

Safe at work?

Employee experiences of workplace health and safety

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Abstract

Health and safety is an important issue for New Zealand workers. It is accepted that some types of work have more inherent health and safety risks than others; however it is important that employees experiences of different types of health and safety issues, as well as their perceptions of how well their employers manage risks, are looked at in greater depth.

The Survey of Working Life (2012) asked employed people how often, in the previous 12 months, they had experienced:

- physical problems or pain because of work*
- stress from being at work, or the work itself stressful*
- tiredness from work that affected life outside of work*
- discrimination, harassment or bullying at work.*

This paper aims to look what role – if any - age, sex, industry, occupation, and employment relationship played in the results.

Using the same breakdowns, employee's perceptions of health and safety risk management, and whether they felt they had reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving health and safety in their workplace will also be explored in further detail.

Introduction

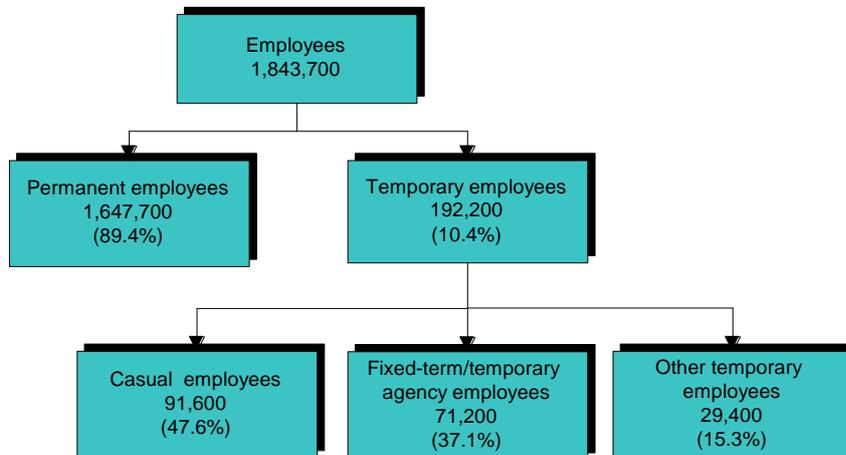
Health and safety in the workplace is an important topic for all working New Zealanders. It is accepted that the rates of occupational disease, fatality, and serious injury in New Zealand are high and come at a great personal, social, and financial cost. The Survey of Working Life 2012 (SoWL) collected information about how often people experienced issues in the previous 12 months regarding stress, tiredness, physical problems or pain, bullying, harassment, or discrimination either at work or from work. The SoWL also collected information on employees' perceptions of how well they felt their employers manage health and safety risks, and whether they felt they had reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving workplace health and safety. The Survey of Working Life is unique in being the only source of information about workplace health and safety from the perspective of employees. Other information on the topic typically comes from employers.

Employees in the New Zealand labour force

Of the 2.2 million employed people in the New Zealand workforce in the December 2012 quarter, most (84 percent) were employees. Nine in ten were in permanent employment and the proportion of female employees (49 percent) matched that of men (51 percent). Eight in 10

employees were aged between 25 and 64 years, 16 percent aged 15–24 years, 22 percent aged 25–34 years, 21 percent 35–44 years, 22 percent 45–54 years, 15 percent 55–64 years and 4 percent 64 years and over.

Figure 1



Definition of permanent vs temporary employees

A permanent employee is an employee who is guaranteed continuing work. They can stay in their job until they decide to leave or their employer makes them redundant. A temporary employee is an employee whose job only lasts for a limited time or until a project is completed.

Only respondents who were employees (working for wages or salary) in their main job were asked if they were permanent or temporary employees. If temporary, they were asked additional questions about the types of temporary work they were doing to enable them to be priority classified as: casual worker, fixed-term worker, temporary agency worker, seasonal worker (employment relationship not further defined), or some other type of temporary worker. For this paper I have aggregated the five temporary categories into three: casual, fixed-term/temporary agency workers, and ‘other temporary employees’, which comprises mostly seasonal workers.

Permanent work is still the norm with only 10 percent of employees being in temporary work. There were similar proportions of men (52 percent) and women (48 percent) in permanent employment but women (58 percent) outnumbered men (42 percent) in temporary work. Around one-third (36 percent) of permanent workers were under 35 years of age, yet the proportion of temporary workers in that age group (55 percent) was significantly higher. Looking further at the temporary workers, we see that casual workers (48 percent) made up almost half of all temporary workers, followed by the combined grouping of fixed-term and temporary agency employees (37 percent). The other temporary employees group (15 percent) mainly consisted of seasonal workers. Six in 10 casual workers were female and the same proportion was aged under 35.

Who works where?

Industry

Table 1 shows the distribution of employees across industries, and the proportion of workers in each. The largest proportion of employees (16 percent) was working in the retail trade and accommodation and food services industry with almost 300,000 workers. The industry with the smallest number of workers was rental, hiring, and real estate services, with around 20,000 employees, or 1 percent of all employees.

