

# PCET 2005

## ***Challenges for OHS Implementation in Building and Construction***

**Presented by**

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# Introduction



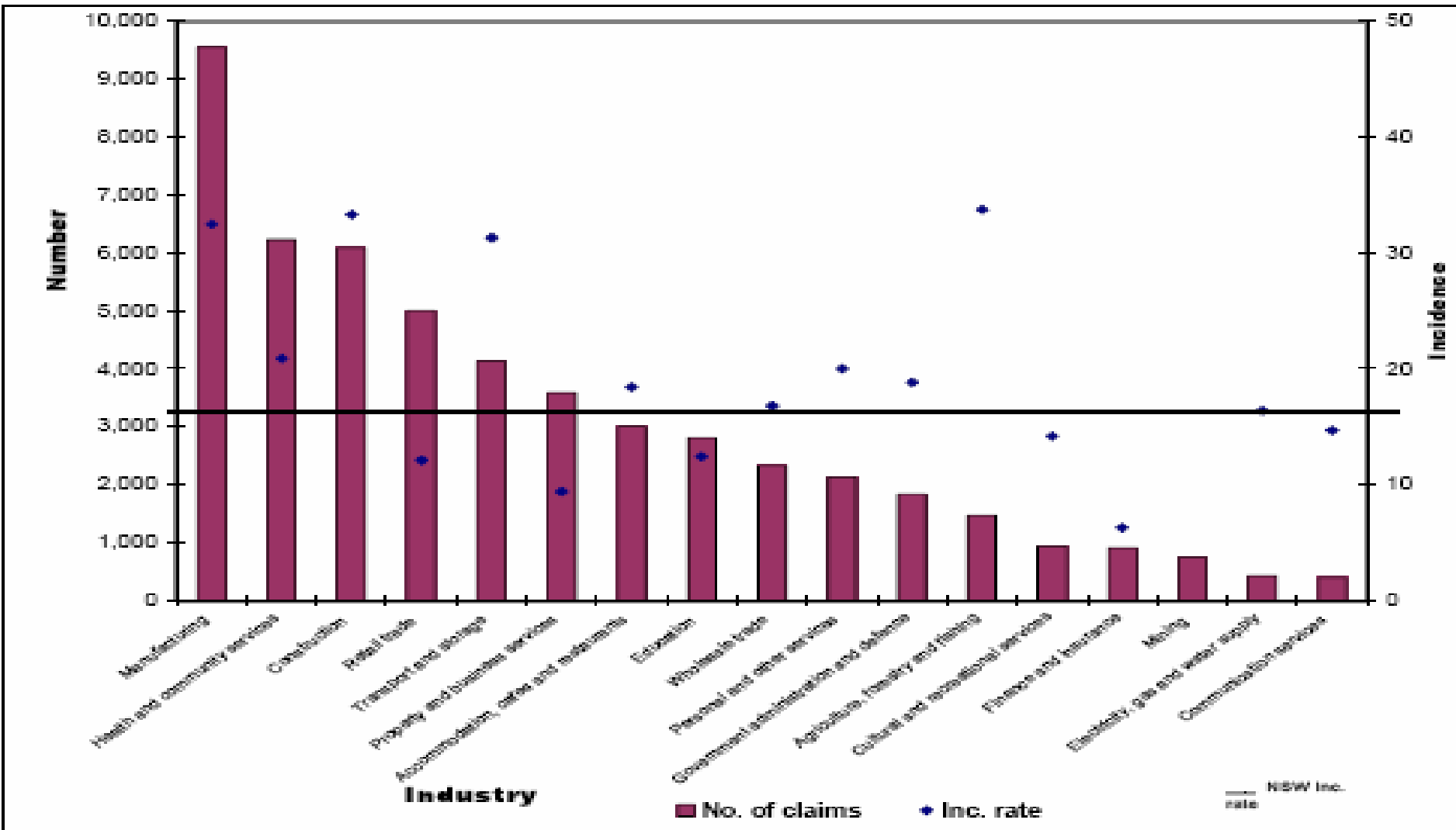
This presentation has been developed from a research project that aimed to increase understanding of the safety culture of subcontractors in the domestic housing segment of the construction industry



# Why Bother?

WorkCover (NSW) statistics state that the number and incidence of injuries in the construction industry are very high – twice as high as the all industry average

