

The role of the workplace in return-to-work: a research perspective

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Presentation to Centre for Aged Care Studies Research
Outcomes Seminar, 20/5/08



Australian Institute
for Social Research
Informing decisions.

Background to the Research

- WorkCover Board keen to acquire evidence base to underpin decisions, began research strategy in 2006
- Australian Institute for Primary Care at La Trobe University completed for WorkCover a literature review on facilitators and barriers to RTW in July 2006
- Identified absence of a clear theoretical framework and multiple interacting factors impacting on RTW outcomes
- Recommended further research on role of workplace factors in achieving RTW



Project's link to broader workforce research at the AISR

- What is the AISR?
- AISR linked this project to ongoing work on workforce participation & development
- Workforce ageing project
- High performance workplaces
- Models of effective workforce development
- Addressing workforce skills shortages

Methodology

- Focus on aged care industry
- Review of research literature, focused on workplace factors that affect injury and illness, and effective return-to-work following injury or illness.
- Structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in *WorkCover SA*, Employers Mutual, aged care industry representatives and researchers specialising in return-to-work.

Methodology

- Two Case Studies of Good Practice in return-to-work in aged care sector.
- Analysis of unit record data of all *WorkCover SA* claims for 2006 and 2007.
- Survey of Managers and Survey of Employees from SA aged care sector.
- Process tailored to each organisation and offered with choice of hard copy or on-line.

Survey sample

- **607** individuals - **552** employees + **55** managers
- Estimated response rate - **22%** employees and **69%** managers.
- Total of 10 organisations
 - range of locations (rural, outer metropolitan and metropolitan)
 - mixture of for-profit and not-for-profit agencies
 - mixture of small, medium and large organisations
 - providing low to high level residential care and community care.

Survey sample by claim history

- **21.2%** of employee sample had **past** workers' compensation claim and returned to work
- **1.8%** with an **active** claim and had not returned to work at the time of the survey
- **68.5%** had never been injured seriously and had **no claim** history
- **7.6%** had been **injured** in their workplace but had **no claim** history.

The Return-to-Work Workplace Index

- Survey instrument designed from findings of literature review and scoping interviews.
- Findings clustered into a 5 themes each grouping questions relating to factors known to affect workplace injury rates and return-to-work.
- The Return-to-Work Workplace Index therefore was structured around 5 sub-Indexes.

The Return-to-Work Workplace Index

- The **conditions** of the workplace.
- The **degree of control** or autonomy individual workers have in relation to their role and responsibilities, and how these are undertaken.
- The **culture** of the workplace – eg, degree of trust, supportiveness to injured or ill workers, quality of communication.
- **Safety** in the workplace and the **prevention** of injury and illness.
- How the workplace **responds** to injury or illness, including provision for return-to-work.

The Return-to-Work Workplace Index

- Separate surveys for Employees and Managers.
- Responses provide a snapshot of overall organisational climate and capacity to achieve effective return-to-work.
- Further analysis involving tests of significance (eg based on presence or absence of a current or past workers' compensation claim, or on work setting) provides more detailed information about role of workplace in promoting health and safety and its response to injury or illness.

The Return-to-Work Workplace Index

- Employee & Manager surveys shared common questions for 3 of the Indexes, remaining 2 specific to survey of Employees.
- Feedback from Managers designed to obtain an assessment of their employing organisation's workplace (as opposed to their experience as employees of that organisation).
- Feedback from Employees designed to capture perceptions of workplace + their own experience as workers in their employing organisation.

The Return-to-Work Workplace Index

Sub-Index	Employee Survey	Manager Survey
I. Workplace Conditions		
II. Workplace Control		
III. Workplace Culture		
IV. Workplace Safety		
V. Workplace Response to Injury/Illness		

The Return-to-Work Workplace Index

The Index can be used -

- As a measure of achievements made and challenges that need to be addressed.
- As a risk management tool through the early identification and management of problems.
- As a baseline to assess the impact of interventions designed to enhance the role of the workplace in the return to work.
- To quantify employing organisation's capacity to design and operate the workplace to prevent or minimise work-related injury or illness and to achieve timely and effective return-to-work.