Table 1 Distribution of employees across industries

Industry	Number of employees (000)	Proportion of employees in industry (%)
Retail trade and accommodation and food services	296.3	16.1
Manufacturing and electricity, gas, water, and waste services	238.0	12.9
Healthcare and social assistance	220.5	12.0
Education and training	189.0	10.3
Professional, scientific, technical, administrative, and support services	175.2	9.5
Public administration and safety	126.6	6.9
Construction	114.8	6.2
Arts, recreation and other services	100.2	5.4
Transport, postal and warehousing	87.8	4.8
Wholesale trade	83.6	4.5
Agriculture, forestry and fishing, and mining	82.0	4.4
Financial and insurance services	64.7	3.5
Information media and telecommunications	40.7	2.2
Rental, hiring, and real estate services	20.3	1.1

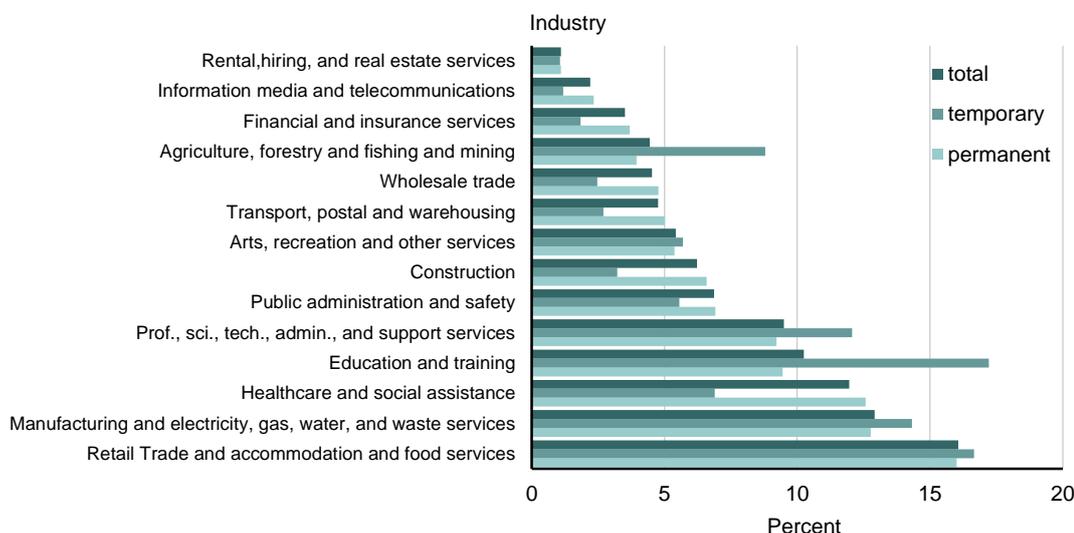
Source: Statistics New Zealand

Figure 2 looks at the proportion of permanent and temporary employees in each industry. While there is little difference between the proportions of permanent (16 percent) and temporary (17 percent) workers in the retail trade and accommodation and food services industry, the largest employer, there are some industries where the percentage of permanent workers is markedly different to the percentage of temporary workers. Employees in the health care and social assistance industry make up a greater proportion of permanent workers (13 percent) than temporary workers (7 percent) and construction (7 percent vs 3 percent). The reverse is true for some industries having greater proportions of temporary workers than permanent employees, particularly education and training (17 percent vs 9 percent) and agriculture, forestry and fishing, and mining (9 percent vs 4 percent).

Figure 2

Proportion of employees (total, permanent, and temporary)

By industry
December 2012 quarter



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Occupation

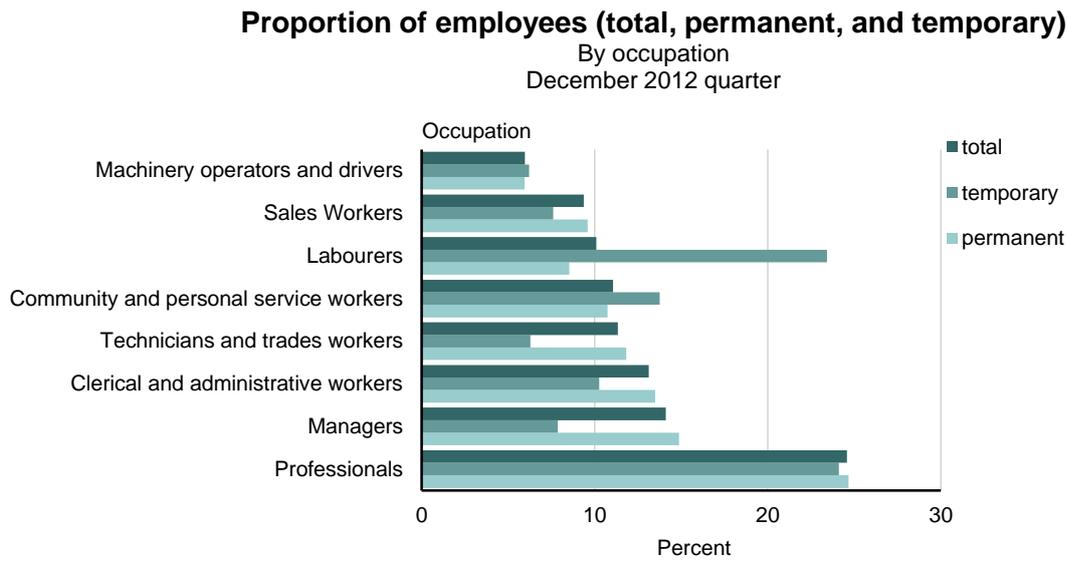
Table 2 shows the distribution of employees across occupations and the proportion of workers in each. Over 450,000 workers, or one quarter of employees in the SoWL were professionals. This includes occupations such as accountants, financial brokers and dealers, human resource and training professionals, architects, engineers, lawyers, teachers, counsellors, social workers and medical practitioners among a host of others. The smallest amount of workers (110,100, or 6 percent) was in the machinery operators and drivers occupation.

