



People Leadership in Practice: Tackling Workforce Challenges

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Introduction

The Construction and Infrastructure (C&I) sector is one of the largest contributors to Aotearoa New Zealand's economy and a cornerstone of national development. However, it faces a complex set of workforce challenges that threaten its long-term sustainability.

Persistent skill shortages, an aging workforce, high turnover, and increasing mental health and wellbeing concerns have created an environment where people leadership has never been more critical. Leadership in this context extends far beyond managing projects and ensuring delivery; it encompasses the ability to inspire, support, and retain a diverse and capable workforce.

This report examines how strong people leadership can help address three interrelated challenges in the C&I sector – retention, attraction, and wellbeing. These factors are deeply connected, shaping how individuals enter the sector, how long they stay, and how effectively they perform. Leadership plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by shaping the systems, cultures, and relationships that determine how people experience their work. Effective leaders create environments that attract new talent, deepen engagement, and prioritise wellbeing, ultimately influencing how the sector performs and sustains itself.

Drawing on evidence from government research, industry case studies, and sector initiatives, the report explores how leadership practices can be leveraged to improve workforce outcomes. It considers how culturally competent, relational, and wellbeing-focused leadership approaches are helping to address the key challenges facing the sector, and how these approaches can be scaled. Ultimately, the report positions people leadership not only as a management function but as a strategic tool for shaping the future resilience, capability, and sustainability of New Zealand's construction and infrastructure workforce.

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The retention challenge

Retention in New Zealand's C&I sector is a pressing issue, driven by persistent skilled labour shortages, an aging workforce nearing retirement, and over \$250 billion in anticipated projects.¹ The scale and complexity of these demands place immense pressure on employers – not only to attract new talent but, critically, to retain and develop the existing workforce. These challenges are explored below.

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Persistent skill shortages

The C&I sector faces long-term skill shortages, particularly in professional and technical roles. Despite attraction rates improving, and new employees entering the workforce, a significant gap remains between the size of the workforce required to meet the pipeline of work and the number of people currently employed. As of September 2025, that gap was equal to more than 100,000 workers (approximately 35% of the workforce) based on the anticipated work put in place.² This is not a new phenomenon but a persistent challenge that has been ongoing for more than a decade.³

Aging workforce and demographic shifts

Throughout engagements, stakeholders consistently highlighted how the sector is characterised by an aging workforce. This brings concerns beyond skills shortages; in particular critical loss of knowledge, sector-specific expertise, and succession and business sustainability.⁴ Current data shows that the number of over 55's in the workforce has actually declined by more than 14,000 between 2022 and 2023. However, the number of young people aged 15–24 also declined, suggesting that there is a paucity of young people replacing those exiting the workforce.⁵ The sector is losing talent faster than it can be replaced.

Retention and early career churn

Overall, retention rates remain low particularly amongst those new to the sector. Data shows that 26% left the sector during their first year, and a staggering 77% had left after 5 years (based on 2018 cohort). This puts the five-year retention rate at 23%, meaning the industry is unable to retain even a quarter of its workforce long term.⁶

1 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2025). *Workforce Information Platform – Project Pipeline*. https://www.wip.org.nz/pipeline-time-series?industry_group=Construction&forecast_window=5&pipeline_view=adjusted

2 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2025). *Workforce Information Platform – Workforce Gaps*. https://www.wip.org.nz/workforce-gaps?pipeline_view=adjusted

3 Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment (MBIE). (2023). *Building and Construction Sector Trends: Annual Report*

4 For example, *Gas Infrastructure Workforce Development Plan*. <https://www.workforce.nz/gas-supply>

5 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2025). *Workforce Information Platform – Demographics*. https://www.wip.org.nz/demographics?legend_choice=age

6 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2025). *Workforce Information Platform – Career Pathways*. <https://www.wip.org.nz/career-pathways?cohort=2018&choice=region>

Training uncertainty

Recent changes to the vocational education and training (VET) system, including the move toward an industry-led work-based learning model from 2026 and the transition from Workforce Development Councils to Industry Skills Boards, are changing the way apprenticeships and training are organised and funded. Updates from the Tertiary Education Commission⁷ and recent Government announcements⁸ highlight that these shifts are influencing how employers plan and sustain training pathways. This transition period is already affecting apprenticeship numbers and the flow of skilled workers into the C&I sector, as noted in the New Zealand Infrastructure Commission’s (NZIC) *Building Workforce Capacity and Capabilities* report.⁹

These challenges highlight that retaining existing workers is not only essential but critical. These pressures place people leadership at the centre of workforce strategy. Leaders are no longer just operational overseers; they are retention specialists who must build inclusive cultures, support worker wellbeing, and provide clear pathways for development and progression. Effective leadership can be a key enabler of retention, resilience, and delivery capability within the C&I sector, particularly as businesses of all sizes seek to futureproof their workforce and meet future national construction and infrastructure demands.

Traditionally, workforce retention strategies have focused on improving pay, working conditions, training access, and employee benefits. However, in today’s dynamic and competitive environment, these approaches alone are no longer enough to sustain a skilled workforce. Increasing evidence shows that the quality of leadership, both formal and informal, has emerged as a decisive factor in workforce engagement, job satisfaction, and long-term retention. Research from Waihanga Ara Rau’s *Digging Deep* report highlights that more than 60 per cent of new entrants leave the construction sector within two years, with factors such as leadership, training opportunities, and feeling valued by employers influencing whether workers choose to stay.¹⁰

How people leaders can influence worker retention

Leaders play a central role in shaping workplace culture, fostering a sense of belonging, enabling growth, and promoting wellbeing. Their ability to build trust, recognise diverse cultural identities, and support workers through mentorship and career progression directly influences employee satisfaction and organisational loyalty.