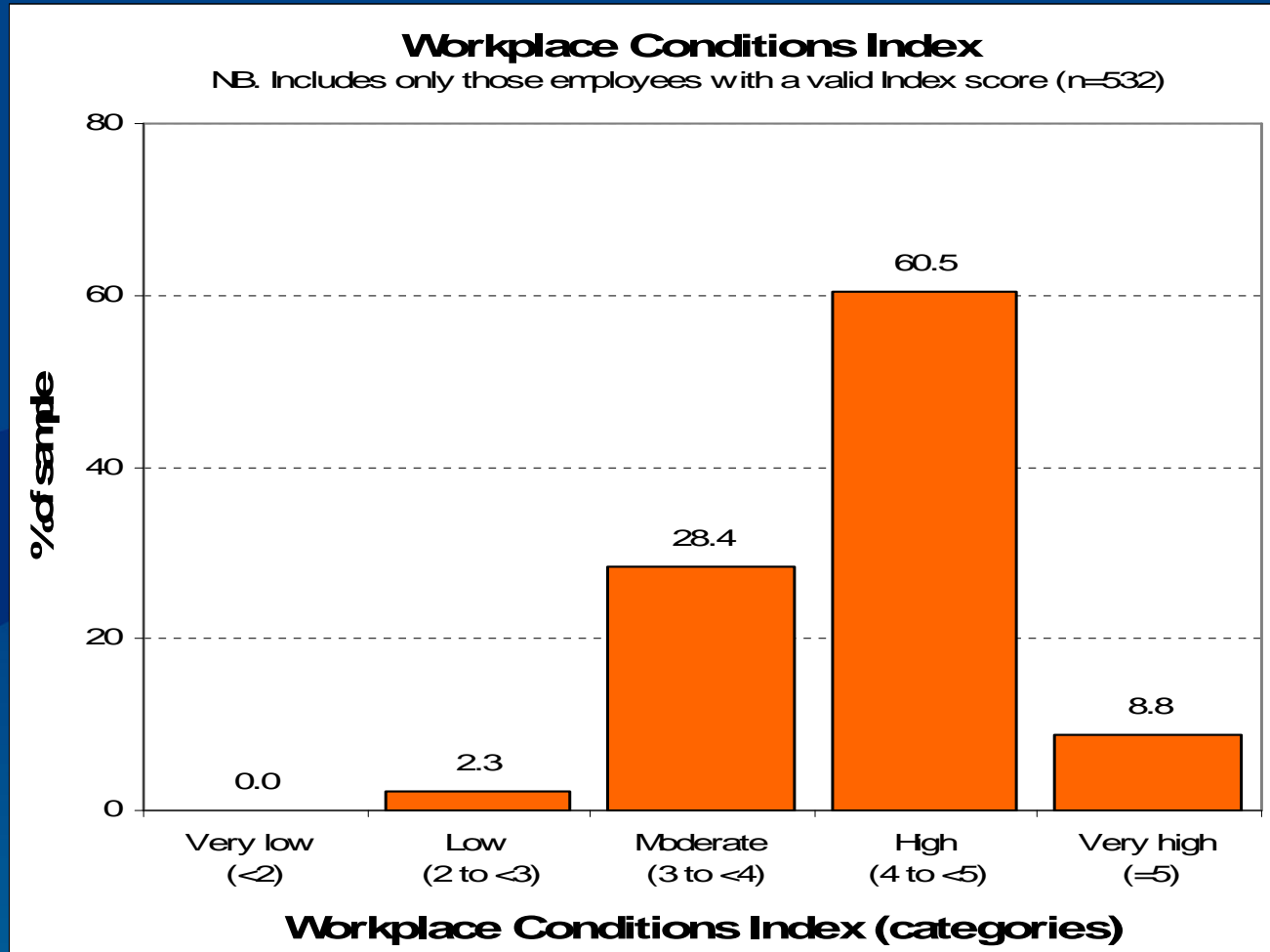
Findings

- Reinforce previous research about important role of workplace in relation to RTW, and significant scope for employers to prevent injury and to achieve effective return-to-work when this does occur.
- Majority of aged care providers studied gave essentially positive assessment of the aged care workplace in SA.
- However, sample included organisations who were willing to participate, and assessments of the workplace were more negative where an **active or past claim** for workers' compensation) existed.

The Return-to-Work Workplace Index

Sub-Index	Employee Survey Total Mean Score	Manager Survey Total Mean Score
I. Workplace Conditions	4.2	n/a
II. Workplace Control	3.5	n/a
III. Workplace Culture	4.0	4.3
IV. Workplace Safety	4.2	4.3
V. Workplace Response to Injury/Illness	4.5	4.6

Workplace Conditions Index - total



Workplace Conditions Index: with claim

- Statistically significant differences on basis of past or active workers' compensation claim for 3 *Workplace Conditions Index* items –
 1. vibration from equipment - bearing in mind that this was the most positively assessed workplace condition for the sample as a whole ($p < .05$)
 2. being in skin contact with chemicals ($p < .05$)
 3. slippery floors, loose rugs and other fall-inducing conditions ($p < .05$).