Table 2: Distribution of employees across occupations

Occupation	Number of employees (000)	Proportion of employees in occupation (%)
Professionals	453.1	24.6
Managers	260.3	14.1
Clerical and administrative workers	242.0	13.1
Technicians and trades workers	209.2	11.3
Community and personal service workers	203.8	11.1
Labourers	186.0	10.1
Sales workers	172.8	9.4
Machinery operators and drivers	110.1	6.0
Source: Statistics New Zealand		

Figure 3 shows the proportion of permanent and temporary employees in each occupation. The proportion of permanent (25 percent) and temporary workers (24 percent) in professional occupations is the same, and as with industry groupings, there are some occupations which have bigger proportions of permanent employees than temporary ones. These include managers (15 percent vs 8 percent) and technicians and trades workers (15 percent vs 6 percent). Labourers (23 percent) make up a greater proportion of temporary workers than permanent workers (9 percent).

Figure 3



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Experiences of workplace stress

In the last 12 months, how often have you found being at work, or the work itself, stressful?

Work stress is when being at work, or the work itself, makes you feel tense, anxious or less able to cope.

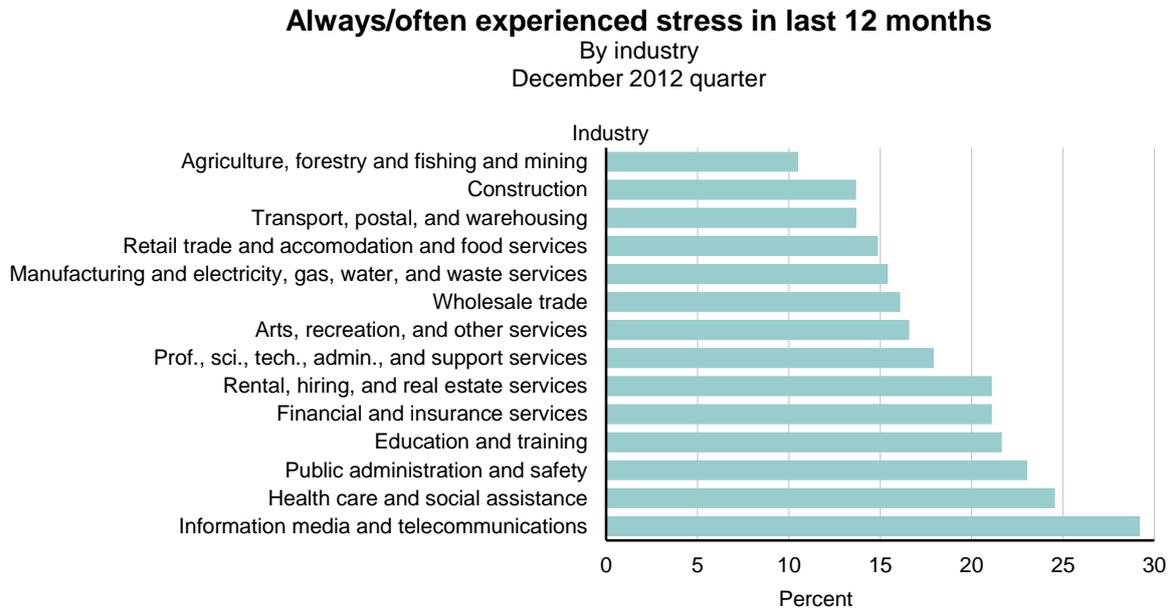
Almost 1 in 5 employees reported that they always or often found being at work or the work itself stressful. Women (20 percent) reported experiencing workplace stress in the previous 12 months slightly more than men (16 percent). The youngest workers (15–24 year olds, 13 percent) reported significantly less work stress than the other age groups, with around 1 in 5 of those aged 25–64 years reporting that being at work, or the work itself, was stressful.

Permanent workers (19 percent) were more likely to have experienced work stress than temporary employees (13 percent). When temporary employees are broken down further by type of employment relationship, fixed-term/temporary agency workers (16 percent) reported higher levels of stress than casual workers and 'other temporary' employees (both reported 11 percent).

When it comes to work stress by industry, there are some marked differences with a clear standout: the information media and telecommunications industry, with nearly 3 in 10 employees in that industry reporting they always or often felt being at work, or the work itself stressful in

the previous 12 months. This proportion is almost three times higher than those working in agriculture, forestry and fishing, and mining (11 percent) and twice as high as those working in construction (14 percent), transport, postal and warehousing (14 percent), retail trade and accommodation and food services (15 percent) and manufacturing and electricity and electricity, gas, water, and waste services (15 percent).

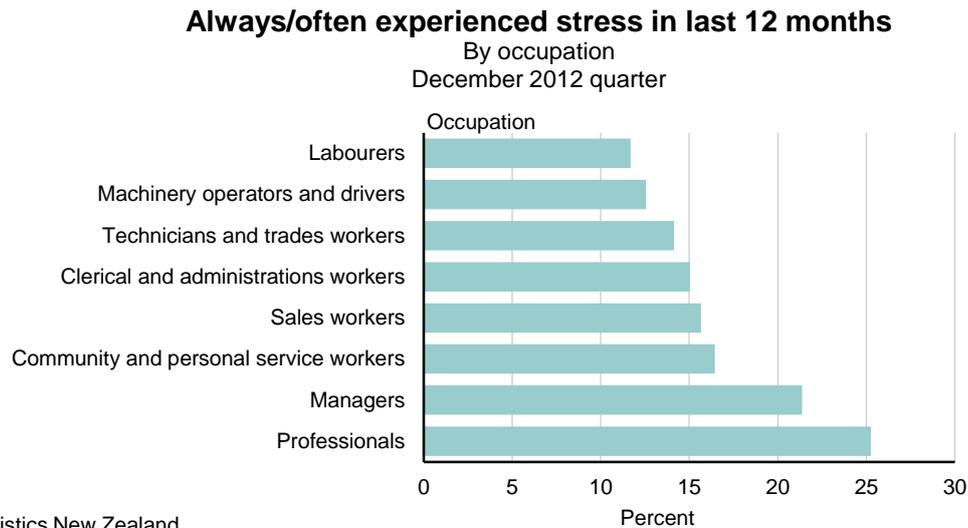
Figure 4



Source: Statistics New Zealand

There is less variation in the occupation breakdown than industry. One quarter of professionals reported always or often feeling stressed at or from work, twice that of people working as labourers. This could be due to some of the pressures and responsibilities associated with professional occupations compared with labourers, which includes cleaners, construction labourers, agricultural workers, factory process workers, and food preparation workers. These jobs are generally more manual and don't have the same types of responsibilities as professional jobs.

