

Wednesday 15 May 2024

1.5m UK construction workers at risk with circa 700,000 injuries already caused from poor mental health

Half of all UK construction workers, or 1.5m people have worked in a dangerous environment¹ while suffering poor mental health and close to 700,000 suffered injuries, according to new research from business insurer QBE.

For the first time, QBE research shows the cost to the UK construction industry from poor mental health. QBE surveyed 362 UK construction workers about their mental health at work. The results indicate that even with the increased risk of injury, they are likely to continue to work.

Three quarters of UK construction workers with poor mental health said at some point they continued to work in a dangerous situation despite the increased risk involved. In addition, more than one quarter of construction workers (27%) have taken time off in the last 12 months due to poor mental health, with almost half of them (46%) taking at least one week off.

The research also shows that in the UK construction industry, more than 5.1 million working days were lost to poor mental health last year, this compares to 18 million² working days for the whole UK economy. The construction sector is one of the largest in the UK economy – employing 3.1 million people or over 9% of the workforce.³

According to government reports, stress, depression or anxiety account for almost half (49%) of all work-related ill health. And it is the biggest cause of lost workdays in the UK with work-related ill health accounting for *over* half (54%) of working days lost.⁴

Speaking at The British Insurance Brokers' Association (BIBA) conference in Manchester this week, QBE is encouraging employers to do more to support and protect their workers.

David Dexter, Practice Leader, Risk Solutions at QBE Europe, said:

“Mental health issues are the biggest cause of lost workdays in the UK and a contributing factor in many workplace incidents.

“The UK construction industry is no exception; we are only too aware how mental health can be the hidden driver behind an incident or claim.

¹ Figures extrapolated from QBE research, which found that 50% of UK Construction workers surveyed had often or sometimes worked in a dangerous situation (for example operating machinery, working in poor weather conditions, working at height, lifting heavy loads or driving commercial vehicle) while experiencing poor mental health (feelings of stress, depression, tiredness or anxiety). Calculation: Total UK Construction workforce 3.1m *50%; When asked 'have you ever experienced an injury during a period of poor mental health': 22% responded yes. Calculation: 22% * 3.1m = 682,000

² <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/dayslost.htm>

³ [https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/bis-construction-sector-team#:~:text=Construction%20is%20one%20of%20the,of%20the%20total%20UK%20workforce\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/bis-construction-sector-team#:~:text=Construction%20is%20one%20of%20the,of%20the%20total%20UK%20workforce))

⁴ *Work-related stress, depression, or anxiety statistics in Great Britain, 2023*, <https://www.hse.gov.uk/>



“We’ve just celebrated Construction Safety Week and are partway through Mental Health Awareness Week so worker safety should be front of mind for firms. Even a small positive change in an employer’s approach to wellbeing and mental health can substantially address and change workplace pressure points resulting in less stress and fewer accidents and incidents.

“Improving workplace culture by encouraging openness and demystifying stigmas when discussing mental health demonstrates to staff that their health and wellbeing should be a business priority.”

Key findings from the research include:

- Half of workers in the industry or 1.5m people have worked in a dangerous environment while experiencing poor mental health.
- More than one in five (22%), or 682,000 workers report they have suffered an injury at work as a result of poor mental health.
- For those that have continued to work with mental ill health; the majority (76%) say mental ill health increases risk of injury.
- Mental health costs UK construction industry at least £1.2bn per annum with 1.7 days lost per worker⁵ and 5.1m lost working days last year.
- More than one quarter (27%) are uncomfortable discussing mental health with their employer.
- One third (32%) of workers said their employer has never once checked in with them about their mental health.
- Absent construction workers are likely to lie about the reason when it is related to mental health and give a different reason for their time off⁶; over a third (38%) of respondents said they told an employer the reason they were absent from work was due to a physical condition, when it was in fact due to poor mental health.
- 36% have been prevented from speaking openly about their mental health due to workplace stigma.

<ends>

On behalf of QBE, Opinium Research carried out an online survey of 362 UK construction workers aged 18+ from 24th April to 2nd May 2024.

Minds in Business

As a leading business insurer, QBE has been supporting construction and engineering firms for more than 30 years. We work with many of the sector’s leading firms and have long-term relationships with 20 of the UK’s top 30 construction companies.

To help businesses evaluate and improve their mental health strategy, QBE has a new ‘Minds in Business’ mental health strategic assessment tool that’s unique in the insurance market.

QBE Minds in Business has been developed in collaboration with renowned mental health charity Mind, organisational culture and human error specialists Anker and Marsh, and business and

⁵ When asked ‘how many days they took off for poor mental health last year’, the average was 1.7 days. Calculation: 1.7 days * 3.1m = 5.1m and when we multiply the number of working days lost by the average person’s daily labour productivity (£227 per day), we find sickness absences due to mental health conditions reduce UK GDP by a further £1.2 billion a year

⁶ <https://www.ts-p.co.uk/insights/mental-health-in-construction-the-silent-epidemic/>

personal resilience specialists Petros, so brokers and customers can have confidence in the process and outcomes.

If you are suffering from mental health or need support, please contact the NHS urgent mental health helpline in England here: <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline>

Or the Mates in Mind charity who specialize in mental health in the construction industry: <https://www.matesinmind.org/need-help>

For further information contact:

Sandra Villanueva, Corporate Communications, QBE, 020 7105 5284,
Sandra.Villanueva@uk.qbe.com

Georgie Hall, Corporate Communications, QBE, 0789 0647 808, Georgie.Hall@uk.qbe.com

About QBE

QBE helps businesses build resilience through risk management and insurance.

QBE European Operations is part of QBE Insurance Group, one of the world's leading international insurers and reinsurers and Standard & Poor's A+ rated. Listed on the Australian Securities Exchange, QBE's gross written premium for the year ended 31 December 2023 was US\$21.75 billion.

As a business insurance specialist, QBE European Operations offers a range of insurance products from the standard suite of property, casualty and motor to the specialist financial lines, marine and energy. All are tailored to the individual needs of our small, medium and large customer base.

We understand the crucial role that effective risk management plays in all organisations and work hard to understand our customers' businesses so that we offer insurance solutions that meet their needs – from complex programmes to simpler e-trading solutions – and support them in minimising their risk exposures. Our expert risk management and rehabilitation practitioners focus on helping customers improve their risk management so that they may benefit from a reduction in claims frequency and costs.