By applying a leadership lens, workforce retention becomes more than just an HR or an operational issue, but a strategic leadership challenge. Leaders who are equipped to navigate cultural complexity, foster inclusion, and invest in people development are essential to building a resilient, future-ready C&I workforce.

A growing body of literature highlights the importance of leadership in retaining skilled workers within New Zealand’s C&I sector. National and international reports, including those by Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment¹¹ and the UK’s Places for People,¹² emphasise that addressing future labour shortages requires strong leadership to support workforce development, succession planning, and cultural inclusion.

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7 Tertiary Education Commission. (2025). *Changes to the vocational education and training (VET) system: New work-based learning model*. <https://www.tec.govt.nz/strategic-initiatives/vocational-education-system/changes-to-the-vocational-education-and-training-vet-system>

8 Beehive. (2024). *Vocational education and training decisions support return to regions*. <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/vocational-education-and-training-decisions-support-return-regions>

9 NZIC. (2024). *Building workforce capacity and capabilities*. <https://tewaihang.govt.nz/the-strategy/7-a-world-class-infrastructure-system-how-we-get-there/7-5-building-workforce-capacity-and-capabilities/>

10 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2023). *Digging deep to keep the people who have the skills to build*. <https://www.waihangaararau.nz/digging-deep-to-keep-the-people-who-have-the-skills-to-build/>

11 MBIE (2019). *Aotearoa New Zealand’s Employment Strategy*. <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/employment-and-skills/employment-strategy/aotearoa-new-zealands-employment-strategy>

12 Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning Research. (2025). *Construction and Building Trades: The Skills Horizon*. Commissioned by Places for People. <https://www.placesforpeople.co.uk/media/ae5piox1/pfp-skills-final-report.pdf>

Sector-specific sources such as Construction Health and Safety NZ,¹³ and Waihanga Ara Rau Regional reports¹⁴ point to the need for culturally competent, community-connected leadership across small and medium-sized businesses.

Case studies from Fletcher Building¹⁵ and Downer NZ¹⁶ demonstrate how leadership investment through structured development pathways, wellbeing frameworks, and apprenticeship mentoring can significantly improve retention outcomes.

For Māori and Pacific workers, the Tertiary Education Commission leads several initiatives that strengthen access to training and workforce participation. Māori and Pasifika Trades Training (MPTT)¹⁷ provides funding for pre-trades training tailored to Māori and Pacific learners. An earlier initiative, the Māori Trades Training Fund (MTTF), supported kaupapa Māori¹⁸ projects that offered employer-based training and highlighted the role of whānau-centred and culturally grounded leadership in long-term workforce participation.

Internationally, comparable approaches are echoed in Australia,¹⁹ and the USA,²⁰ where Indigenous inclusion, and people-first leadership are centred in procurement policy, training programmes, and legislation. Global insights from organisations such as the OECD²¹ and McKinsey²² reinforce that leadership at all levels of business, from small contractors to large infrastructure firms, is a critical lever for workforce resilience, particularly amid demographic shifts, climate adaptation, and rapid project growth.

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What are the drivers of retention?

There are numerous drivers of retention that stem from a mix of personal, organisational, and industry-level influences. These drivers are the underlying reasons why employees will choose to stay with an organisation.

Workplace conditions and progression

Job satisfaction, fair wage compensation, employment security, and a sense of purpose can be central drivers of retention.²³ When individuals feel valued in their roles, they are more likely to develop an emotional attachment to their work and employer.²⁴ Employment security provides confidence in a stable future, which reduces the temptation to seek opportunities elsewhere. This becomes especially important in sectors that are characterised by cyclical demand, such as construction and infrastructure.²⁵

13 Construction Health and Safety NZ, *Lead On Programme*. <https://www.chasnz.org/leadon>

14 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2022). *Regional Reports*. <https://www.waihangaararau.nz/for-industry/research/regional-reports/>

15 Fletcher Construction. (2025). *Leadership in Construction*. <https://www.fletcherconstruction.co.nz/our-communities/leadership-in-construction?start=18>

16 Downer Group. (2025). *Case Studies*. <https://www.downergroup.co.nz/case-studies>

17 TEC. (2024). *Māori and Pasifika Trades Training*. <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/maori-and-pasifika-trades-training>

18 Māori initiatives grounded in a specific philosophical approach that centres Māori knowledge, language and culture and value to achieve positive outcomes for Māori communities.

19 National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2025). *Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP)*. <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/employment-and-economic-development/indigenous-procurement-policy-ipp>

20 U.S. Department of Labour. *Division of Indian and Native American Programs (DINAP) Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Section 166*. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/dinap>

21 OECD. (2022). *Employment Outlook 2022: Building Back More Inclusive Labour Markets*.

22 McKinsey & Company. (2023). *The State of Organisations 2023: Ten shifts transforming organisations*.

23 OECD. (2022). *Employment Outlook 2022: Building Back More Inclusive Labour Markets*.

24 Deloitte. (2020). *Global Human Capital Trends*.

25 MBIE. (2023). *Building and Construction Sector Trends: Annual Report, 2023*.

Career progression

A clear pathway for career development, supported by active leadership and mentoring, is a strong predictor of retention. Workers who see opportunities for progression are more likely to stay, especially when guided by mentors who offer knowledge, encouragement, and leadership modelling.²⁶ Mentorship helps to transfer skills, build trust, and identify future leaders. Structured succession planning, especially when inclusive of Māori and Pacific leadership development, further enhances this effect.²⁷

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is now widely recognised as a contributor to productivity and retention in the workforce. Drawing on models such as the UK Office of National Statistics' *Measuring National Well-being: Domains and Measures* framework, this report defines wellbeing holistically, incorporating psychological, physical, and social factors.²⁸

Worker wellbeing encompassing mental, emotional, and physical health is strongly linked to retention. Leaders who prioritise psychological safety, listen actively to concerns, and build positive site cultures can reduce stress, absenteeism, and disengagement. This includes enabling flexible work where possible, modelling healthy behaviours, and embedding wellbeing into leadership expectations.

