

Designing a Work-Life Balance Learning Module for Cal Poly Construction Management Department

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The construction industry is known to create a highly stressful work environment given its unpredictability and mental/time demanding nature, which creates challenges for professionals to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This senior project aims to research and identify the key areas that foster this stress and propose a learning module for the Cal Poly Construction Management Department to implement into class curriculum. Having this learning module taught to students will raise awareness of the topic for future industry professionals and equip them with the tools to maintain a healthy equilibrium between their work demands and personal life. The learning module encompasses understanding and identifying stress within the construction industry, communication strategies and effective time management, mental and physical wellness, support networks and career changes, and lastly how to create a work-life balance plan. This learning module will provide theoretical knowledge along with practical tools and techniques, preparing students for navigation through their careers in the demanding industry of construction.

Key Words: Work-Life Balance, Mental Health, Stress Management, Time Management, Learning Module

Introduction/Background

Mental health is a popular talking point in today's society, especially when the case in point involves school or work life. According to a research study done by AXA insurance company for its 2018 Stress Index, Neil Gerrard from Construction Management Magazine concludes "It found that 82% of workers in building and construction were stressed at least some of the time during a typical week." AXA studied a vast amount of industries to find the stress levels among them, with construction coming in third behind domestic and financial services. Pairing this information of construction being one of the most stressful industries to work in along with the reality that mental health is not a popular topic to be spoken or taught about in the industry, this is an area that needs more awareness for professionals.

Stress is an inevitable part of work and life, and this can easily overwhelm individuals when not managed correctly. This can evolve into a spiral of a person's mental and physical health, leading to a butterfly effect of compounding issues. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that in 2016, the suicide rate for men in construction was about 50 out of 100,000, equating to almost double the total suicide rate for working men not in the construction industry. Along with this, the OHS (Occupational Health & Safety) states "Among male construction workers, 2.5 percent self-reported experiencing suicidal ideation and 30 percent cited regular psychological distress." As these numbers are self-reported, we can assume that the real numbers are much higher as many individuals are uncomfortable reporting such information.

With the establishment that the construction industry's demanding mental and physical nature has been taking a toll on its workers, let's take a look at the potential main causes behind this. According to Travelers.com, the main factors contributing to the high stress environment include demographics/culture, psychological, physical, and drugs/alcohol related challenges.

Demographics & Culture

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the majority of the construction industry's workforce is male with 38% being between 35 and 64 years old. This demographic is already at a high risk of suicide compared to the general population, and it's what makes up the industry. Along with this, the culture of this demographic tends to belong to an ideology of suppressing, instead of verbalizing personal problems which leads to the mindset of "just working through it". For the majority of people, this is an improper approach to these issues and tends to compound into bigger problems.

Psychological

This is arguably the biggest factor of stress in the industry, as the demanding nature of the job leads to mental hardships. Long work hours and ever changing schedules can cause mental exhaustion through sleep deprivation which takes a toll into almost every aspect of a person's life. Economic changes are common in the industry and jobs are never promised forever, so an unpredictable future project schedule can also contribute to the psychological battle. On top of these, the high risk and responsibility of the job affects everyone differently but is a popular contribution to lower mental health. Along with these direct psychological effects of the construction environment, there are also indirect effects, as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention states "These health effects can include heightened stress; poor safety outcomes (e.g., higher injury rates, more frequent incidents); greater risk for cardiovascular disease; and higher susceptibility to musculoskeletal disorders, sleep disorders, and gastrointestinal issues."

Physical

For many construction workers, their days consist of constant strain on their bodies. Over the years this may lead to pains and discomfort to those affected through developing musculoskeletal disorders which contribute to one out of five nonfatal injuries in the construction industry (CDC). Through multiple research projects, the CDC has also found that "low job satisfaction, high perceived job stress and unrealistic job goals or expectations, and perceived lack of control over the work environment resulted in greater lower back and neck or shoulder pain among construction workers." and that there is increasing evidence that workplace psychosocial factors can contribute to mental health disorders, alcohol abuse, and suicidal tendencies.

Drugs & Alcohol

Lawrence Smith from the Construction Financial Management Association says "The construction industry has one of the highest rates of substance abuse and alcoholism in the U.S. and the highest rate of suicide in any industry." Along with this, Smith lists some statistics on drugs and alcohol abuse in the industry with the sector ranking fifth in illicit drug use (11.6%), second in heavy drinking (16.5%) and substance use disorder (14.3%), and first in marijuana use (60.33%), heroin use (4.42%), and pain reliever abuse (22.63%). The alarming results of those studies highlight the major problem the construction industry is facing, as it ranks highest among these areas.