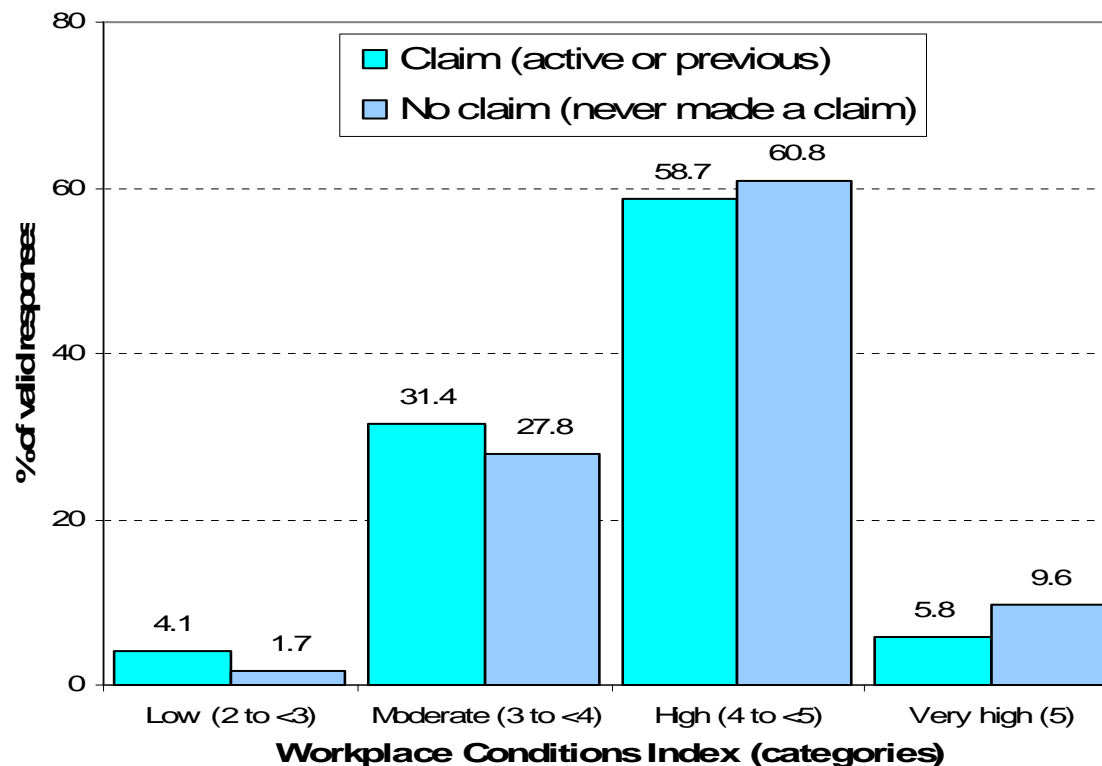
Workplace Conditions Index: care setting

- Significant difference in relation to *slippery floors, loose rugs and other factors that can lead to a fall* ($p < .05$) with employees working in residential care settings being more positive than those working in clients' homes.
- Workplaces bringing greater risk of falls were also significantly associated with employees with a past or active workers' compensation claim.

Workplace Conditions Index: with claim

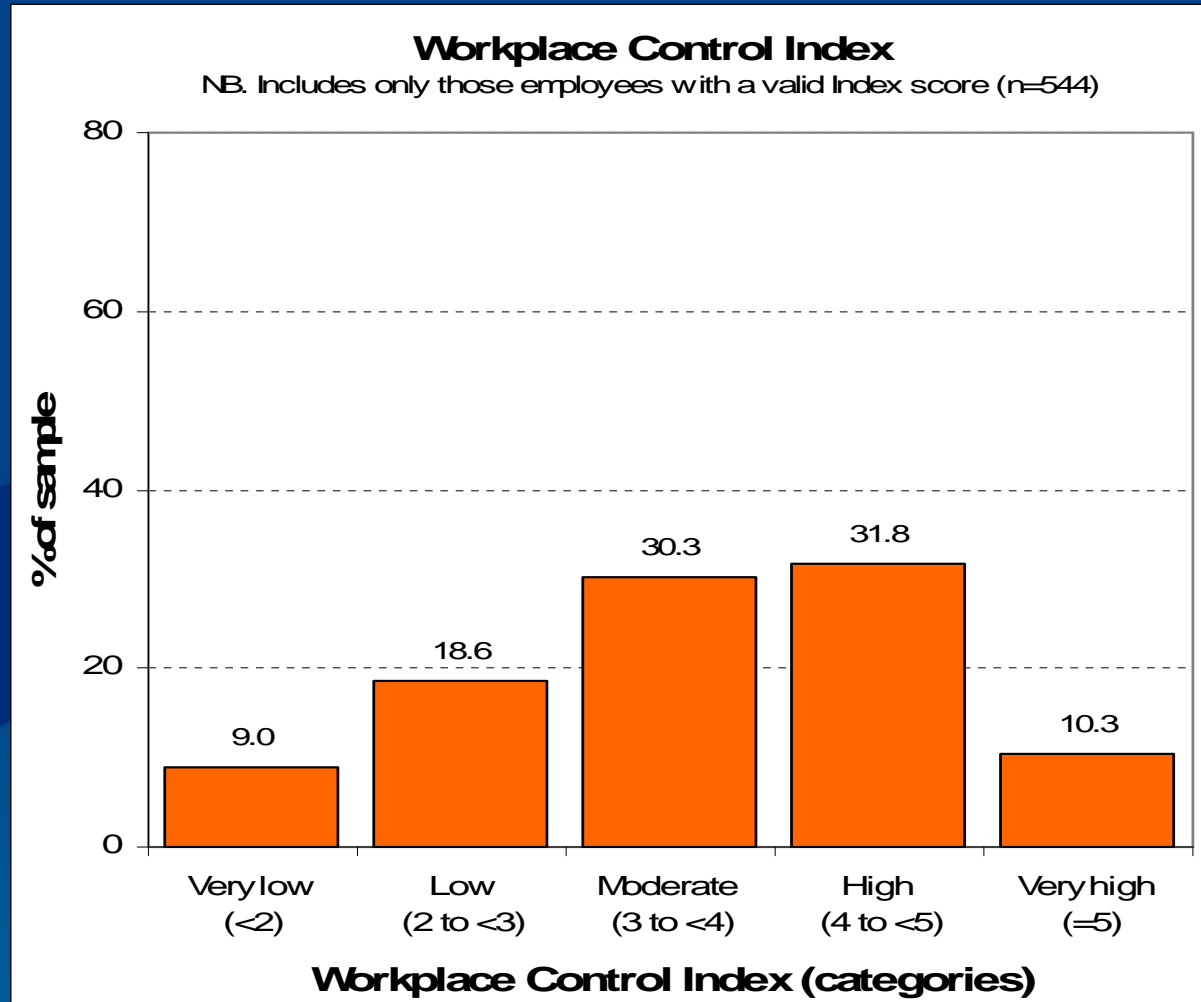
Workplace Conditions Index by Claim/No Claim

NB. Includes only those employees with a valid Index score (n=532)



There was a statistically significant difference between the Index scores for Claim/NoClaim (Mann-Whitney $U=21274.5$, $p<.05$).