Strategies for workforce retention

By understanding the drivers that influence workforce retention, organisations can develop corresponding strategies that directly address these drivers. Several initiatives are already demonstrating success in the sector in working towards a more stable workforce.

Leadership development

A number of large mainstream organisations invest in developing internal leadership pipelines to retain high-performing staff and support their progression. Programmes such as Fletcher Building's Step Up²⁹ initiative focus on upskilling team leaders and creating clear promotion pathways. By investing in ongoing learning and development, employers demonstrate a commitment to personal growth that can strengthen employee loyalty and engagement.

Structured apprenticeships and mentoring

Formal training pathways, especially apprenticeships paired with mentoring, improve retention by building capability and connection. These models give new entrants confidence and a sense of belonging while ensuring they have the skills to do the job. Many medium and large organisations link apprenticeships to permanent employment and leadership potential. Downer Group have a formal trade apprenticeship programme spanning a variety of trades. This programme provides on and off job training, mentoring, and supplementary learning support to facilitate ongoing professional development. Across Australasia, Downer reports that 85% of apprentices and trainees that complete their qualifications are offered ongoing employment.³⁰ The organisation also has a dedicated learning and development team to facilitate employee development including Leadership training.

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26 Abdolmaleki, G. (2021). Development of Employee Retention Strategies for the New Zealand Construction Sector. <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/rangahau-aranga/1/article/view/79>

27 Deloitte. (2024). *The future belongs to the prepared*. <https://www.deloitte.com/nz/en/services/consulting/blogs/the-future-belongs-to-the-prepared.html>

28 Office for National Statistics (2023). *Measuring national well-being. Domains and measures*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/ukmeasuresofnationalwellbeinguserguide>

29 Fletcher Construction. (2025). Training Opportunities – Step Up. *Training opportunities | Fletcher Construction*

30 Downer Group. (2022). *Sustainability Report*. <https://www.downergroup.com/2022sustainabilityreport-people>

Recognition and reward

Monetary and non-monetary recognition play a role in staff satisfaction and long-term loyalty. Strategies include performance-based bonuses, project milestone rewards, employee of the month programmes, and public recognition. These incentives increase motivation and affirm workers' value within the business. For example, Fulton Hogan promotes long-term employee engagement through a mix of performance-based bonuses, values-driven recognition awards, and an employee share scheme that reinforces loyalty and a sense of ownership within the business.³¹

Wellbeing and mental health integration

Wellbeing is increasingly recognised as a critical retention lever, particularly in high-demand and high-pressure industries such as construction and infrastructure. Downer NZ,³² for example, has embedded wellbeing into its leadership framework by implementing regular check-ins, mental health support, and psychologically safe team cultures. These initiatives help reduce stress and burnout, enhance resilience, and foster a work environment where workers feel cared for. By proactively addressing employees' physical, mental, and emotional needs, Downer creates an environment where workers feel valued and supported. Initiatives such as those implemented by Downer NZ, which take a holistic approach, can strengthen employee satisfaction and contribute to both sustained productivity and long-term retention of skilled people.

Culturally inclusive leadership

Mainstream approaches are evolving to include culturally competent leadership, particularly when retaining Māori and Pacific workers. Inclusive policies, language visibility (e.g. Te Reo Māori use), whānau friendly practices, and cultural safety training are increasingly embedded in modern leadership programmes. AECOM's Mahere Rautaki Māori (Māori strategy) exemplifies how an organisation can integrate Te Ao Māori (Māori worldviews) into both its internal operations and client-facing projects.³³ This initiative aims to create a more inclusive work environment that supports the retention of Māori employees whilst also aligning with broader industry efforts to enhance cultural competence in leadership.

Strategies for retaining Māori talent

Retaining Māori talent in New Zealand's C&I sector requires approaches that think beyond conventional human resource strategies. Māori make up a significant portion of the sector's workforce – around 16 per cent – with strong representation in trades and civil infrastructure roles.³⁴ Yet Māori workers often experience higher attrition rates due to systemic barriers, cultural disconnection, and limited pathways for advancement. To address these challenges, culturally responsive leadership and organisational practices are essential. These approaches recognise the value of Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview), honour tikanga (customs and protocols), and create inclusive environments where Māori workers feel a sense of belonging, purpose, and opportunity.

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31 Bridgeman, D. (2022). 'Fulton Hogan staff take up shares as dividend jumps 46 per cent'. *New Zealand Herald*, 31 October (Online). Available at: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/companies/construction/fulton-hogan-staff-take-up-shares-as-dividend-jumps-46-per-cent/WEJAVYMCDBVBJXGEP3HXBMXZNV/>

32 Downer Group. (2022). *Sustainability Report*. <https://www.downergroup.com/2022sustainabilityreport-people>

33 AECOM. (2024). *Mahere Rautaki Māori: AECOM's strategy in Aotearoa New Zealand to embed Te Oa Māori*.

34 Waihangā Ara Rau. (2025). *Workforce Information Platform – Demographics*. https://www.wip.org.nz/demographics?legend_choice=ethnicity

Whānau-centric leadership

Māori leadership frameworks are deeply relational, valuing connection, collective responsibility, and holistic wellbeing. In workplace contexts, this translates into leadership that actively recognises the role of whānau, both within and beyond the work environment. Practices such as flexible working arrangements, support for family commitments, and the creation of culturally safe spaces help Māori kaimahi (employees) remain engaged, supported and valued. Organisations that embed these principles, illustrated by the Māori business progressive procurement case studies,³⁵ demonstrate how whānau-centric leadership can strengthen retention, foster loyalty, and create pathways for career growth in the C&I sector.

