



BLUEPRINT FOR MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES

**SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH
COMMISSION**

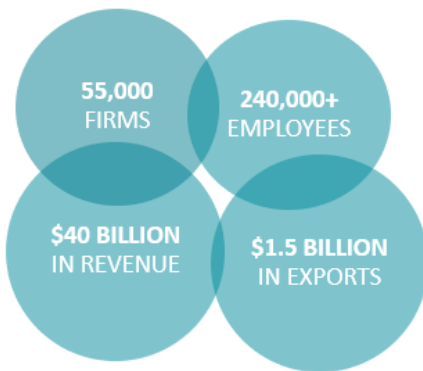
NOVEMBER 2021

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ABOUT US



Consult Australia is the industry association representing consulting businesses in design, advisory and engineering, an industry comprised of over 55,000 businesses across Australia. This includes some of Australia's top 500 companies and many small businesses (97%). Our members provide solutions for individual consumers through to major companies in the private sector and across all tiers of government. Our industry is a job creator for the Australian economy, directly employing 240,000 people. The services we provide unlock many more jobs across the construction industry and the broader community.

Our members include:



A full membership list is available at:

<https://www.consultaustralia.com.au/home/about-us/members>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Consult Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Mental Health Commission's consultation on the Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces. We note that the Blueprint is an element of the government's National Workplace Initiative which we strongly support.

It is the responsibility of everyone to ensure our workforce remains healthy and productive. Consult Australia has done significant work in this area, with our members [striving for mentally healthy workplaces](#). This includes creating environments that build confidence and acceptance of employees seeking help (removing perceived barriers a key here). However, we know that a myriad of pressures and external factors outside of an employer's control can also impede on the mental health of our workforce and the sustainability of our industry.

Given this, we have advocated for clients (both public and private sector) to set the tone from the top and strive for a mentally healthy *industry*. We have called on governments to adopt the principles outlined in our [Model Client Policy](#) to drive model procurement behaviours that support the sustainability and health of our industry. We have established an [End of Year Tender Deadlines Campaign](#) calling on agencies to implement a black-out period across Christmas and New Year, to give those we represent a well-deserved and uninterrupted rest over that period. Furthermore, we have called on the Commonwealth Government to mandate a collaborative procurement policy in line with our [Uplifting Productivity Report](#), recommending ways in which the Commonwealth government can maximise the economic benefits from projects via procurement reform.

With our members we have established Consult Australia's [mental health knowledge hub](#) including resources from our Mental Health Ambassadors and Mental Health Working Group. Members dedicated time to these because they genuinely believe that by making it easier for staff to address mental health concerns in the workplace, they can have a significant impact on the livelihood of their employees.

Below we have set out our recommendations on how the Blueprint could be enhanced, focusing on three key considerations:

1. Acknowledging factors outside of the employer's control.
2. The Blueprint should be suggestive, and not prescriptive, to empower sole traders and employers to adopt promoted strategies, while also respecting alternative methods.
3. Provide further clarity in some areas.

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1. ACKNOWLEDGING FACTORS OUTSIDE OF AN EMPLOYER'S CONTROL

Consult Australia supports the Blueprint foundations of mentally healthy workplaces – protect, respond, and promote. We recognise that many of the concepts in the protect and respond pillars are already embedded in the legal requirements for employers through work health and safety, worker's compensation, workplace relations, privacy, and anti-discrimination law. However, there are some aspects of the Blueprint pillars that despite an employer's best efforts, may be impacted by factors outside of their control.

In our industry, there are many factors outside of an employer's control that may impact an employee's mental health. Pipeline and procurement demand, including client timetabling/tender requests and the lack of a collaborative culture is putting significant pressure on our people to perform and produce, often to unreasonable timetables. These concerns are further complicated by the significant skills shortage that has impacted our industry prior to COVID-19 and continues to be constrained under the increasing pipeline demands.

One of the major factors driving mental health concerns in our industry (in addition to COVID-19 related issues) is the significant pressure our members are under with the current professional indemnity (PI) insurance market and the litigious nature of working in construction and the built environment in Australia. It is getting very difficult for our members to access affordable PI insurance in Australia. This is not a regular 'hard cycle' of the insurance market, we are now seeing small businesses and sole traders face forced business closure and early retirement based solely on the fact they can no longer get insurance at any price (let alone at an affordable price). Undoubtedly these circumstances will be taking a toll on the mental health of our sole trader members as well as employees in small business. However, these circumstances are not within their control.

