

# Mental Health in Construction Management: The Impact of Workplace and Organisational Culture

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how workplace and organisational cultures affected the mental health of construction managers. The study used an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach to fully explore the participants' experiences concerning the phenomenon under investigation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 11 construction personnel working in managerial and supervisory roles on construction sites. The findings reveal that high workloads, tight deadlines, interpersonal pressures, and an organisational culture that discourages open discussions about mental health contribute significantly to stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue. The study further highlights the role of stigma and limited organisational support in exacerbating these challenges. However, the relatively small sample size limits the findings, potentially affecting the generalisability of the results. Despite this limitation, the study contributes to a growing body of knowledge about psychosocial risks in the construction industry and calls attention to the importance of organisational interventions that promote supportive work environments, improve workload management, and encourage mental health awareness.

**Keywords:** Construction Industry, Construction management, Mental health, Organisational Policy, Workplace Culture

## 1. Introduction

The construction industry plays a critical role in national economies and contributes significantly to economic growth (Adekunle et al., 2022). However, despite its importance, the industry faces a critical yet often overlooked challenge that extends beyond physical safety concerns namely, the mental well-being of construction personnels. While occupational health and safety (OHS) efforts have traditionally focused on physical hazards, increasing attention is being given to the psychological demands of construction work. For instance, Lingard & Turner, (2023) highlight that workers, particularly men, operate within a workplace culture that valorises endurance and toughness despite long hours, heavy workloads, and ongoing stress. This culture of stoicism discourages the acknowledgement of mental health challenges and contributes to outcomes such as depression and anxiety.

Construction workers experience significantly higher rates of mental health problems than national averages, with suicide rates in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom reported to be two and three times higher, respectively (Chan et al., 2020). The causes of mental health in the construction industry could be rooted to factors such as excessive workloads, unrealistic deadlines, and job insecurity (LaMontagne et al., 2023). In South Africa, workers at moderate or considerable risk of harm were 80.0% and 77.0% less likely to present depressive symptoms, respectively

(Zhang et al., 2025). It is further reported by the authors that in South Africa construction workers who were single or living with other adults without children had a significantly higher risk of depression compared to those in other forms of family relationships.

Mental health, as defined by Gautam (2024), refers to the absence of mental illness, the ability to function effectively in daily life, and a state of internal balance within one's social and physical environment. Poor mental health is associated with reduced work performance, non-compliance with safety regulations, and declining physical health (Lingard & Pirzadeh, 2025). In the construction industry, managerial roles are particularly vulnerable towards mental health. For instance, managers often face higher levels of burnout and depression than workers due to sustained responsibility, decision-making pressures, and performance expectations in construction (Tijani et al., 2021). These challenges are associated to psychosocial workplace risks, which Cox and Griffiths (2005) describe as harmful aspects of work design, organisation, and social framework. In the construction industry, such health risks include high psychological demands, time pressure, long working hours, and unpredictable schedules, all of which negatively affect job satisfaction and mental health (Lingard & Turner, 2023).

The research problem is the limited understanding of how workplace and organizational culture influence the

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mental health of construction managers. Despite increased attention to mental health in the construction industry, the specific interaction between organizational dynamics and managerial well-being remains underexplored. This study addresses the question: *"How do workplace and organizational culture in the construction industry affect the mental health of construction managers?"* Answering this question contributes to knowledge on psychosocial risks in managerial roles, informs interventions, and supports improved project performance, safety, and industry sustainability. Construction managers are critical, balancing the demands of clients, contractors, and teams while ensuring project delivery and profitability. In the South African construction industry, they face significant pressures from demanding schedules, resource constraints, stakeholder expectations, and economic uncertainties, making them vulnerable to psychosocial risks. Understanding the impact of culture on their mental health is essential, as their well-being directly influences decision-making, project performance, safety, and organizational sustainability.