One of the aforementioned case studies is the Height Capability Uplift Programme that was developed in collaboration with Te Puni Kōkiri. This programme has successfully assisted over 120 Māori businesses since 2021 to secure more than \$45 million in new contracts; a significant proportion of which were with the construction sector. Notably, 53% of the participating businesses employ individuals who were previously not in education, employment, or training, highlighting the programmes impact on workforce development and retention.³⁶ The programmes culturally responsive approach is the cornerstone of its success, assisting businesses to identify their unique value propositions, and communicate that value through tender responses and sustainable pricing strategies. The outcomes are twofold; enhanced business capability and a sense of belonging among Māori employees, contributing to improved retention rates.

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Workplace integration of Te Reo Māori and Tikanga

Creating a workplace culture that reflects Māori values, and identity plays a key role in retention. This includes using Te Reo Māori in signage and communication, incorporating karakia and mihi in daily operations, and celebrating events such as Matariki. Such practices signal to Māori employees that their cultural identity is not only accepted but valued. These efforts foster a sense of pride, connection, and commitment to the organisation.³⁷

Māori representation in leadership

Māori employees are more likely to stay with organisations where they can see themselves reflected in leadership. Providing leadership development programmes that specifically support Māori into supervisory, and governance roles is important. Case studies like the Māori cadetship programme run by Te Puni Kōkiri and Māori success in Construction & Infrastructure³⁸ demonstrate the success of mentorship, succession planning, and internal promotion pathways tailored to Māori career progression. This also includes recognising and supporting informal leadership, such as kaumātua or respected peer mentors.

Culturally competent leadership training

Leaders in the C&I sector must be equipped to lead diverse teams with cultural intelligence. Culturally competent leadership training enables managers and supervisors to better understand Māori perspectives, respond to cultural needs, and foster inclusive environments. This not only strengthens workplace cohesion but enhances trust, communication, and retention. Embedding cultural competency as a core leadership requirement has been championed by organisations like Civil Contractors NZ and various regional workforce groups.³⁹

35 Te Puni Kōkiri, Ministry of Māori Development. (2021). *Māori business progressive procurement case studies*. <https://www.tpk.govt.nz/docs/tpk-sp-procurement-case-studiesv4-2021.pdf>

36 Height PM. (2025). *Height Capability Uplift Programme*. <https://heightpm.com/capability-uplift-programme-success-maori-businesses>

37 Matariki.co.nz. (2025). *Celebrating Matariki in your workplace*. <https://matariki.co.nz/celebrating-matariki-in-the-workplace/>

38 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2025). *Supporting Māori Talent in Construction & Infrastructure – resources for employers*. <https://www.waihangaararau.nz/maori-matters/>

39 Waihanga Ara Rau. (2025). *Supporting Māori Talent in Construction & Infrastructure – resources for employers*. <https://www.waihangaararau.nz/maori-matters/>

Strategies for retaining Pacific talent

Pacific people are a vital part of New Zealand’s C&I workforce – encompassing approximately 6.4% of the workforce in 2023.⁴⁰ Pacific employees bring strong community values, work ethic, and technical capability to the sector. However, Pacific workers often face systemic challenges that can lead to higher turnover such as limited career progression, cultural misalignment in leadership, and underrepresentation in decision making roles. Retention of Pacific talent requires leadership approaches that are culturally grounded, relational, and responsive to the lived realities of Pacific communities. Recognising Pacific values such as āiga/whānau (family), fa’aaloalo (respect), service, and collective achievement is essential to building supportive workplaces where Pacific workers feel seen, supported, and invested in. Effective retention also depends on practical strategies that embed these values into organisational practice, including inclusive leadership development, targeted training and career pathways, and wraparound cultural support that reflects Pacific worldviews.

Pacific Peoples representation in leadership

Retention is strengthened when Pacific workers can see themselves reflected in leadership roles. Increasing the number of Pacific team leaders, supervisors, and project managers enhances cultural relevance, trust and belonging across workforces. Workforce strategies such as the Pacific C&I Workforce Development Plan⁴¹ and the Ministry for Pacific Peoples Pacific Employment Action Plan⁴² emphasise the importance of leadership pathways, mentoring, and targeted development initiatives to support Pacific achievement and long-term retention.

Pacific cultures place strong emphasis on family and community responsibilities. Leadership approaches that acknowledge these values, such as flexible working arrangements and culturally safe communication, help promote work-life balance and foster loyalty. Employers who actively accommodate family involvement and cultural obligations tend to see stronger engagement and lower attrition. Programmes such as Pasifika Trades Training⁴³ embed family and community support throughout training and workplace transition processes, demonstrating how holistic, whānau-orientated leadership can reinforce retention and build enduring workforce participation.

Mentoring and peer leadership

Pacific workers benefit from mentoring models that emphasise relationship building, guidance, and culturally relevant learning. Senior Pacific staff who act as mentors or navigators provide invaluable support to early career workers, helping them adapt, build confidence, and feel part of the workplace culture. Pacific mentoring programmes also help bridge the gap between cultural identity and professional development, creating spaces where workers feel safe to grow.

Research by the Ministry for Pacific People highlights that culturally responsive mentoring enhances retention by empowering Pacific employees to bring their full selves to work, increasing engagement and long-term career commitment.⁴⁴ Initiatives such as HEB Construction’s regional apprenticeship programme highlights how dedicated support like in-house training advisors and one-to-one mentoring⁴⁵ can be used successfully to grow Māori and Pasifika capability.