Figure 5



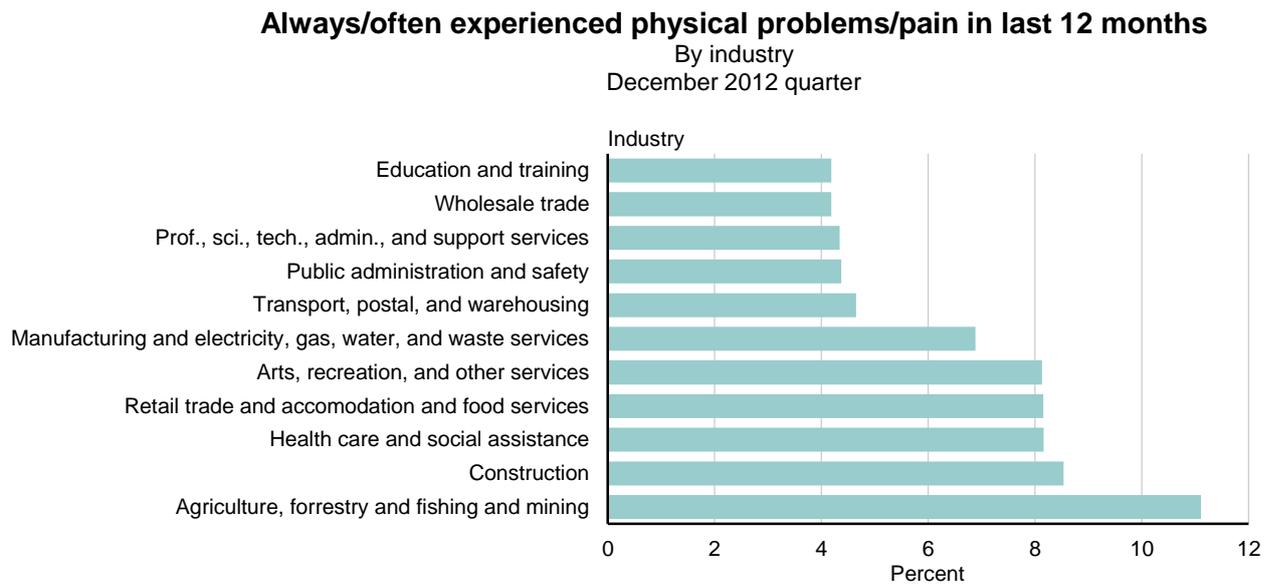
Physical problems or pain

In the last 12 months, how often have you had physical problems or pain because of work?

Six percent of employees reported always or often experiencing physical problems or pain because of work. There is no statistical difference between the sexes (men 6 percent, women 7 percent), nor does age seem to be a factor with the different age groups ranging between 6 and 7 percent. There is no difference between permanent (6 percent) and temporary employees (6 percent) although there is a difference between types of temporary workers. Those in the 'other temporary workers' category (11 percent) were more likely to have experienced physical problems or pain in the previous 12 months than casual workers (7 percent). This may be due to the bulk of the other temporary workers category being seasonal workers, such as freezing workers, fruit pickers, and ski field workers. This type of work often involves more physical activity.

As expected the industries that have more physical work, such as agriculture, forestry and fishing, and mining (11 percent), along with construction (9 percent), reported the highest prevalence of always/often experiencing physical problems or pain because of work. Some industries reported such low proportions of employees experiencing physical problems or pain because of work that they had to be suppressed due to high sampling errors. Most industries reported proportions of workers who had pain because of work at between 4 and 8 percent.

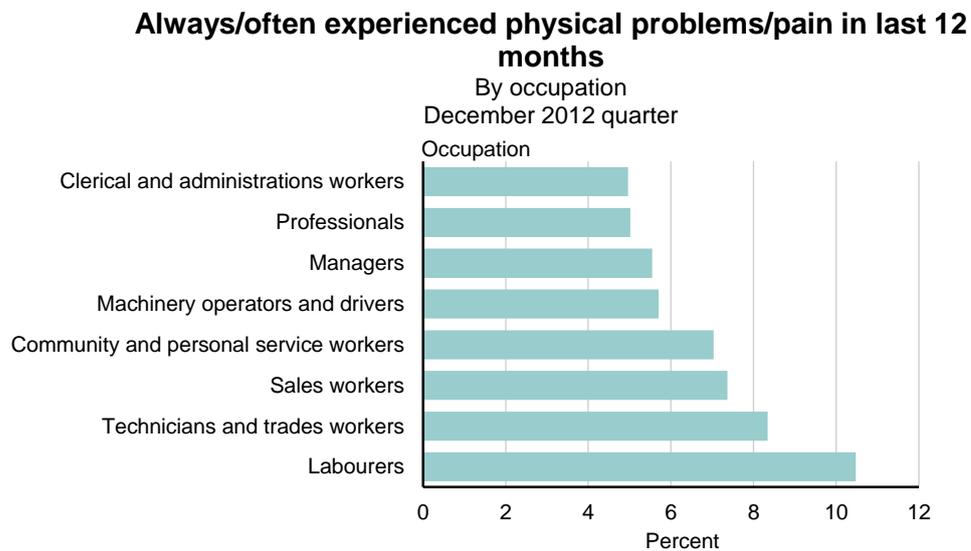
Figure 6



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Figure 7 shows twice as many labourers (10 percent) reported always or often experiencing physical problems or pain because of work in the previous 12 months compared with clerical and administrative workers (5 percent). Again this could be due to the more physical nature of labouring work in contrast to the more traditional desk-based jobs of clerical and administrative workers.