## 2. Literature Review

In the construction industry, managers are expected to oversee demanding workloads, tight deadlines, and multiple tasks simultaneously, which places considerable pressure on their daily activities (Tijani et al., 2021). This level of demand frequently leads to high stress levels and emotional fatigue (Enshassi & Al. Swaity, 2015). According to Senaratne and Rasagopalasingam (2017), stress is intensified when managers lack adequate resources or support to meet project requirements, especially under strict deadlines and when overseeing several projects simultaneously. In addition, long working hours, broad responsibilities, and the need to coordinate different stakeholders increase the strain on managers and contribute to burnout (Selcuk, & Gundes, 2025). Taken together, these findings highlight how ongoing pressure and workload demands remain a persistent challenge for construction managers (Fisher et al., 2024).

Beyond workload, the general working conditions in construction add to the pressure experienced by managers (Zhang et al., 2020). The industry is characterized by long shifts, unpredictable working hours, and limited control over work processes, all of which contribute to fatigue, burnout, and even depression. In practice, this means that construction managers are often required to deliver results under difficult conditions, including unrealistic targets and constant time pressure. They are required to make rapid decisions, coordinate diverse teams, and manage complex stakeholder relationships, all of which can contribute to sustained mental strain over time. Consequently, the continuous demands and responsibilities associated with the role mean that

project managers tend to experience higher levels of emotional fatigue than many other professionals in the industry (Wu et al., 2019).

The concept of burnout is useful in explaining the impact of these pressures. Burnout is understood as a state of emotional exhaustion, detachment from work, and a reduced sense of achievement, and it is common among construction managers and project teams (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2025). High job demands, combined with limited organizational support and a lack of recognition, increase the risk of psychological strain and may even lead to employees wanting to leave the industry (Golzad et al., 2023). Job stress is also intricately linked to fatigue, with factors such as heavy workloads, tight deadlines, and pressure to perform identified as major contributors (Fitri & Budiyo, 2023). These conditions demonstrate how workplace pressures can gradually affect both the mental health and overall well-being of construction professionals (Zhang et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the demanding nature of the construction industry continues to worsen mental health challenges in the industry. This is because long working hours, complex project requirements, and the constant need to meet performance expectations leave little room for rest and recovery (Wu et al., 2019). In the South African context, where additional pressures such as economic uncertainty and resource constraints may exist, these challenges can be even more pronounced. The interaction between these demanding work conditions and organizational factors, such as workplace culture and support systems, plays a significant role in shaping the mental health of construction managers. This section, therefore, demonstrates that mental health in construction is not only an individual issue but is strongly influenced by the working conditions, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how organizational culture and work conditions affect managerial well-being.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Research design

Following Saunders et al., (2023), this study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy to explore the impact of the workplace and organizational culture on the mental health of construction managers. An interpretivist approach was appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings related to workplace stress and mental well-being within the construction industry (Saunders et al., 2023). To capture rich, contextual insights from construction personnel directly involved in the construction project delivery. Thus, a qualitative research design was employed as explained by Creswell & Creswell (2023). The qualitative data were collected over two months, from August to September 2025, representing a cross-

sectional design that ensured sufficient engagement with participants to obtain detailed and reflective responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

### 3.2. Research sampling

The research sample consisted of eleven (11) construction personnel working on construction sites in the Free State Province, the central region of South Africa. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with relevant experience in managerial and supervisory roles within construction project delivery (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The participants interviewed included a construction manager, foremen, a site engineer, a safety manager, and site supervisors, all of whom were directly exposed to the operational and organizational dynamics under investigation. To ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance, participants were anonymized and coded as P1 to P11. The selection criteria ensured that all participants possessed practical experience and decision-making responsibilities, enabling them to provide informed perspectives on workplace conditions and organizational culture (Table 1).

selected for its suitability in identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data, especially for understanding complex social and organisational phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This analytical approach provided a structured, yet flexible, framework to interpret how working environments and organisational culture shape the mental health outcomes of construction managers within the South African context.