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40 Waihangā Ara Rau. (2025). *Workforce Information Platform – Demographics*. https://www.wip.org.nz/demographics?legend_choice=ethnicity

41 Waihangā Ara Rau. (2024). *Construction and Infrastructure Workforce Development Plan for Pacific Peoples*. <https://www.workforce.nz/pacific-wdp>

42 Ministry for Pacific Peoples. (2022). *Pacific Employment Action Plan*. <https://www.mpp.govt.nz/programmes-and-funding/economic-growth/pacific-employment-action-plan/>

43 Māori & Pasifika Trades Training. (2025). <https://www.maoripasifikatrades.co.nz/>

44 Ministry for Pacific Peoples. (2022). *Pacific Employment Action Plan*. <https://www.mpp.govt.nz/programmes-and-funding/economic-growth/pacific-employment-action-plan/>

45 Te Urū Tangata Centre for Workplace Inclusion. (2022). *Case Studies: HEB Construction*. <https://workplaceinclusion.org.nz/2022-case-heb-construction-diverse-talent>

Cultural recognition and inclusion

Workplaces that celebrate Pacific languages, identities, and events such as Pacific Language Weeks or community festivals promote inclusion and recognition. These culturally affirming practices not only deepen a sense of belonging but also contribute to morale and pride. Simple gestures like using Pacific greetings, involving cultural leaders in celebrations, or acknowledging important dates strengthen relationships and create workplaces where Pacific staff feel valued and respected.

Tailored upskilling and advancement

Pacific workers often enter the sector through entry level or labouring roles, where opportunities for advancement can be limited without structured support. Creating clear, and culturally responsive pathways into skilled trades, supervisory positions, and project leadership roles is essential for driving long-term retention. The Pacific Workforce Development Plan⁴⁶ highlights the importance of trades training that recognises Pacific learning styles and values, ensuring upskilling opportunities are accessible, relevant and empowering. When Pacific employees can see defined progression routes, and receive support tailored for their cultural context, they are more likely to remain in the sector and invest in their professional growth.

Towards a sustainable and culturally responsive retention strategy

While New Zealand faces growing pressure to deliver on a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure pipeline amidst workforce shortages, trans-Tasman migration and high turnover, the need for targeted, culturally responsive, and leadership driven retention strategies has never been more critical. The traditional approaches presented in this report demonstrate that while traditional Western strategies such as apprenticeships, recognition systems, and leadership development remain important, they must be complemented by approaches that are inclusive, relational, and values-based.

Employers must take deliberate steps to embed cultural competency, wellbeing, and career progression pathways into their organisational fabric to effectively retain Māori, Pacific, and diverse talent. This includes investing in frontline leadership capability, creating culturally safe environments, partnering with iwi and Pacific communities, and recognising the central role of whānau in worker wellbeing.

Ultimately, workforce retention in the construction and infrastructure sector is not simply about filling roles, it is about creating environments where people can thrive, contribute meaningfully, and envision long-term futures in the industry. The future of New Zealand’s infrastructure depends not only on what we build, but on how we value and support the people who build it.

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46 Waihangā Ara Rau. (2024). Construction and Infrastructure Workforce Development Plan for Pacific Peoples. <https://www.workforce.nz/pacific-wdp>

Attraction: The flip side of retention

Attracting talent to the C&I sector remains a significant challenge. While retention focuses on keeping skilled workers, attraction is about drawing them in; leadership plays a critical, though often indirect, role in shaping that appeal.

Intrinsic and extrinsic drivers of attraction

Attraction is shaped by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic drivers relate to personal satisfaction and purpose such as the satisfaction of building something tangible, the opportunity for career progression, and the appeal of hands-on, practical work. Many individuals are drawn to the sector's dynamic environment and the visible impact of their efforts. Extrinsic drivers relate to external rewards such as competitive pay, job security, work-life balance, and sector reputation.

A recent study exploring career perceptions, commissioned by Waihanga Ara Rau, found that while construction and infrastructure careers are respected and seen as offering good pay and development potential, concerns about work-life balance and physical demands persist. Despite the sector's scale and diversity, public understanding remains narrow. Most respondents associated construction careers with physical trades like building and plumbing, with limited awareness of professional, design, or leadership roles.⁴⁷ This lack of visibility significantly limits attraction, particularly among younger demographics and those interested in changing careers.

Leadership's role in enhancing sector appeal

Leadership influences attraction by shaping workplace culture, safety, and wellbeing; factors that directly affect how the sector is perceived. Effective leaders prioritise inclusive, supportive environments that align with the values of potential entrants. These values attract people who seek purpose-driven and supportive workplaces.

Entry into the sector is characterised by many "*industry changers*", referring to people who previously worked in other sectors who have now switched careers and joined the C&I sector. In 2022, 66% of new entrants were industry changers which underscores how the sector relies on attracting people mid-career rather than only school leavers⁴⁸. This means leadership reputation and workplace culture are key levers in persuading people to make that transition.

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47 Ipsos. (2024). *Career perceptions of the construction & infrastructure industries*. Commissioned by Waihanga Ara Rau. <https://www.waihangaararau.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Waihanga-Ara-Rau-Construction-Careers-Research-Report.pdf>

48 ConCOVE. (2024). *Where is the front door? An investigation of workforce entry points into the construction and infrastructure sectors*.

Fletcher Construction has embedded a culture of wellbeing through its partnership with Groov. Initiatives include a Safety Leadership Programme, mental health support, and executive-led safety walks.⁴⁹ Their Protect programme has contributed to an 86% reduction in serious injuries and a halving of overall injury rates, with over 150 more people going home safely each year.⁵⁰

Similarly, Higgins Family Holdings has embraced Groov's platform to support staff wellbeing across its concrete and property businesses. Initiatives include breathing sessions, wellbeing rituals, and leadership-led workshops. These efforts have led to increased engagement, self-referrals for support, and a stronger sense of community among staff.⁵¹

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Addressing misconceptions and enhancing appeal

To enhance attraction, there are a range of actions that could be taken by sector stakeholders, including:

- Promote the breadth of career opportunities beyond the trades
- Highlight inclusive leadership and employee wellbeing
- Provide clear, accessible information on training pathways
- Showcase real-world examples of leadership-led transformation

By aligning leadership practices with the values and expectations of potential workers, the sector can strengthen its ability to attract and grow a sustainable workforce.



