

Mental health and preserving social distancing as we return to work

John Robbins

Managing Director, USA and North America Head of Real Estate

e: john.robbins@turntown.com

Occupational health and safety in its physical form has long been on the radar screen for the construction industry, and controlling for COVID-19 risk will present its own unique challenges on construction sites.

As the US begins to consider what a return to work will look like operationally, keen attention to the workforce's mental and physical health will be the first priority. Some in the construction industry will understandably have reservations about how social distancing can be preserved to defend against any further spread of the virus in the interim, as vaccines and medical therapies continue to be researched and developed.

What are the best practices that will facilitate the remobilization and can we leverage technology to reduce worker density on job sites?

We have a responsibility to address these important issues and engineer our way to risk avoidance under these exceptional circumstances.

People are productivity

In the US, it is estimated that the construction sector employs more than 11 million people. When shutdowns are lifted, returning to construction sites will require proactive mitigation of ongoing physical and psychological hazards associated with COVID-19.

Re-establishing productivity is going to be a process that develops over time, requiring both physical and mental capacity and capability to return to full strength.

Several factors come into play. Demographically, the industry is largely male dominated and an aging workforce. The workforce has tended to be risk-taking on construction sites, both physically and behaviorally. Science has proven that men are less likely to speak up about mental health issues and to seek support or professional help.

These factors are known to be contributors to a 3-times higher rate of suicide among US construction workers compared to the national average, and 4.2-times more likely to die by suicide than from an occupational injury.

- **Mental health must be a priority** – Have you recognized that mental resilience of the people in your business is equally as fundamental to its short and long term ability to operate as compared to physical health and safety? Other male-dominated industries such as front-line emergency services, who confront the reality of poor mental health daily. This industry has been proactive about challenging norms, creating advocacy for breaking the barriers to building positive mental health.
- **Confront systemic structural issues** – Do all members of your workforce have equal access to support? Addressing the historically temporary nature of construction work, which can in some circumstances lack in overall job security and other benefits and programs to promote holistic health.

Re-building trust

It is likely that businesses will need to address significant residual trauma and apprehension within the construction workforce as they return to site. Demonstrating leadership in health, safety and wellbeing, while building trust among workers, must be of paramount importance.

While the immediate focus has been on occupational and environmental hygiene, which undoubtedly plays an important part in controlling risk, as construction professionals we have a responsibility to mitigate risks wherever possible.

We believe there is an urgent and unprecedented opportunity now to invest in modern design and construction techniques, along with technologies that allow us to avoid the risks of traditional site-based construction. The added benefits of seizing this opportunity will be significant productivity gains and advantages.

- **Modern methods of construction** – Design for manufacture and modular construction are techniques which reduce the need for lengthy on-site installations, thereby improving the safety of site workers, boosting productivity and potentially saving overall time and money.
- **Remote robotic and UAV inspections** – Regular visual data collection from remotely operated surveys using unmanned aerial vehicles (such as drones) or high definition video camera-equipped rovers reduces the need for site visits and are a speedy, cost effective way to frequently gather and share data for analysis in 3D models.
- **Construction robotics** – Robotics development is increasingly providing the construction industry with innovative solutions for reducing risk to humans. One example of this is creating formwork for concrete and re-bar tying.
- **Autonomous vehicles** – Already being successfully used by the giants of natural resources, autonomous vehicles are available to transport materials and carry out excavation or grading around the clock, with operators in remote control centers away from the dangers of a traditional site.
- **Wearable technology** – There are now a number of companies developing various forms of wearable sensors to provide real-time collection of occupational safety and health data of construction workers on sites.



Don't wait until it's too late

While OSHA is the current prevailing US standard for health and safety on construction sites, there is opportunity to create a platform that promotes a positive culture around mental health.

Proactively adopting strategies from the global construction industry further along in this journey can give employers a head start in creating holistically safe workplaces.

Some examples we have experienced operating successfully include:

- **Engage with mental health topics** – Regular toolbox talks and training are positive ways to raise awareness, break stigmas and demonstrate tools for colleagues to get appropriate help.
- **Education on workers' rights and protections** – Employees who understand how they are protected from discrimination, their entitlements and what to expect when they ask for help, can give them the courage to speak up.
- **Employee Assistance Programs** – Adopting services that staff can turn for professional support, and making them accessible, allows workers to easily access the help they may need.
- **Mental health first aiders** – Empowering people to recognize and support those struggling with mental health should be considered a safety service that saves lives.

For more information: www.turnerandtowntsend.com

© Turner & Townsend. This content is for general information purposes only and does not purport to constitute professional advice. We do not make any representation or give any warranty, express or implied, and shall not be liable for any losses or damages whatsoever, arising from reliance on information contained in this document.