## 4. Findings

This section uses thematic analysis to address the research question: "*How do workplace and organizational culture in the construction industry affect the mental health of construction managers?*" The first sub-question explored how high job demands and tight deadlines function as persistent sources of psychological distress. For instance, P1 stated that their role as construction manager or site agent "*affects their mental well-being in terms of managing high-pressure deadlines, ensuring safety on site, and dealing with unexpected issues like weather delays or material*

**Table 1:** Participants research sample

| Code         | Position              | Total (No) | Percentage(%) |
|--------------|-----------------------|------------|---------------|
| P1, P9, P11  | Construction managers | 3          | 27.27         |
| P2, P8       | Foreman's             | 2          | 18.18         |
| P3           | Site engineer         | 1          | 9.09          |
| P4           | Safety manager        | 1          | 9.09          |
| P5,          | Safety officer        | 1          | 9.09          |
| P6, P10      | Site agents           | 2          | 18.18         |
| P7           | Supervisor            | 1          | 9.09          |
| <b>Total</b> |                       | 11         | 100.00        |

### 3.3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews, as described by Saunders et al. (2023), were used to collect qualitative data, allowing participants to express their experiences and perceptions in a flexible, yet guided manner. Aligned with the research objective, interview questions explored workplace demands, organisational culture, and their influence on mental health. All interviews were conducted in a professional and confidential setting, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed for analysis. This approach ensured consistency while capturing depth and nuance in participant responses.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, as recommended by Saunders et al. (2023), following a systematic process of coding, categorisation, and theme development. Initial codes were generated from the data and grouped into broader themes reflecting recurring patterns, including workload pressures, burnout, work-life imbalance, organisational culture, and interpersonal strain. To ensure traceability of responses while maintaining anonymity, participant codes (P1–P11) were used. Thematic analysis was

*shortages.*" P1's statement illustrates how operational pressures and uncertainty contribute to sustained psychological strain among construction managers.

P3 and P5 echoed P1's remarks, citing stress associated with coordinating multiple construction task teams, adhering to project budgets, and managing client expectations. These accounts demonstrate that operational uncertainty and constant time pressure create a construction work environment where mental fatigue accumulates, impacting managerial well-being. This assertion analytically shows how operational uncertainty and ongoing time constraints combine to produce a high-demand work environment where extended exposure to stressors causes cumulative mental exhaustion, which has a detrimental impact on construction managers' wellbeing.

Regarding the second sub-question, participants associated emotional exhaustion and burnout with long working hours and continuous performance pressure. P2, for example, explained they felt "*emotionally drained or burnt out due to work, especially during long hours on site or when projects don't go as planned.*" This result indicates a close link between

work-life imbalance and these experiences; professional duties often encroach on personal time, leaving little opportunity for rest or recovery. This overlap between work and personal life underscores the intensity of occupational stress in construction management and highlights the psychological toll of prolonged exposure to high-demand roles.

The analysis also revealed that cultural attitudes and the stigma surrounding mental health significantly affect construction managers' psychological well-being. Participants indicated that the prevailing *"tough it out"* culture discourages open discussions about mental health challenges, fostering a perception of vulnerability as weakness. This is especially true for construction project leaders, who are already responsible for the project's physical and technical demands. As P4 is quoted saying, *"leadership is not very open to conversations about mental health,"* and P5 added that *"stress is seen as part of the job."* These comments suggest that organizational norms and cultural expectations actively inhibit help-seeking behaviours, leaving managers and foremen without sufficient support. The stigma associated with mental health not only hinders the recognition of stress-related issues but also can intensify emotional strain by discouraging individuals from seeking coping resources.

Interpersonal dynamics and conflict also emerged as a major source of stress. For instance, P9 is quoted saying *"dealing with conflicts between team members"* is a significant contributor to workplace strain, highlighting the complex social interactions that managers must navigate alongside their operational duties on construction sites. P9 stated that *"dealing with conflicts between team members"* significantly contributes to workplace stress, highlighting the complex social dynamics managers must navigate alongside their operational duties on construction sites. Construction managers are responsible for managing subcontractors, supplies, and construction personnel, as well as external stakeholders such as local government leaders and community forums.