49 Fletcher Construction. (2025). *Health, safety and wellbeing*. <https://www.fletcherconstruction.co.nz/work-with-us/health-safety-and-wellbeing>

50 Fletcher Building. (2025). *Protect leaders handbook*. <https://fletcherbuilding.com/assets/1B-Safety/Safety-Documents/Fletcher-Building-Protect-Leaders-Handbook.pdf>

51 Groov. (2025). *Higgins Family Holdings case study*. www.groovnow.com/higgins

Wellbeing as a strategic priority

Workforce wellbeing in the context of the C&I sector in New Zealand refers to the physical, mental, social and cultural health of workers within their workplace environments. It reflects the collective efforts of employers, industry organisations, government agencies, and the lived experiences of workers to create safe, supportive, and culturally inclusive workplaces. In these environments, workers are empowered to thrive both personally and professionally.

The significance of workforce wellbeing in C&I settings is gaining momentum, as reflected in WorkSafe New Zealand's 2022 research on *Work-Related Wellbeing: What Good Looks Like*.⁵² The report highlights that adopting best practice frameworks and proactive approaches to wellbeing leads to improved workplace safety, mental health, satisfaction, engagement, and overall productivity. By fostering a culture of care and inclusion, businesses achieve better outcomes for both workers and employers across the sector.

New Zealand has a distinctive approach to workplace wellbeing that draws on Western and Indigenous models. Western frameworks typically focus on legislative and regulatory measures to protect health, safety, and wellbeing. For example, the *Health and Safety at Work Act 2015*,⁵³ WorkSafe's role as the primary regulator,⁵⁴ and their *Construction Sector Plan 2024–2026*.⁵⁵

Increasingly, businesses are incorporating Māori values and cultural perspectives into their wellbeing practices. Indigenous approaches emphasise holistic wellbeing that encompass physical, mental, spiritual, and whānau (family) wellbeing of dimensions. Examples of Māori health and wellbeing models informing workplace strategies include:

- Te Whare Tapa Whā⁵⁶
- Te Wheke⁵⁷
- Te Pae Mahutonga⁵⁸
- Whānau Ora Outcomes Framework⁵⁹
- Whānau Rangatiratanga Frameworks: approaching whānau wellbeing from within Te Ao Māori⁶⁰

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52 WorkSafe. (2022). *Work-Related Wellbeing: What Good Looks Like*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/work-related-health/mental-health/work-related-wellbeing-what-good-looks-like/>

53 New Zealand Legislation. (2015). *Health and Safety at Work Act 2015*

54 WorkSafe. (2024). *WorkSafe Strategy*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/about-us/who-we-are/worksafe-strategy/>

55 WorkSafe. (2024). *Where we focus our effort: priority plans 2024–2026*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/dmsdocument/68610-where-we-focus-our-effort-priority-plans-20242026/latest>

56 Ministry of Health. (2023). *Te Whare Tapa Whā model of Māori Health*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/maori-health/maori-health-models/te-whare-tapa-wha>

57 Ministry of Health. (2023). *Te Wheke Model of Māori Health*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/maori-health/maori-health-models/te-wheke>

58 Ministry of Health. (2017). *Te Pae Mahutonga model of Māori health*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/maori-health/maori-health-models/te-pae-mahutonga>

59 Te Puni Kōkiri. (2016). *The Whānau Ora Outcomes Framework*. <https://www.tpk.govt.nz/docs/tpk-wo-outcomesframework-aug2016.pdf>

60 Social Policy Evaluation and Evaluation Unit: Superu. (2016). *The Whānau Rangatiratanga Frameworks: Approaching whānau wellbeing from within Te Ao Māori*. <https://thehub.sia.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Whanau-rangatiratanga-frameworks-summary.pdf>

Mainstream wellbeing frameworks are also complemented by culturally tailored approaches for Pacific workers, such as:

- WorkSafe New Zealand's Wellbeing Framework⁶¹
- Mental Health Foundation – Five Ways to Wellbeing⁶²
- Ministry for Pacific Peoples – Pacific Health and Wellbeing Framework⁶³

Together these frameworks demonstrate a national recognition that workforce wellbeing is integral not only to the C&I sector, but also to the wider economy. They underscore growing concern for the wellbeing of workers and the understanding that healthy, supported employees are essential to sustainable business and industry performance.

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Key wellbeing issues and challenges

Some of the key challenges and issues inherent to C&I workplace wellbeing include physical health risks, mental health challenges and work life balance. More specifically they include workplace injuries, fatigue, stress, depression, high rates of suicide amongst construction workers,⁶⁴ impacts of long working hours or stressful job environments.

There is a trend by businesses adopting a wider view of workforce wellbeing going well beyond the legal requirements to ensure workers are well supported within their working environment. They include demonstrating commitment to cultivating workforce wellbeing, health and safety and retaining and growing talent by developing tailored initiatives to support staff development through training. The increased understanding of how worker wellbeing underpins retention and performance highlights how early adopters have understood the most current research in organisational performance and responded accordingly.

The cost of 'business as usual'

WorkSafe estimates that 750 to 900 people die in New Zealand each year from work-related illness, and that 5000 to 6000 hospitalisations annually are attributable to work-related health causes. It also notes that thousands of ACC claims arise from gradual process injuries, such as noise-induced hearing loss, and many more cases of work-related illness go unreported or are not linked back to occupational causes.⁶⁵ The burden of ill-health falls not only on individuals but heavily impacts families and imposes broader economic costs, often far exceeding the burden from acute work-injury alone.