Workplace Control Index: total



Workplace Control Index: Work Role & Care Setting

- Workplace control factors emerge as the least conducive to effective return-to-work.
- With exception of those in policy or administrative roles, most aged care workers have restricted capacity to control how their work day and activities are structured.
- Staff in residential aged care significantly less likely to agree they could adapt their working hours, and decide when to take a break, compared with staff working in clients' homes or administrative, community care offices etc.

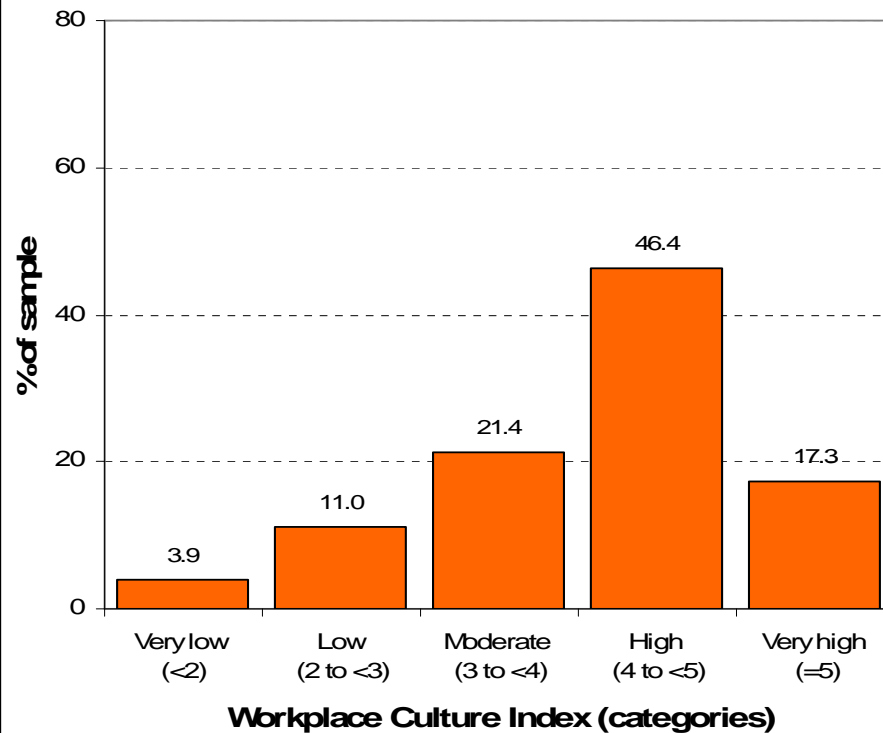
Workplace Control Index: Work Role & Care Setting

- Care workers reported least flexibility in taking a break, policy/administration staff reported most flexibility in those areas, with nurses somewhere in between.
- Staff in policy or administrative roles had greater control over ability to adapt working hours than did nurses, care workers and domestic or home maintenance workers.
- Re: the item '*I can adapt my working hours within limits*' - employees who had made a compensation claim rated their workplace as providing less control over working hours than was case for those with no claim history ($p < .05$).

Workplace Culture Index: total

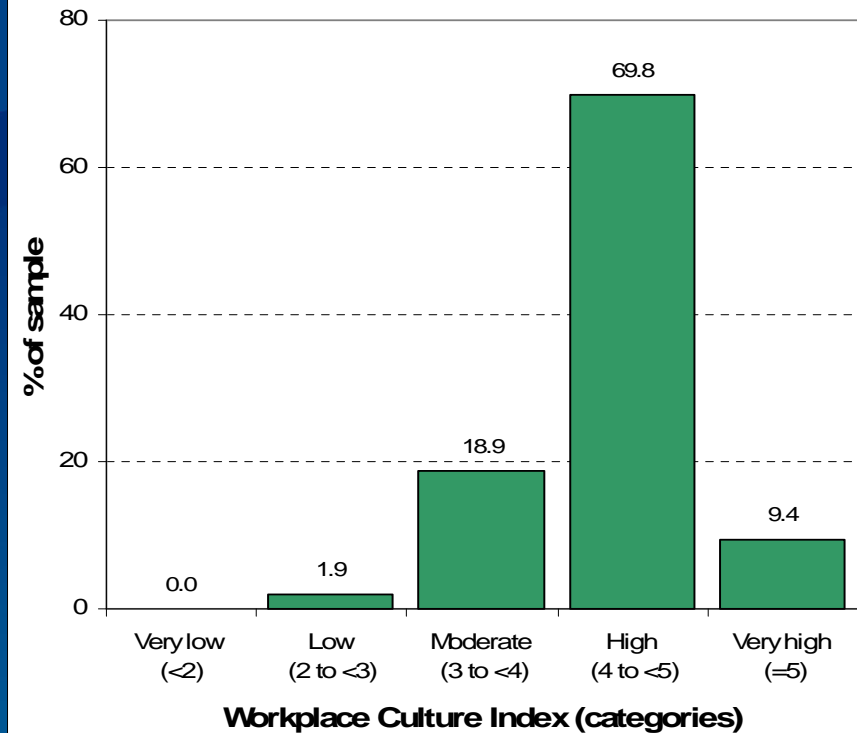
Workplace Culture Index: Employees

NB. Includes only those employees with a valid Index score (n=543)