P11 details how the combination of high-stakes responsibilities, complex coordination, and interpersonal conflict contributes to cumulative mental fatigue among construction managers. In summary, the consistent recurrence of stigma, interpersonal pressure, work-life imbalance, burnout, and excessive workload across participant interviews reveals the extent to which organizational structures and cultural norms are implicated in the mental health challenges faced by construction management. This consistency suggests that these issues are systemic, rather than isolated incidents, highlighting the need for organizational interventions within the construction industry that address work design and foster cultural change.

## 5. Discussion

The findings from construction personnel, as presented in the previous section, corroborate existing studies that identify high job demands and excessive workloads as major contributors to mental health challenges among construction managers (Tijani et al., 2021). Participants highlighted persistent project pressures, tight deadlines, and the responsibility of balancing client expectations with organisational profitability, reflecting the demanding nature of construction management. While previous studies have acknowledged workload-related stress, this study contributes new knowledge by contextualising these pressures within the South African construction industry, where resource constraints, economic uncertainty, skills shortages, and project delivery challenges intensify managerial stress. The findings therefore extend existing literature by demonstrating that construction managers experience a unique combination of operational, financial, and stakeholder-related pressures that increase their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Consequently, structured workload allocation, realistic scheduling, and effective task prioritisation are necessary to reduce excessive demands and support sustainable managerial performance (Lingard & Pirzadeh, 2025).

The study further reveals that organisational culture plays a significant role in shaping the mental well-being of construction managers. Participants described workplace environments characterised by a prevailing *"tough it out"* mentality, where expressing stress or seeking psychological support is often perceived as a sign of weakness. Although similar observations have been reported in international studies (Golzad et al., 2023), this research contributes new empirical evidence from South Africa, highlighting how cultural norms within construction organisations discourage discussions about mental health among managerial personnel. Importantly, the findings show that construction managers occupy a neglected position within organisational well-being initiatives, despite carrying substantial responsibility for project delivery, safety compliance, and profitability. This contribution is particularly significant because mental health research in the South African construction industry has traditionally focused on workers and safety outcomes, with limited attention given to managerial psychosocial well-being. The findings therefore underscore the need for leadership development programmes, psychological safety initiatives, regular mental health assessments, and confidential support systems tailored specifically for construction managers.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the mental health of construction managers is influenced by a complex interaction of workload pressures, organisational culture, interpersonal relationships, and the high-risk nature of construction projects. This

finding advances current knowledge by illustrating that managerial mental health challenges cannot be adequately addressed through workload reduction alone. Instead, they require a holistic organisational response that addresses structural, cultural, and relational factors simultaneously. The evidence suggests that conflict resolution training, team-building initiatives, improved communication channels, and formal mental health policies can help alleviate stress arising from interpersonal and organisational pressures (Wu et al., 2019). By identifying the interconnected nature of these factors, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of psychosocial risks affecting construction managers in South Africa. This represents a meaningful contribution to the construction management body of knowledge, as it positions managerial mental health as a critical yet underexplored determinant of project performance, safety outcomes, employee well-being, and long-term industry sustainability.

## 6. Conclusion

This study's findings indicate that the mental health of construction managers is significantly affected by the

interplay of a demanding work environment and organizational culture. Specifically, high workloads, time pressures, interpersonal strain, and the prevailing stigma against discussing mental well-being contribute to this impact. Furthermore, the study underscores the necessity of a more holistic approach to managing psychosocial risks within the construction sector. To that end, construction organizations should implement structured workload management, promote realistic project scheduling, and foster supportive leadership that encourages open communication about mental health. Providing access to employee assistance programs and counselling services is also crucial. However, this study is limited by its small sample size, potentially restricting the generalizability of its findings. Future research should, therefore, expand the sample size and incorporate diverse organizational contexts to strengthen the evidence base and offer more comprehensive insights into improving mental health outcomes in the construction industry.

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