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Driving business success for consulting firms in the built and natural environment

5 July 2019

Penny Armytage
Chair
Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Dear Ms Armytage and colleagues,

Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System – Submission

I write on behalf of Consult Australia regarding Victoria's Royal Commission into the Mental Health System. Consult Australia welcomes the Commission, and the opportunity to contribute. This letter outlines our submission, which focuses on key questions included in the Commission's formal submission guidance that relate to mental health in the workplace. Additionally, we are pleased to also provide a copy of Consult Australia's [*Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces*](#) report released in October last year to support our submission for the inquiry.

Consult Australia is the industry association that represents the business interests of professional services firms within the built and natural environment. These services include design, planning, civil engineering, architecture, technology solutions and project management. Our industry is estimated to employ over 240,000 people and generates a combined revenue of over \$40 billion per year.

Improving the community's understanding of mental illness, and reducing stigmas and discrimination

Consult Australia believes stigmas and discrimination in our society associated with mental ill-health are some of the most important issues. They limit our ability to create an open and supportive environment where people are willing to discuss and manage concerns, and to seek appropriate support when needed. To this end, we see efforts to tackle stigmas and discrimination as a crucial first step to opening up a range of solutions to creating a mentally healthy society.

We believe the workplace can provide a useful setting for tackling mental health stigmas and discrimination. Many of our members are leaders in initiatives to support the mental health of employees, with a focus on driving cultural changes in the workplace being a common theme. A focus of these initiatives is to provide a strong, visible and long-term commitment to mental health by senior leaders. Initiatives championed by senior leaders and embedded by 'frontline' managers and other operational leaders are likely to positively influence the work environment, the day-to-day experience of staff, and improve and normalise the overall understanding of mental health.

An industry-wide approach can play a role in reducing stigmas and discrimination through a knowledge sharing culture. Consult Australia has reviewed initiatives across our industry which has identified a gap in how comprehensive approaches are to mental health in different workplaces. To help close this gap, Consult Australia has focused on establishing a knowledge sharing culture by connecting firms to share experiences at different points along their journey to creating mentally healthy workplaces.

The first step towards this is the recent establishment of Consult Australia's industry-wide Mental Health Ambassador Network of 18 senior leaders and managers. Our ambassador network will drive a cultural change in the broader industry by challenging the notion that mental health is a closed topic, providing insights on personal experiences, and providing guidance on establishing a mentally healthy workplace.

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Consult Australia is happy to be contacted to discuss our recent activities to improving our industry's understanding of mental illness and reducing stigmas and discrimination as we strongly believe this is transferable to other sectors or a society-wide approach.

Better preventing mental illness and supporting people to get early treatment and support

Consult Australia's *Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces* report outlines the importance of picturing our mental health as a continuum, where people are flourishing at one end and languishing at the other. This concept was developed by Corey Keyes, and emphasises that the difference between being mentally healthy and experiencing mental illnesses is not 'black and white'. It instead acknowledges that we shift along this continuum day-to-day based on our own unique experiences.¹

As outlined in table 1 below, an individual is demonstrating a high-level of resilience and wellbeing when they are at the green end of the spectrum. An individual in the yellow area may be experiencing some difficulties coping with current challenges. In the orange area, an individual is finding it more difficult to cope and symptoms may be increasing in severity and frequency. At the red end, an individual may be experiencing severe symptoms and may be at risk of self-harm and suicide. These symptoms could include social withdrawal and irritability, feeling overwhelmed, hopeless and/or worthless, reduced productivity, and alcohol and drug use.²



Table 1: The mental health continuum³

A focus on looking at mental health as a continuum, and appropriately designing Victoria's end-to-end mental health system along this continuum, will enable our society to not just focus on addressing concerns when people are experiencing severe symptoms, but also raise awareness and put in place actions to encourage individuals to 'flourish' and build their resilience to limit the severity of mental ill-health through day-to-day activities. A focus on encouraging individuals to remain thriving in the green area of the continuum has been a recent focus of many mental health initiatives in the workplace, and Consult Australia recommends this approach be upscaled and promoted further across the community – through an integrated model focused on promotion, protection and support.

One example of a community-wide integrated approach with a particular focus on promotion is the mentally healthy city project in Townsville being delivered by the Tropical Brain & Mind Research Foundation. The project is developing a Townsville-centric 'wheel of wellbeing' framework that aims to improve mental health across the community. The project will also promote the integration and networking of mental health support helping individuals and the community, centred on a 'step care' model – an evidence-based, five staged system comprising a hierarchy of interventions from the least to most intensive designed to match to an individual's needs (health promotion, early intervention, low intensity services, face-to-face services, and multiagency care). We encourage the Commission to further investigate the approach taken under Townsville's mentally healthy city project which is the first of its type across Australia.

¹ Corey Keyes, [The Mental Health Continuum: From Languishing to Flourishing in Life \(2002\)](#)

² Beyondblue and Heads Up, [Developing a workplace mental health strategy: a how-to guide for organisations](#)

³ Ibid.