Workplace Culture Index: Managers

NB. Includes only those employees with a valid Index score (n=53)

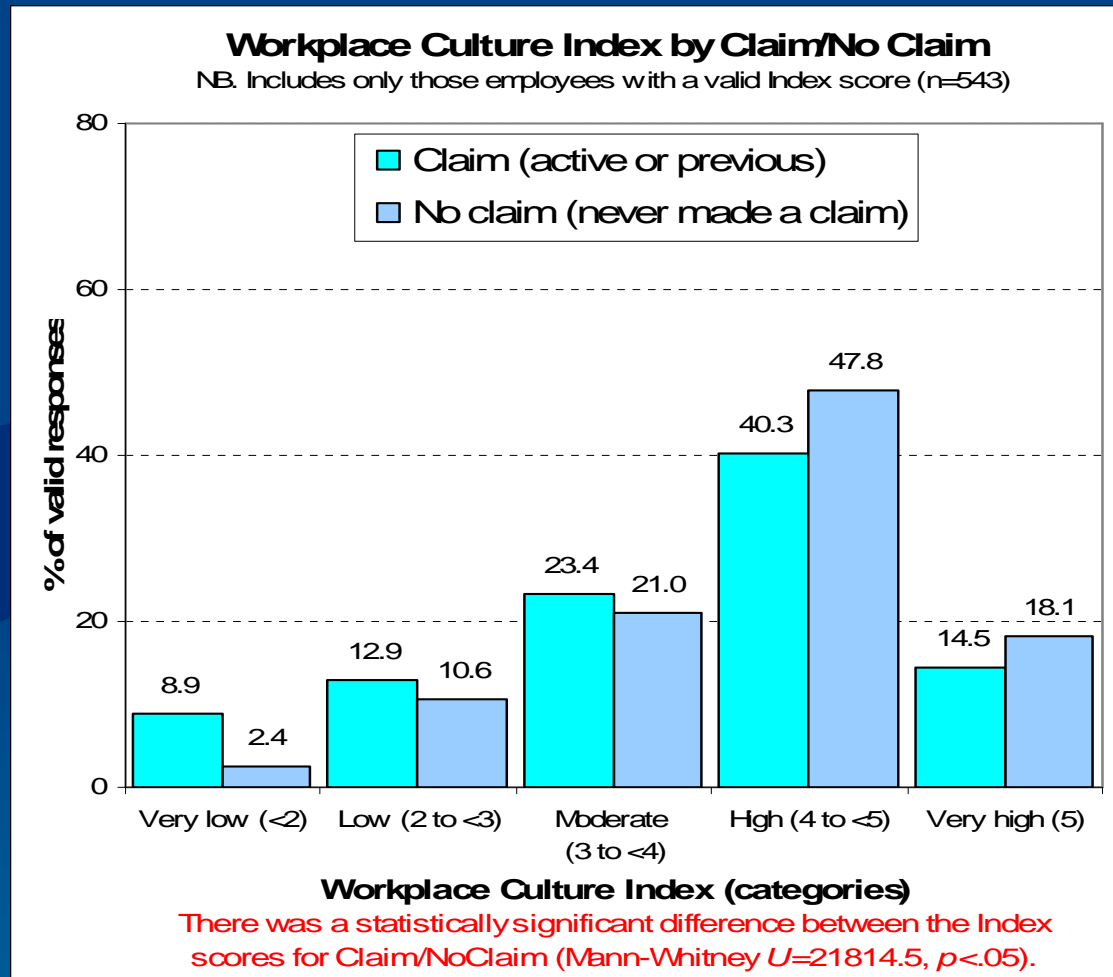


Workplace Culture Index: With Claim

The following 6 items of the Index showed a statistically significant difference with a claim –

- Communication between managers and staff ($p < .05$) – less effective
- Communication within work teams ($p < .05$) - less effective
- Level of trust within work teams ($p < .01$) - lower
- Workplace bullying ($p < .05$) - higher
- Work teams are supportive to ill/injured employee ($p < .05$) – less supportive
- Management/supervisors are supportive to ill/injured employee ($p < .05$) – less supportive