**Figure 5: Number and incidence rate by industry 2003/04**



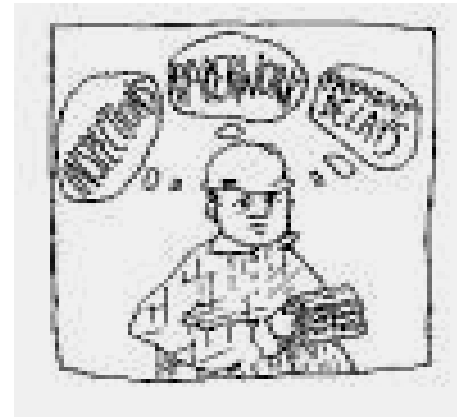
# Subcontractors

1. However, these figures only apply to workers who are covered by the worker's compensation system. Subcontractors and contractors fall outside of this system.
2. Research demonstrates that subcontracting correlates with negative health and safety outcomes for these types of workers.
3. The housing segment of the construction industry is mainly comprised of subcontractors
4. Anecdotal evidence gathered by the researcher before this research project began suggested that many subcontractors are resisting efforts to enforce OHS requirements



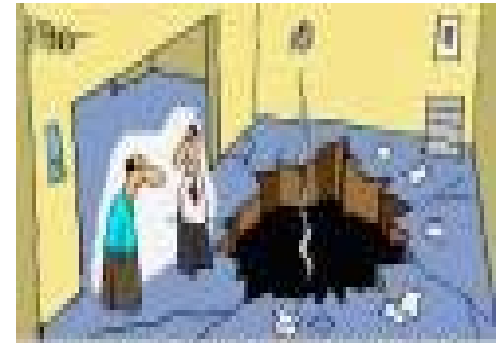
# Reasons for resistance to OHS

- Modern OHS legislation for the construction industry puts an emphasis on paperwork, and traditionally paperwork has not been one of the skills required to build houses
- Many subcontractors are unclear on what exactly the new OHS requirements are
- WorkCover inspectors often have a reputation for fining people unreasonably
- Many perceived requirements are considered unfair, impractical, ineffective, and failing to address the subcontractors real safety concerns



# Paperwork

- 1. The OHS Regulation details the following paperwork requirements for the construction industry:**
  - Project safety management plans
  - Safe work method statements
  - General, work activity, and site inductions, and records kept for these
  - Risk assessments
  - Log books for certain plant
  - Material safety data sheets and registers for all hazardous substances
- 2. The new National Code of Practice for Construction Work adds more detail and specific requirements, with a focus on paperwork.**



*"Apparently Johnson's desk just couldn't withstand the weight of the paperwork we piled on his desk."*



*"Excuse me, Mr. Johnson, but there's someone here who wants to know if you'd mind having some paperwork left with you to go over."*

# However

- The construction industry has low barriers to entry and many people enter the industry with relatively low education levels
- Up to 60% of subcontractors have no formal trade qualification
- The numeracy and literacy levels of construction workers are considerably poorer than those of the Australian workforce in general
- Tradespeople learn how to do a job and use their tools, they don't learn how to write about how they do it
- Documents are fixed and inflexible, whereas a successful subcontractor constantly makes decisions and judgements about non routine situations.

# Consequently:

Many feign compliance by using “off the shelf” or generic documents, without putting in any personal thought.

That is, many possess the paperwork in case a person in ‘authority’ wants to look at it. However, it often bears little resemblance to the way they perform their job.

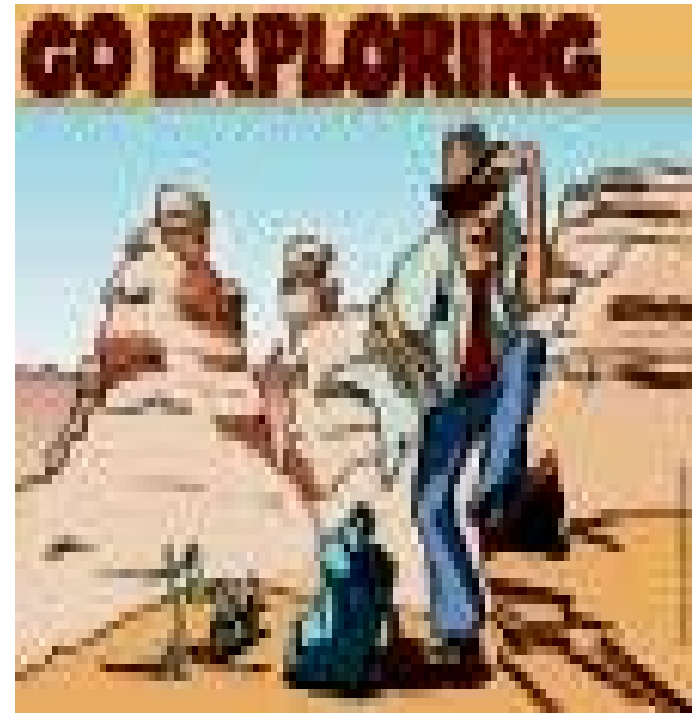


# Construction Workplace Culture

- The construction workplace culture is based on doing and not writing about doing
- Construction workers produce tangible articles
- Work must be practical and effective
- It is spread among workers through oral stories and is almost completely devoid of documented cultural material
- Many construction workers left school early because they did not like school, which is based on theory, and entered the construction industry because it is based on practice

