals), was another serious issue. Given the nature of their work, they were more susceptible to skin cancer than other workers, and this provided rationale for launching three annual industry-wide skin cancer campaigns. It is worth noting that skin cancer rates in Ireland are amongst the highest in the world.

Project infrastructure

A close co-operation was established with the Irish Cancer Society and the Irish Heart Foundation, who provided expertise and staff. This required setting up a new infrastructure whereby all service providers work together. Employers’ permission had to be secured in order to facilitate health screening on sites during working time. Less formal but more relevant support also had to be obtained from various “gatekeepers”, particularly from foremen on the respective sites.

Needs analysis

Quite extensive research has been undertaken in order to detect and adequately address the needs of construction workers. Thus, initial health promoting initiatives undertaken by the CEHT were based on a careful examination of construction workers’ circumstances.

Action areas

- n Annual industry-wide skin cancer campaigns
- n On-site health screening
- n Data gathering arising from health screening programme

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- n Research project “Patterns of Ill-Health in Irish Construction Industry Workers” .

Steering a successful course

Due to the prevalence of a particular type of macho style culture, negative peer pressure often operates, reducing responsiveness to health promoting advice. Therefore an important facet of the strategy was to have confidential, “one to one” consultations. Conducting these proved to be a very rewarding exercise indeed. The majority of construction workers generally have very low GP consultation rates and these sessions were used to compensate for that. Some of these individual sessions were effectively counselling sessions as well, with individual workers, once reassured about confidentiality ‘opening up’ and discussing other pressing issues for them (e.g. family problems, alcohol problems, etc.). Given the construction industry workers’ circumstances and their lifestyle, the partners in the CEHTs WHP initiative (the Irish Heart Foundation and the Irish Cancer Society) appear as natural allies in this health promoting project. These partners initially highlighted some nation-wide health issues and concerns, which were subsequently used as a basis for formulating health-promoting campaigns for construction industry workers. Thus this co-operation highlighted the need for action regarding coronary disease prevention (according to national and

international data, Ireland has one of worst records in Europe in the area of coronary disease). Similarly, given the prevalence of male workers in the industry, the need for action regarding so called “male cancers” has also been identified. This data in turn was used to formulate a “quit smoking” campaign. This campaign was organised in the conjunction with the Irish Cancer Society who provided support and monitoring to the participants (who have volunteered to take part). The “quit smoking” campaign even incorporated a piece of clever marketing - one of the participants won a holiday abroad for two weeks. The CEHT has research findings regarding sickness patterns in the construction industry in the last three decades. There is no doubt that these findings will be valuable for designing future health promoting initiatives.

Developing an effective strategy

A number of implementation strategies proved both effective and successful. Probably the most effective strategy was directly targeting construction workers at their workplaces, and offering convenient, free health check ups, health education, advice and consultation.

Factors contributing to the success of the project included:

- n Easy access to the WHP programme and its general inclusiveness (it is open to all regardless

of the grade and position held)

- n A participative set up and partnership framework between trade unions (construction industry trade union), public bodies (Department of Health and Children) and voluntary health promoting bodies
- n No direct cost involved to either employees or employers
- n Minimised disruption to the workflow (enhancing the acceptance by employers)
- n The absence of any “hidden agenda”
- n Realisation that the WHP positively contributes to profitability via employee performance
- n Good image of the partners in the WHP project (The Irish Cancer Society, the Irish heart Foundation)
- n The type of delivery of the WHP programme – focus on face to face approach
- n Getting all relevant players ‘on board’.

Looking at the results

It is too early to ascertain whether the state-of-health has been improved, as there is no hard data available, but anecdotal experience and feedback are very positive. This was communicated to the CEHT by all parties involved. The whole project is designed to be self-sustaining and all partner organisations are fully committed to furthering the activities undertaken thus far.