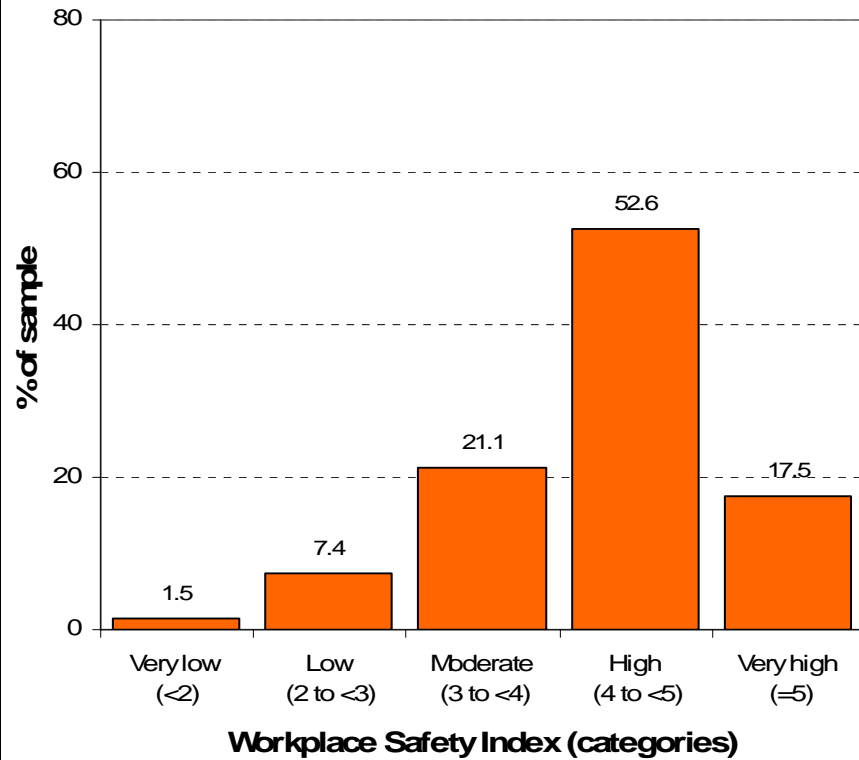
Workplace Culture Index: with claim



Workplace Safety Index: total

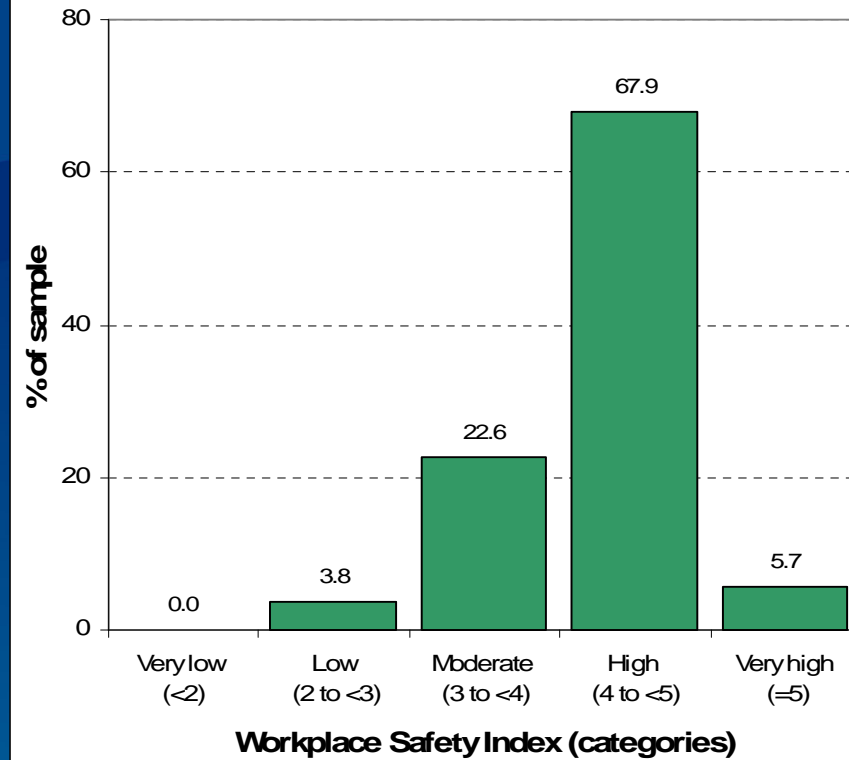
Workplace Safety Index: Employees

NB. Includes only those employees with a valid Index score (n=544)



Workplace Safety Index: Managers

NB. Includes only those employees with a valid Index score (n=53)



Workplace Safety – Most positive ratings

- High value placed on workplace safety by employing organisations.
- Management was rated as receptive to the raising of safety issues.
- Training in lifting and the use of lifting equipment.
- Provision and availability of lifting equipment.