Figure 7



Source: Statistics New Zealand

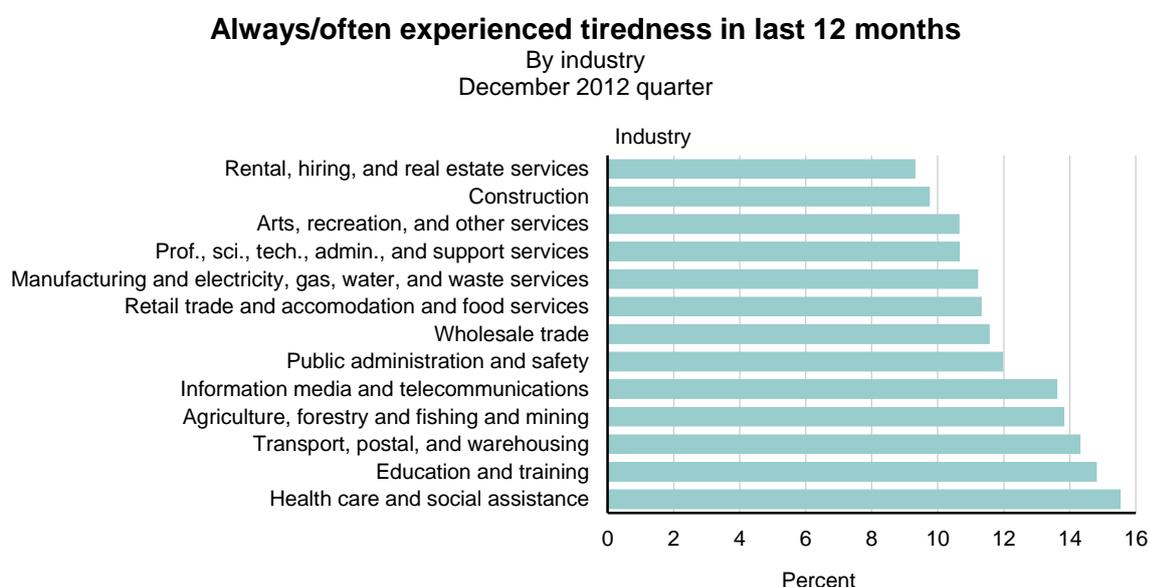
Tiredness at work

In the last 12 months, how often have you felt so tired from work that you were unable to enjoy the things you like to do outside of work?

Twelve percent of employees said they always or often felt too tired from work to enjoy the things they like to do outside of work. Women (14 percent) reported a slightly higher proportion than men (11 percent). The youngest group (aged 15–24 years, 10 percent) reported less tiredness than the other age groups which ranged between 12 and 14 percent. The result was the same for permanent (12 percent) and temporary workers (12 percent), yet there is a difference between the types of temporary employees. Those in the ‘other temporary workers’ category (17 percent) had a bigger proportion of workers experiencing tiredness from working than fixed-term/temporary agency workers (14 percent), and casual workers (10 percent). Again this could in part be due to the physical nature of seasonal work as discussed above.

Tiredness by industry was clustered quite tightly. Those in the health care and social assistance industry (16 percent) reported the biggest proportion of workers too tired from work to enjoy life outside of it. These are the people who work in hospitals, medical, and other health care services, residential carers and those providing social assistance services – people caring for other people. This could be due to the work often being done outside standard hours (7am to 7pm) and it often being quite physical.

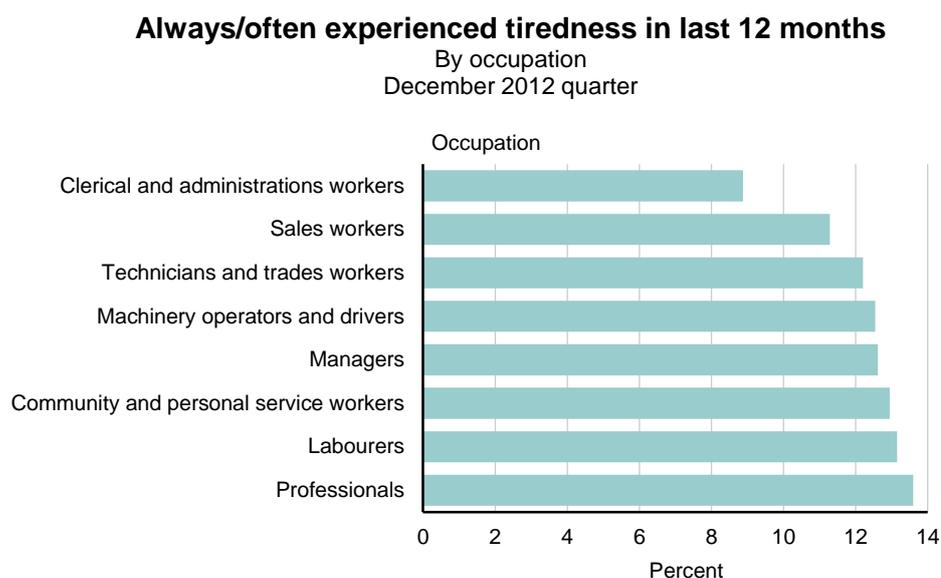
Figure 8



Source: Statistics New Zealand

There also wasn't much difference in results by occupation. Clerical and administrative workers (9 percent) reported less tiredness encroaching on their outside lives than the other occupations, which ranged between 11 percent (sales workers) and professionals (14 percent).