WorkSafe has identified that the construction sector experiences among the highest rates of acute and chronic harm. The sector accounts for around 15% of work-related fatalities and serious injuries, and has the largest number of workers exposed to toxic dusts and fumes. The leading causes of harm include falls from heights, being struck by falling objects or moving vehicles, and exposure to hazardous substances such as silica dust, welding fumes, wood dust and asbestos.⁶⁶

61 WorkSafe. (2022). *Work-related Wellbeing. What good looks like for construction workers*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/dmsdocument/54243-work-related-wellbeing-what-good-looks-like-for-construction-workers/latest>

62 Mental Health Foundation. (2025). *Five Ways to Wellbeing*. <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/five-ways-to-wellbeing>

63 Ministry of Pacific Peoples. (2025). *Pacific Wellbeing Outcomes Framework*. <https://www.mpp.govt.nz/assets/Reports/Pacific-Wellbeing-Strategy-2022/Pacific-Wellbeing-Outcomes-Framework-Booklet.pdf>

64 MATES in Construction. (2025). *SPARK CHANGE: 2025 Construction Industry Wellbeing Survey*. <https://mates.net.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025-MATES-in-Construction-Industry-Well-being-Survey-Supported-by-ASB.pdf>

65 WorkSafe. (2019). *Work-related health estimates and burden of harm*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/work-related-health/work-related-health-estimates-and-burden-of-harm>

66 WorkSafe. (2024). *Where we focus our effort: priority plans 2024-2026*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/dmsdocument/68610-where-we-focus-our-effort-priority-plans-20242026/latest>

The sector continues to face a profound mental health crisis. In 2025 research commissioned by MATES in Construction reported that more than one construction worker dies by suicide each week.⁶⁷ Alarmingly, 98% of those lost are men, with the highest rates among workers aged 20 to 24 and 45 to 49 years. The occupations most affected include labourer, technicians and trades, painting trades, carpenters and joiners, electricians, and plumbers. Notably, Māori men face rates twice that of non-Māori men overall. The impact extends beyond fatalities. Every day, approximately 31 construction workers take time off due to self-harm or suicidal distress, highlighting the pervasive nature of the issue.

Further research commissioned in 2024 identifies five key workplace psychosocial stressors impacting mental health and wellbeing of sector workers. These are:

- financial instability
- poor communication
- entrenched old school masculinity
- low pay and job insecurity
- insufficient mental health support

Proposed solutions call for systemic action, including government-led procurement reforms to mandate suicide prevention in contracts (e.g. embedding it into the Government Procurement Charter's Economic Benefits principle), refreshed national frameworks like the Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2025–2029 with dedicated funding for the construction sector and a Men's Health Taskforce, expanded grassroots programmes, improved communication and supportive cultures to reduce stigma, limits on overtime, and more accessible, effective mental health initiatives to build resilience and foster help-seeking.⁶⁸

The legislative and regulatory frameworks that support wellbeing

The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 provides the legislative foundation for workplace health and safety in New Zealand, including within the construction and infrastructure sector. This Act sets out clear responsibilities and obligations for employers, workers, and other duty holders to ensure the health and safety of everyone in the workplace. It focuses specifically on promoting risk management, hazard identification, risk assessment and implementation of effective control measures. Health and Safety Plans are a mandatory requirement, serving as a critical tool to safeguard employees and manage workplace risks systematically.

WorkSafe New Zealand is the country's primary workplace health and safety regulator, whose role is to influence and support businesses and workers to ensure work is conducted safely, and holding to account duty holders to meet their obligations. WorkSafe have priority plans that outline how it will deliver enforcement, engagement, and permitting activities with the aim of achieving better, safer, and more equitable outcomes for employees.

In the C&I sector, WorkSafe's activities are particularly critical due to the high-risk nature of the work. By promoting robust health and safety practices, providing guidance, and enforcing compliance, WorkSafe contributes not only to reducing injuries and fatalities but also to enhancing overall workforce wellbeing.

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⁶⁷ MATES in Construction. (2025). SPARK CHANGE: 2025 Construction Industry Wellbeing Survey. <https://mates.net.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025-Construction-Industry-Well-being-Survey-Supported-by-ASB-Exec-Summary-and-Recommendations.pdf>

⁶⁸ Branz. (2024). Workplace psychosocial stressors in the construction industry: Perspectives of construction industry stakeholders. https://mates.net.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/MATES-and-BRANZ-Workplace-Psychosocial-Stressors-Focus-Group-Report-September-2024_web.pdf

Initiatives and best practice for improving workplace wellbeing

Several initiatives and programmes are in effect within the industry to improve workplace wellbeing. SiteSafe is a not-for-profit health and safety organisation that works to create a strong health and safety culture in the New Zealand C&I sector.⁶⁹ It offers a wide range of products and services, including training courses, toolbox talks, online resources, audits, and advisory support, all designed to help business understand and manage workplace risks effectively.

Other organisations focussing on safety and wellbeing in the construction sector include:

- Vitality Works
- Live Well, Build Well
- Construction Health and Safety New Zealand
- MATES in Construction

The services these organisations offer range from mental wellbeing, leadership, site safety to ergonomic improvement and suicide prevention. These services have grown out of the recognition of the importance of wellbeing in the C&I sector and the need to address long standing concerns about the negative impact health and wellbeing have in the workplace.

Specific services promoting mental health awareness and reducing stigma in the workplace include initiatives led by the sector, Māori, Iwi, and Pacific Peoples to address risks at work that affect a worker's health. These can include psychological (including bullying and harassment), biological, physical, ergonomic, and chemical risks.