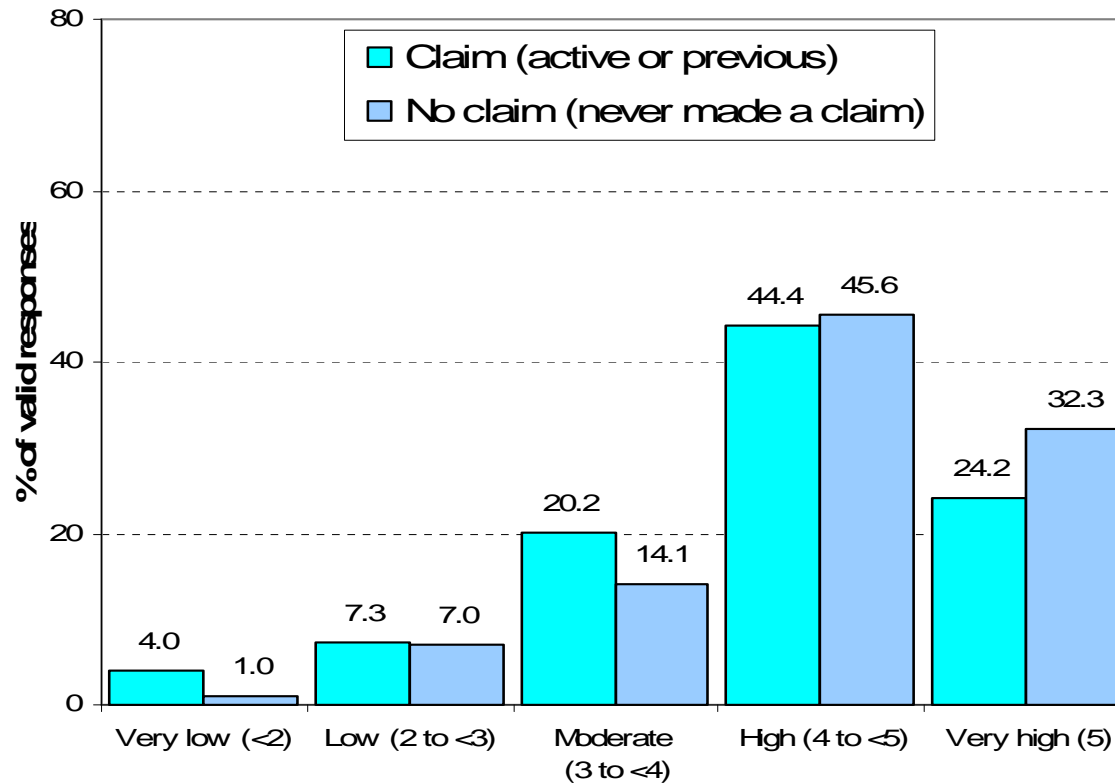
Workplace Safety – Most negative ratings

- inadequate training of managers and supervisors in safety and injury management (Managers' Survey)
- familiarity with workers' compensation rights and obligations and processes, and processes associated with making a claim (Employees' Survey)

Workplace Safety Index: with claim

Workplace Safety Index (Version II) by Claim/No Claim

NB. Includes only those employees with a valid Index score (n=541)



Workplace Safety Index - Version II (categories)

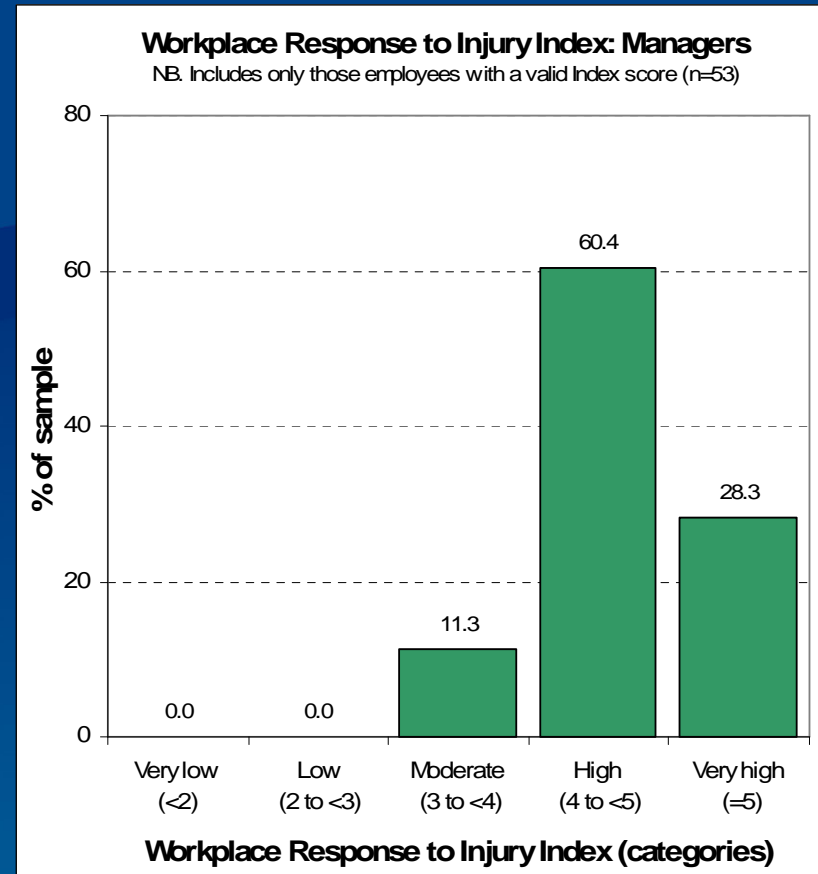
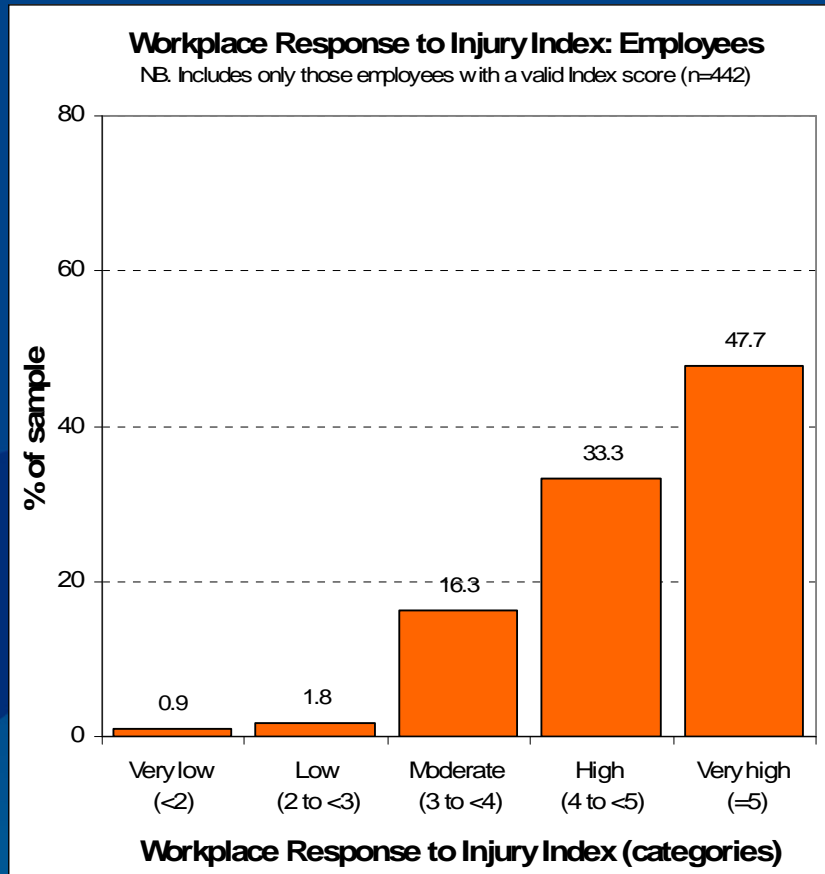
Statistically significant difference between the Index scores for Claim/NoClaim (Mann-Whitney U=21838.5, $p < .05$).