Figure 9



Discrimination, harassment, or bullying

In the last 12 months, have you experienced any discrimination, harassment or bullying at work?

Results from SoWL showed around 1 in 10 (11 percent) of employees had experienced discrimination, harassment, or bullying in the previous 12 months. A slightly higher proportion of women (13 percent) than men (9 percent) reported experiencing these. When looking at age, 13 percent of employees aged between 35 and 54 years said they had always or often experienced them, 12 percent of 55–64 year olds, 10 percent of 15–24 year olds, and 9 percent of those aged 25–34 years and 65 years and over.

There was no real difference between permanent (12 percent) and temporary employees (11 percent), but again differences can be seen in the different types of temporary employment. Those in the ‘other temporary workers’ category (14 percent) reported experiencing discrimination, harassment, or bullying in the previous 12 months more than fixed-term/temporary agency workers (10 percent) and casual workers (6 percent).

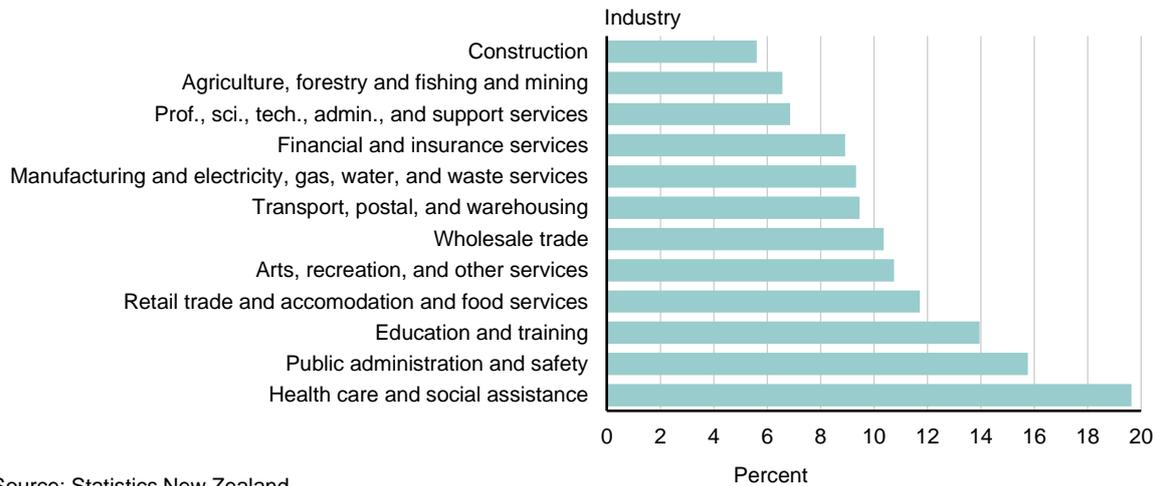
One in five people working in the health care and social assistance industry reported experiencing discrimination, harassment, or bullying at work in the previous 12 months, significantly more than most other industries. Their result was around three times that of people working in construction (6 percent) and the agriculture, forestry and fishing, and mining industry, the professional, scientific, technical, administrative and support services industry, and information media and telecommunications industry (all 7 percent). The top three industries reporting higher proportions of discrimination, harassment or bullying, which also includes people working in education and training (14 percent), and public administration and safety (16 percent), are all industries that tend to deal with people in their work life. They are the teachers, the armed forces, the police, the corrections officers, the medical professionals and the carers. The SoWL data doesn’t discern between whether it was someone you work with, or deal with in carrying out your job when experiencing discrimination, harassment or bullying so

it's not possible to say whether dealing with people is inherently more likely to lead to experiencing these behaviours when at work.

Figure 10

Always/often experienced discrimination, harassment, or bullying in last 12 months

By industry
December 2012 quarter



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Occupation appears to have less of an impact than the industry worked in for proportions of employees reporting they'd experienced discrimination, harassment, or bullying in the previous 12 months, with only a 5 percent spread across the occupations. Community and personal service workers (14 percent), who often deal with people in the course of their work, had the biggest proportion of employees reporting discrimination, harassment, or bullying. It is unsurprising that managers (9 percent) had the smallest proportion given the inherent association of management with authority. It wasn't statistically smaller than some of the other groupings, however.

Figure 11

Always/often experienced discrimination, harassment, or bullying in last 12 months

By occupation
December 2012 quarter



Source: Statistics New Zealand

The question asked in SoWL means it is not possible to determine which of the three – discrimination, harassment, or bullying was actually experienced by respondents. This is potentially an area for improvement in future iterations of SoWL.