Project Product - Learning Module

From experience and research on stress in the construction industry, maintaining a healthy psyche through a person's career is the most important thing they can do. With how much someone's personal and work life can be affected by their mental state, the purpose of this project was to explore this theory further and find a way to introduce a learning curriculum on the topic to the Cal Poly Construction Management Department. From researching important topics on the broad scheme of mental health to more detailed information then connecting this to the construction industry, below is the outline of a learning module that can be introduced into a course's curriculum. This learning module is created based on the typical size of a learning module in a class at Cal Poly, being one week in length with class being five days a week.

Week / Date	Meeting Topic	Discussion
Week X - Day 1	Introduction & Understanding Stress in the Construction Industry	Begin the learning module with an intro to the importance of balancing personal and work life. Explore deeply what stress is, its sources, the affects, and what burnout is/how it looks in the construction industry.
Week X - Day 2	Time Management & Communication Strategies	Discuss strategies for efficient time use in the construction setting. Explain the impact of good/bad communication on work-life balance and explore conflict resolution in the workplace.
Week X - Day 3	Prioritizing Mental & Physical Health	Highlight the role of self-care, introducing mental relaxation and calming techniques. Introduce the importance of physical health including exercise, sleep, and nutrition.
Week X - Day 4	Support Networks & Navigating Career Changes	Dive into the importance of a strong social network and its contribution to a person's mental well-being. Discuss how to manage transitions and changes to career in the construction industry and maintain a steady mindset through the process of changes.
Week X - Day 5	Module Summary & Personal Work-Life Balance Plan	Summarize the main points of the learning module. As a last exercise, students will create a personal work-life balance plan for their future career role in the construction industry.

Figure 1: Course Learning Module Curriculum/Material

Day 1: Introduction & Understanding of Stress in the Construction Industry

The first day consists of a simple introduction to the material and an explanation of the importance of work-life balance. Students will dive into understanding the inherent challenges within the construction industry and what that may evolve into regarding someone's mental health, if it's not properly managed. Information will then switch to a more detailed exploration of stress including its origins, impacts, and the result of burnout in the industry. The goal of this day will be to identify the overall aim of this learning module and provide a foundation of understanding work-life balance to build upon within the coming days.

Day 2: Time Management & Communication Strategies

Day two focuses on introducing students to strategies for efficient time use tailored specifically for the typical career path in the construction industry. Managing time efficiently is crucial in achieving work-life balance as

it allows the person to fulfill both their work responsibilities while also making time for personal life and hobbies. Material will then shift to cover the importance of communication along with strategies to create an efficient system for this as well. Transparent and efficient communication leads to harmony between work and personal life which further establishes secure grounds for a steady mental psyche. This section will also cover conflict resolution in the workplace, which can be an area of great stress for people.

Day 3: Prioritising Mental & Physical Health

Day three will involve diving into methods of achieving mental and physical health on a more personal level. This includes relaxation and calming techniques that can be used to further nurture mental health when times get rough. Next, this course will cover the importance of consistent exercise, sufficient sleep, and a nutritious diet which aims to achieve a greater level of physical health. These self-care techniques and strategies will create an environment for people that play a big role in fostering healthy work-life balance.

Day 4: Support Networks & Navigating Career Changes

Day four will revolve around the significance of developing a strong network for stress management. This will give professionals practical guidance and resources along with a level of emotional comfort. Next, the course will cover approaches for handling career changes and shifts within the industry along with strategies to maintain a balanced lifestyle during these transformative periods.

Day 5: Module Summary & Personal Work-Life Balance Plan

Being the last day of the learning module, day five will consist of a recap of critical points throughout the week, ensuring students have a solid grasp on the essential aspects of work-life balance in the construction industry. The day will be concluded with offering the students an exercise on creating their own personalized plan for maintaining their work-life balance in their future careers. This plan will consist of the student examining their future career role, digging into the responsibilities to identify possible sources of stress. Finding these origins of stress will then allow the student to plan time management, communication methods, and strategies to maintain a healthy work and personal life throughout their careers.

Conclusion

Those in construction are faced with the harsh reality that the industry is riddled with factors contributing towards poor mental health. The goal of this project was to shed light on a serious problem within the industry and spread awareness about the topic with discussions in the module working to assist in equipping students entering the construction industry with important tools to help maintain work-life balance.

In order to achieve this, a class module on work-life balance focusing specifically on the construction industry was created. Understanding that a healthy work-life balance is critical to employee productivity and overall mental and physical health, this project emphasizes the need for construction industry professionals to develop skills in stress management, time management, and effective communication. Furthermore, the project highlights the significance of nurturing mental and physical health by establishing supportive networks and smoothly handling career transitions. The topics addressed target the most popular issues with the largest effect on professionals in order to give them the most useful knowledge towards combating mental health disorders throughout their careers which they can further pass on to others in the industry.

With this sector being one with the most number of employees, finding ways to mitigate these issues is paramount in creating an environment where workers are provided with a space that promotes greater mental health and guaranteed safety.

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