Workplace Safety Index: no claim

Those with no claim history provided significantly more positive ratings on these 6 items –

- *Employees* receive enough training in OH&S issues ($p < .01$).
- *Employees* receive enough training in injury prevention ($p < .05$).
- *Managers* receive enough training in OH&S issues ($p < .05$).
- *Managers* receive enough training in injury prevention ($p < .05$).
- *Employees* receive enough training in lifting to prevent injury ($p < .05$).
- Managers listen if employees raise workplace safety issues ($p < .05$).

Workplace Response Index: total



Workplace Response Index

- Both employees and managers more positive about their organisations' response to workplace injury and illness and to achieving RTW, than about their capacity to prevent injury and illness.
- Employees gave their most positive average rating to policies encouraging employees to *notify as early as possible* if they have been injured.
- Very positive ratings given to developing a *return-to-work plan, involving supervisors and the injured worker* in that plan, and *work redesign* to accommodate the injured worker.

Workplace Response Index

- Greatest barrier to RTW was communication processes between management and those managing the worker's injury or illness.
- This factor not within influence of aged care sector alone, and requires collaborative intervention by all stakeholders.
- Managers identified the appointment of a *Return-to-Work Coordinator* as another facilitating factor to RTW.

Conclusions and Future Directions for Aged Care Employers to consider

- Given trend for most aged care industry occupations traditionally to have low levels of control or autonomy, it would be useful to explore ways in which greater workplace control can be achieved across roles and work settings, perhaps by establishing a series of pilots to model alternative approaches.
- Attention should be directed to addressing less positive ratings given to workplace bullying (by both employees and managers), & levels of trust between managers and staff (as perceived by employees).

Conclusions and Future Directions for Aged Care Employers to consider

- The findings suggest that the aged care sector has implemented a range of initiatives to support effective return-to-work, but should pay greater attention to developing and implementing specific RTW policies and procedures.
- Given how positive managers have been in most of their ratings, the lower assessment given by them to the training they receive in injury prevention should be interpreted as an urgent need for further training on this issue.

Conclusions and Future Directions for *WorkCover SA* to consider

- Only workplace condition identified as requiring attention by aged care employers related to fall-inducing conditions. Given continuing trend to provide care in the home rather than a residential setting, risk of falling will be more difficult to contain.
- Indicates need for a wider community education campaign by *WorkCover SA* and *SafeWorkSA* about home and office conditions that bring the risk of falling.
- Most negatively rated factor in responding to workplace injury/illness involved ineffective communication processes between those involved in RTW process.
- Requires a coordinated strategy that could be initiated by *WorkCover SA* and involving all stakeholder groups.

Conclusions and Future Directions for *WorkCover SA* to consider

- Among the least positive ratings were those assessing how informed employees are regarding workers' compensation claim processes
- Given the influence identified by research of this on RTW, there is scope for *WorkCover SA* to work with the aged care industry to address this information gap.
- Role for *WorkCover SA* to play, in collaboration with the Department of Further Education Employment Science and Technology (DFEEST) and Department of Trade & Economic Development (DTED) in bringing a focus on RTW objectives as part of development of the new state-wide skills and workforce development strategy.

Expanding the evidence base

- Research to be expanded across other industries in 2008-09.
- Minister Wright announced \$15 million as part of Return to Work Fund:
 - initiatives helping retraining
 - rehabilitation and return to work programs
 - other initiatives to assist RTW
 - more information on this fund later in 2008.
- Existing aged care organisations have a benchmark for repeated and ongoing research.