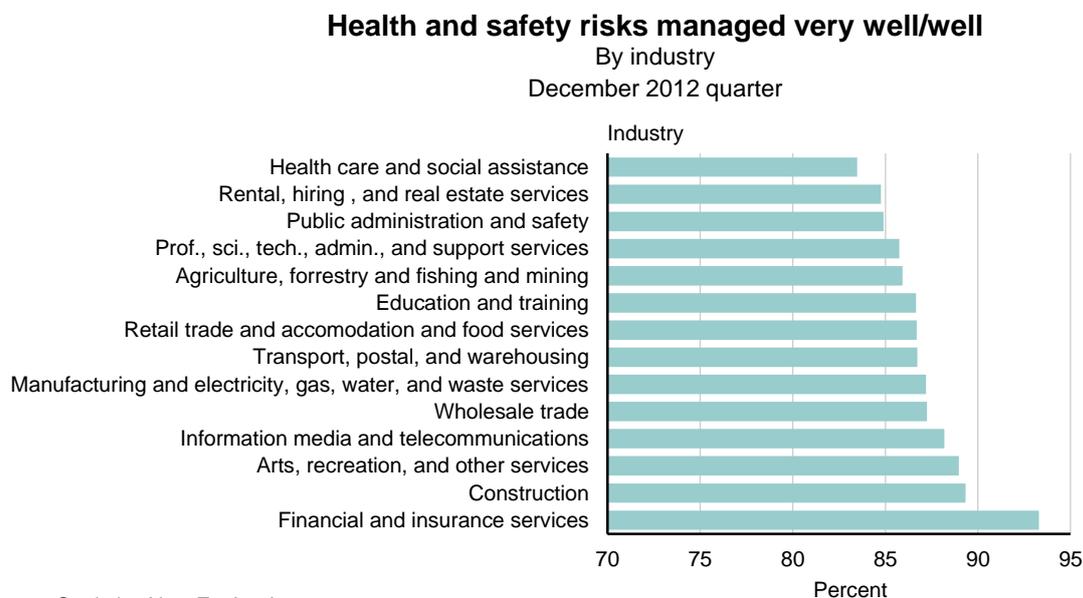
Employer management of health and safety risks

Do you think the health and safety risks (at name of employer) are managed: very well, well, neither well not poorly or very poorly?

Most employees (87 percent) reported they thought their employers managed health and safety risks in the workplace either very well or well. There was no difference between the sexes (both 87 percent) and no discernible difference between the age groups which ranged from 85 to 89 percent. Permanent workers (87 percent) reported a similar proportion to temporary workers (85 percent). Looking at the different types of temporary employment relationships, there was minimal difference across the groups.

By industry, the financial and insurance services industry (93 percent) had the biggest proportion of employees who felt health and safety risks were managed very well or well by employers, possibly due to risks associated with that type of work being low. People who worked in health care and social assistance (83 percent), who experienced the most discrimination, harassment, or bullying and tiredness at work, and were in the top three for both stress and physical problems or pain from work, had the smallest proportion of workers happy with how their employers managed health and safety risks. However this still equates to more than 8 in 10 being satisfied with risk management. The rest ranged between 85 and 89 percent.

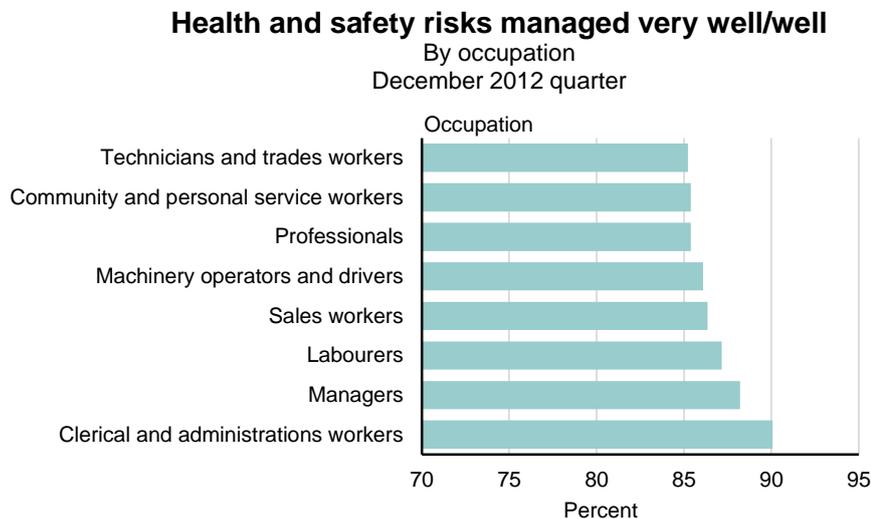
Figure 12



By occupation, 9 in 10 clerical and administrative workers (90 percent) thought their employers managed workplace health and safety risks very well or well. These are traditionally office based roles. The occupation with the lowest proportion of workers satisfied with how health and safety risks are managed, was technicians and trades workers (85 percent). These roles are

traditionally more mobile in nature and as such the environment in which they work is constantly changing. They also tend to deal with equipment making these jobs more high risk than desk-based jobs.

Figure 13



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving health and safety

At (name of employer) are there reasonable opportunities for you to take part in improving workplace health and safety?

More than 8 in 10 employees felt they had reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving health and safety at their place of work. More men (87 percent) than women (82 percent) felt they could contribute to improvement. Fewer young people (78 percent) felt they had reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving workplace health and safety than the other age groups, which ranged between 84 and 86 percent.