For further detail on the key issues impacting our members and business confidence we direct you to our recent [Industry Health Check of September 2021](#).

It is for these reasons that it is necessary to balance the Blueprint pillars of protect and respond, with an acknowledgement that external factors can and do arise outside of an employer's control.

Use of case studies in the Blueprint

Consult Australia supports the use of the case studies in the Blueprint to show how sole traders, small businesses and medium to large organisations can create mentally healthy workplaces. However, we have concerns with some of the word choices, particularly as they relate to sole traders and small businesses.

The case studies note that sole traders can '...set healthy boundaries...' and small businesses can '...balance the pressures...with time away to connect and recharge, and encourage their people to do the same...'. While we know our members strive for this, we suggest the need for balance in the Blueprint with an acknowledgement that despite best efforts, employers may face external factors outside of their control that impede upon the mental health of themselves as sole traders/ small business owners and their workers.

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2. SUGGESTIVE, NOT PRESCRIPTIVE

We support the aspects of the promote pillar outlined in the Blueprint. However, we suggest the promote pillar should be complimented by an acknowledgement that the listed ways to promote mentally healthy workplaces are suggestive, not prescriptive. The intention should be to empower employers to adopt strategies, while also respecting alternative methods.

We have concerns that if the aspects of Blueprint were used to create competition between businesses, many businesses and particularly those who may be under resourced, would be intimidated from participating in the conversation.

Similarly, we support the change process set out in the Blueprint. However, we recommend that this be suggestive, rather than prescriptive. As the Blueprint identifies, not all principles of the change process will be relevant for all businesses. Additionally, some businesses may start at different stages of the change process. Given this, we suggest clarity be given to the introduction of the change process by acknowledging that the change process is a suggested guide.

3. FURTHER CLARITY NEEDED

Consult Australia have identified a few areas within the Blueprint that could be further clarified, as discussed below.

Resilience training to support mental health during high-pressure situations

While we support the '*resilience training to support mental health during high-pressure situations*' aspect of the protect pillar, we are concerned that many organisations may not be currently offering this level of support and will require significant education and guidance on how to establish such a framework.

Further, it may be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a high-pressure situation for many workers, and this event was unforeseen by businesses who may usually fall outside a high-risk environment for high-pressure situations. Given this, we recommend this aspect of the protect pillar be developed further for clarity on how and when an employer could introduce such a framework.

Compassionate and supportive conversations

The Consult Australia Mental Health Working Group recently developed a member business guide on mental health conversations in the workplace. During the process of development, it became clear that having '*compassionate and supportive conversations*' requires education beyond just what someone could or should say. Our members identified the need to build rapport and create a supportive environment, including building leadership capabilities to ensure a compassionate culture is set from the top. Our members also raised the need for education on crisis intervention in the unfortunate event that a colleague expresses or displays signs of being a danger to themselves.

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Given this, we recommend that further material be introduced to the National Workplace Initiative to support businesses being well equipped to understand the depth of what a compassionate and supportive conversation entails.

Research-supported early intervention initiatives

As the Blueprint states, *'...it is common for people to feel confused about where to start.'* This is particularly the case for sole traders and small businesses who are often under-resourced and often do not have dedicated human resources professionals on staff.

Therefore, we suggest that further clarity is required as to what *'research-supported early intervention initiatives'* are available, and suggestive, rather than prescriptive, guidance on which practices sole traders and small to medium businesses could seek to adopt.

CONCLUSION

Consult Australia supports the Blueprint and welcomes this document as a guiding resource for businesses striving for mentally healthy workplaces. However, Consult Australia recommends that the Blueprint remain suggestive, not prescriptive, to promote inclusion of alternative ideas and to ensure employer's feel empowered not discouraged.

Additionally, we recommend that the Blueprint highlight how there may be some factors outside of an employer's control that impede the mental health of their workers, and that it is up to the ecosystem as a whole working together to support the health and wellbeing of Australia's workers.

Finally, we recommended that further clarity be provided to the areas we have identified above to ensure businesses are well-equipped to bolster their mentally healthy workplace initiatives.

We thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Blueprint and we look forward to working with the National Mental Health Commission in the future.

CONTACT

We would welcome any opportunity to further discuss the issues raised in this submission.

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