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Wellbeing initiatives in action: case studies

A number of case studies demonstrate how employers and projects across the sector have successfully integrated best practice workforce wellbeing approaches. These include a series of business profiles promoted by WorkSafe. These examples highlight the tangible benefits of embedding health, safety, and wellbeing principles into everyday business operations.

G.J. Gardner Manukau participated in WorkSafe's *SafePlus*⁷⁰ assessment programme, using the findings to design a comprehensive wellness initiative supporting staff mental health. The programme was informed by the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* framework developed by the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, focusing on normalising conversations around mental health and creating an open, supportive workplace culture. Since implementation, G.J. Gardner Manukau has reported increased productivity and engagement, alongside a measurable reduction in absenteeism.⁷¹

Wellington Pipelines, a family-owned business, has built its health and safety approach on tikanga Māori principles, creating a whānau-centred working environment that supports both people and performance. This approach has strengthened workforce engagement and productivity by fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose. The company actively collaborates with local community services such as WINZ and Youth Inspire to develop employment pathways for young people.⁷² The Wellington Pipelines case study demonstrates how worker engagement through whanaungatanga⁷³ has driven innovation, improved safety outcomes, and enhanced overall productivity.

69 Site Safe. (2025). *Proud to be Safe*. <https://www.sitesafe.org.nz/about/>

70 WorkSafe. (2025). *SafePlus self-assessment resources*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/managing-health-and-safety/businesses/safeplus/safeplus-self-assessment-resources/>

71 G.J. Gardner Homes. (2025). *Mental Health in Construction*. <https://www.gjgardner.co.nz/resources/articles/mental-health-in-construction>

72 WorkSafe. (2017). *Tikanga approach to health and safety builds a stronger business*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/tools-registers-resources/resources/case-studies/wepr-case-studies/wellington-pipelines-tikanga/>

73 Māori (noun) relationship, kinship, sense of family connection – a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging.

At a larger scale, the Te Ahu a Turanga: Manawatū Tararua Highway project showcases the success of an iwi-led partnership approach. The project was built by an alliance of Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency, Fulton Hogan, HEB Construction, Aurecon, WSP, and iwi partners Rangitāne o Manawatū, Rangitāne o Tamaki nui-a-Rua, Ngāti Kahungunu ki Tāmaki nui-a-rua, Te Rūnanga o Raukawa (Ngāti Raukawa ki te Tonga and Ngā Kaitiaki ō Ngāti Kauwhata). Iwi representation at all levels of governance, from the alliance board to operational delivery, led to efficiencies not anticipated at the project's outset⁷⁴. These included streamlined consenting processes, expedited archaeological and environmental approvals, and stronger community relationships, all contributing to improved project delivery and workforce wellbeing.

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Linking people leadership and workforce wellbeing

People leadership is a critical driver of workforce wellbeing across the construction and infrastructure sector. Effective leaders influence how workers experience their environment, manage stress, and feel valued in their roles. Leadership practices that emphasise empathy, communication, inclusion, and trust create a psychologically safe culture where workers can speak up, seek support, and thrive. WorkSafe New Zealand⁷⁵ highlights that positive leadership behaviours, such as engaging teams in health and safety decisions, recognising good work, and addressing psychosocial risks, are strongly linked to improved wellbeing and lower rates of injury and turnover. Conversely, poor leadership and ineffective communication can increase stress, reduce morale, and contribute to disengagement. In high-pressure environments such as those found in the C&I sector, wellbeing-focused leadership helps mitigate fatigue and burnout, enhances productivity, and builds resilient, connected teams. Embedding wellbeing within leadership frameworks ensures that health, safety, and performance are mutually reinforcing outcomes, rather than competing priorities.



⁷⁴ NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi. (2022). *Iwi Partnership on Te Ahu a Turanga: Manawatū Tararua Highway – November 2022*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbCo3QoZfIg>

⁷⁵ WorkSafe. (2025). *Managing psychosocial risks at work*. <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/work-related-health/mental-health/managing-psychosocial-risks-at-work>

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This report evidences how effective people leadership is central to overcoming the C&I sector’s most pressing workforce challenges. Attraction, retention, and wellbeing are not isolated issues, but part of a system driven by leadership quality, cultural responsiveness, and organisational culture. Leaders at every level, from site supervisors to executive managers, have a direct influence on how workers experience safety, belonging, and opportunity within their roles.

Strong leadership builds credibility and trust, which in turn attracts new entrants by shaping the industry’s reputation as a safe, inclusive, and rewarding place to work. Once workers are in the sector, it is leadership that determines whether they stay; through clear communication, recognition, development pathways, and cultural responsiveness. Leaders who model empathy, accountability, and respect create environments where workers feel valued and supported, significantly reducing turnover.

Workforce wellbeing, too, is inseparable from leadership practice. Evidence from WorkSafe New Zealand, MATES in Construction, and the Mental Health Foundation demonstrates that wellbeing-oriented leadership reduces harm, boosts engagement, and enhances productivity. Embedding wellbeing into leadership frameworks ensures that physical safety, mental health, and performance are treated as interconnected outcomes. This holistic view aligns with Māori and Pacific models of wellbeing that emphasise whānau, community, and collective responsibility.

As the C&I sector navigates the challenges of an aging workforce, intensifying project demand, and shifting training systems, the ability to lead with empathy, cultural intelligence, and foresight will determine its success. Future-ready organisations will be those that invest in developing their leaders as mentors, communicators, and champions of wellbeing. Building leadership capability across all levels of the workforce is no longer optional, it is a prerequisite for resilience, productivity, and long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, the future of New Zealand’s construction and infrastructure sector depends not only on what we build, but on how we lead, and how we value, the people who build it.

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