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Building on the mental health continuum and the idea of keeping individuals 'in the green', Consult Australia believes the Commission should also investigate the range of research available on the benefits of 'thriving' workplaces. This concept is primarily based on the idea that a proactive approach becomes cost-effective because while these initiatives are focused on preventing mental ill-health, they also improve the productivity and resilience of an organisation. Thriving workplaces also allow employees to feel empowered to perform at a high level, to confidently pursue challenging goals, and comfortably balance work into an overall healthy life.⁴ We believe this concept can also be applied in different circumstances, such as sports clubs and community organisations, and at a whole-of-society level.

Lastly, it is important to note that while it is valuable to have measures along all ends of the mental health continuum, frontline mental health services are severely underfunded. Therefore, when looking at other forms of improving population mental health, such as funding for research and new initiatives, we must continue to ensure funding is balanced across all areas. This is important because a holistic approach to mental health needs to appropriately respond to severe problems, in addition to promoting wellbeing.

Opportunities in the community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation

Consult Australia believes the Commission should explore how people living with mental illness can be supported to enter the job market, particularly as the right job can be paramount to helping an individual manage mental ill-health symptoms and increasing their participation in society. Support for people with mental illness to enter the workforce should firstly be underpinned by appropriate protections under legislation frameworks across Australia, including anti-discrimination and equal opportunity requirements. Furthermore, we believe there is an additional role for education support to improve recruitment practices in the workplace, particularly focused on tackling stigmas and discrimination with a focus on unconscious bias.

Workplaces can have an impact on mental health or bring concerns to the surface with many people spending a significant amount of time at work while managing day-to-day pressures. We therefore believe workplace initiatives, coupled with additional support from the government and mental health NGOs, can play an important role in helping people living with mental illness enter and remain in the workforce. As demonstrated by successful initiatives in our industry, we believe these initiatives should focus on creating a work environment that builds the confidence of employees to seek help and access support when they are experiencing any concerns. These initiatives have focused on removing barriers, particularly from an employee's 'on-the-ground' perspective to being open about mental health and accessing support measures available, and have in turned helped to improve an individuals social and economic participation.

Other comments

Policy transfer from other jurisdictions

Consult Australia believes the approach taken by the NSW Government and SafeWork NSW on mentally healthy workplaces is a strong example of effective mental health in the workplace programmes by a state government. SafeWork NSW has led the development of a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing mental health in the workplace through their *Mentally Healthy Workplaces Strategy 2018-2022*. The strategy, released in June 2019, represents a \$55 million funding commitment over a four-year period to improving the mental health of NSW workers. These initiatives focus on building partnerships with industry to promote changes, rather than a regulatory approach, and also include a range of free targeted training for micro, small and medium sized businesses on tackling stigmas and providing appropriate support for staff. We also believe a similar approach taken by Worksafe NSW could adopted in Victoria and also upscaled in a community setting.

⁴ University of Western Australia and PWC, [The Opportunity to Thrive \(2015\)](#)

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Increase government funding for proof-of-concept trials

We also believe an effective funding model and approach by governments to supporting an improvement to mental health in the workplace would be to incentivise industry to partner with mental health NGOs such as Beyondblue and the Black Dog Institute. This support by governments could include funding for proof-of-concept trials between sectors and mental health NGOs to demonstrate the effectiveness of an approach before scaling up and embedding them into the broader system (through private investments when a clear business benefit has been demonstrated or additional government funding).

Impacts on mental health from procurement practices and skill shortages

We also encourage the Commission to investigate 'downstream' mental health benefits from improving procurement practices which are often the root cause of mentally unhealthy work environments in the built environment industry. A challenge facing many of our member firms is that procurement arrangements can create circumstances where high demand and intensity work, and tight timeframes, are prevalent and exacerbated by unreasonable terms and conditions.

The current scale of infrastructure investment in Victoria, and current skill shortages, are also exacerbating these mental health concerns in the built environment industry. Consult Australia's [2018 national skills survey](#) highlights that 61 per cent of respondents from member firms are currently experiencing a skills shortage, with 84 per cent of respondents indicating these shortages are being experienced in mid-level roles, and 41 per cent for senior roles, where staff need many years of professional experience. Despite the positive intent, local content requirements are an example of a Victorian procurement practice which is placing undue pressure on a local skills market struggling to meet current demands.

Improving arrangements for tender periods and deadlines is one example of how the Victorian Government and other clients can ensure procurement practices are not creating mentally unhealthy work environments. For example, following recent advocacy activities by Consult Australia on tender periods and deadlines, the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads have changed their tender guidance to avoid unnecessarily tight deadlines and to prevent those with a due date shortly after the end-of-year shutdown period, to allow people time off with their families over the holiday period. While this example is a small step, we believe it does highlight that tangible improvements to procurement practices can help create mentally healthy workplaces in our industry, and we encourage the Commission to consider our [Model Client Policy](#) in this context.

Consult Australia thanks the Commission for the opportunity to provide a submission. If you would like to discuss our submission, please contact James Robertson (Policy Advisor) at on 0448 853 144 or at james@consultaaustralia.com.au.

Yours sincerely,

Nicola Grayson
Chief Executive
Consult Australia