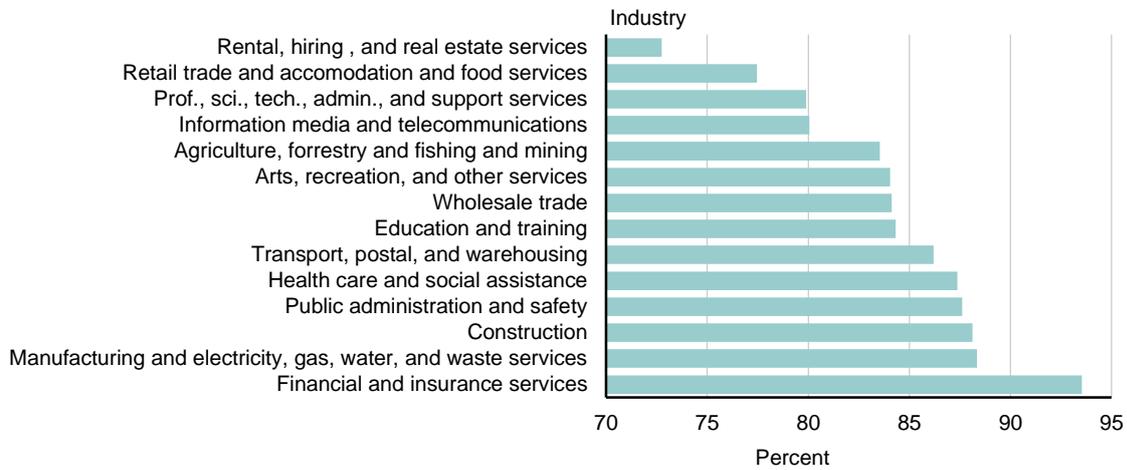
There is a notable difference between permanent (86 percent) and temporary employees (78 percent). Only two-thirds of casual workers thought they had reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving workplace health and safety compared with 80 percent of fixed-term/temporary agency workers and 73 percent of 'other temporary workers'.

By industry, there is a broad spread. Employees in the rental, hiring, and real estate services industry (73 percent) had a far smaller proportion of people who felt they could contribute to improving health and safety than people who worked in the financial and insurance services industry, with more than 9 in 10 workers feeling they could contribute.

Figure 14

Reasonable opportunities to improve health and safety

By industry
December 2012 quarter



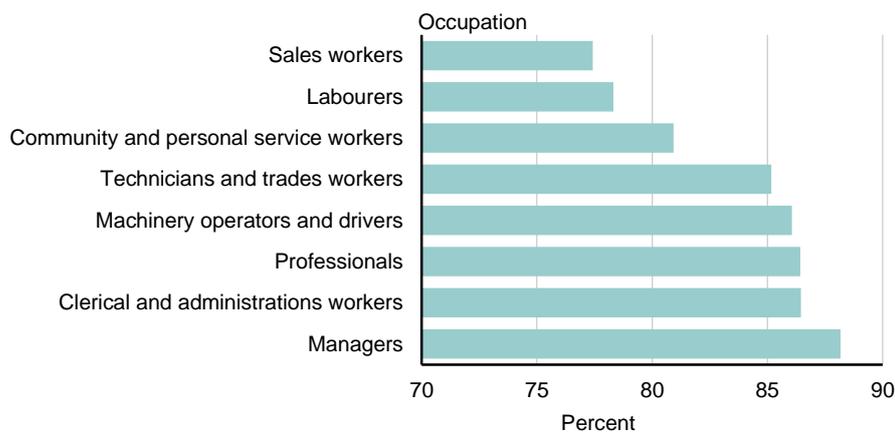
Source: Statistics New Zealand

Figure 15 shows occupation doesn't have as big an effect as industry on perception of having reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving health and safety at work. As expected, managers (88 percent) have the biggest proportion of workers who thought they could contribute. By comparison, sales workers, which include checkout operators, sales assistants, service station attendants and telemarketers, reported the lowest proportion of workers (77 percent) who thought they had could contribute to improving health and safety in place workplace.

Figure 15

Reasonable opportunities to improve health and safety

By occupation
December 2012 quarter



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Conclusion

It's well known that particular industries have inherent issues with health and safety. Forestry, for instance reports double the injury rate than other industries and the fatality rate is significantly higher than the overall rate for all industries. There are numerous mechanisms in place to measure injury, near misses and other health and safety related matters, but these don't necessarily report the everyday experiences of workers in New Zealand, which highlights the importance of the Survey of Working Life.

With 1 in 5 workers experiencing stress at or from work, it is the most prevalent health and safety issues for employees. Around 1 in 20 employees experience physical problems or pain from working and it is unsurprising this is more of an issue with jobs that are inherently physical in nature. Tiredness from work that affects enjoyment of things outside of work is an issue for around 1 in 8 employees. Those classified as other temporary workers, which is predominantly made up of seasonal workers appeared the most affected. Although 1 in 10 employees reported experiencing discrimination, harassment or bullying, those in the health care and social assistance industry reported twice that proportion, significantly higher than any other industry.

Almost 9 in 10 employees think their employer manages health and safety risks very well or well. There is little difference across breakdowns of sex, age, permanent/temporary employment, or occupation. The most notable difference is between different industries where those working in the financial and insurance services industry are more satisfied with their employer's health and safety risk management than workers in any other industry.

In comparison with health and safety risk management by employers, which had few notable differences, employees' perceptions of whether they had reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving workplace health and safety showed big variations. This was particularly noticeable by industry type and the permanent/temporary split. Among the different types of temporary workers the greatest difference was with casual workers who were significantly less likely to report they had reasonable opportunities to improve health and safety in their workplaces than the other groupings. Age and sex are likely to be factors given the majority of casual workers are young and female. It is unclear whether having a more tenuous grasp on their job by virtue of not being permanent, or a reluctance to 'rock the boat', is an influence in the lower proportion of casual workers feeling they have reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving workplace health and safety.

Notes

1. While people who employed others and the self-employed were also asked about their experiences of different health and safety aspects, for this paper I have removed them to focus solely on employees. This is because only employees were asked how well they thought their place of work managed health and safety issues and if they thought they had reasonable opportunities to contribute to improving health and safety in their workplace.
2. Temporary employee is a prioritised classification. As all types of temporary employment are not mutually exclusive, people with multiple responses to the temporary employee questions were assigned to a single group.