# Research design

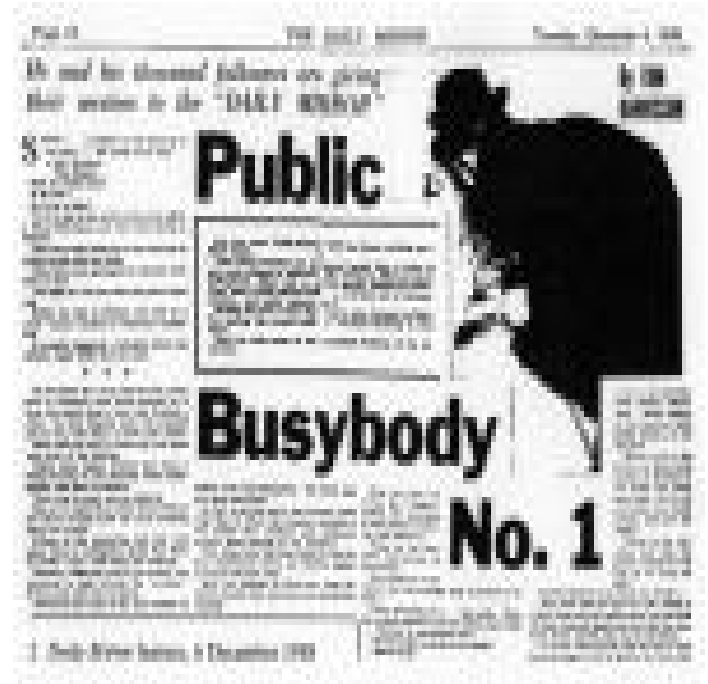
- The main purpose of this study was exploratory because there has been little research conducted to understand how building subcontractors construct their safety knowledge and practice



# Research design

## THEREFORE:

- It was decided to use an ethnographic method from the qualitative paradigm.
- Ethnography is considered as very suitable for understanding cultures, especially in the absence of current knowledge and/or theory



# Data Collection

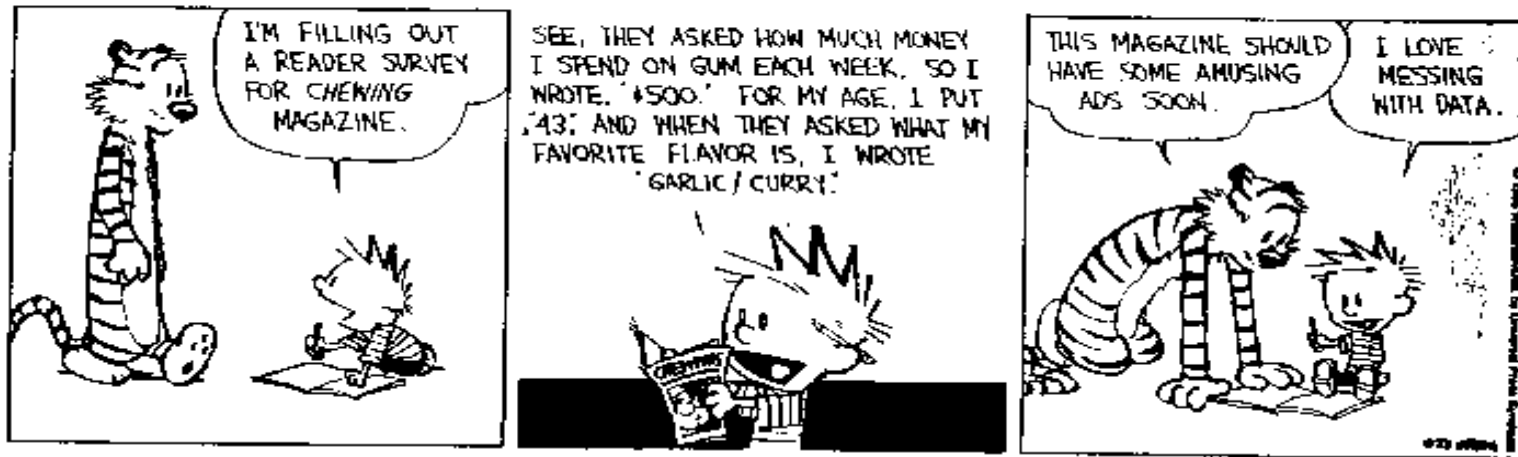
Data was collected through a combination of:

- Oral survey of 150 course participants
- Participant observation
- In-depth semi structured interviews with 11 subcontractors from 6 different trades
- Investigator diaries
- Document analysis

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

## and its limitations

### CALVIN and HOBBS

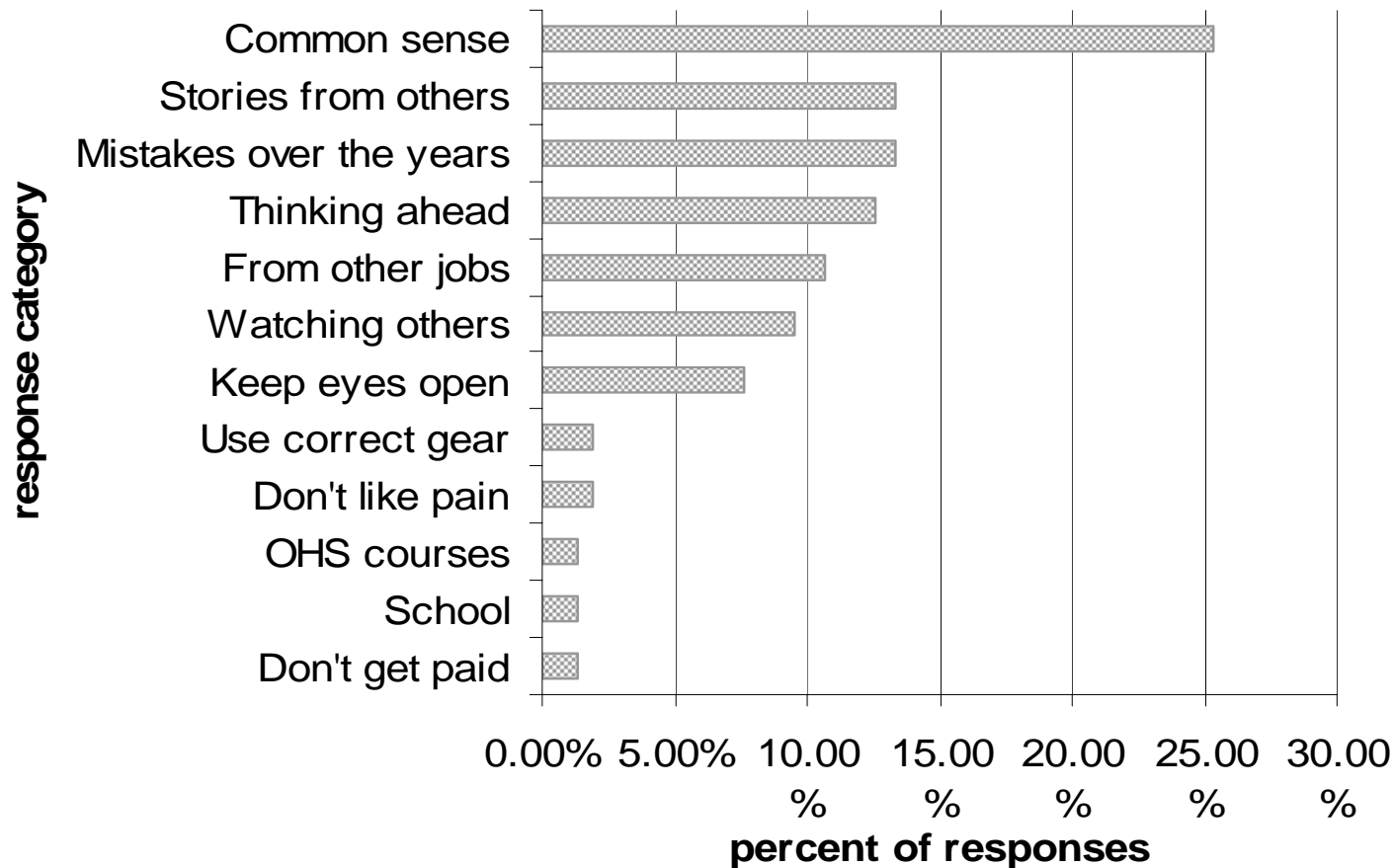


### HAGAR the Horrible

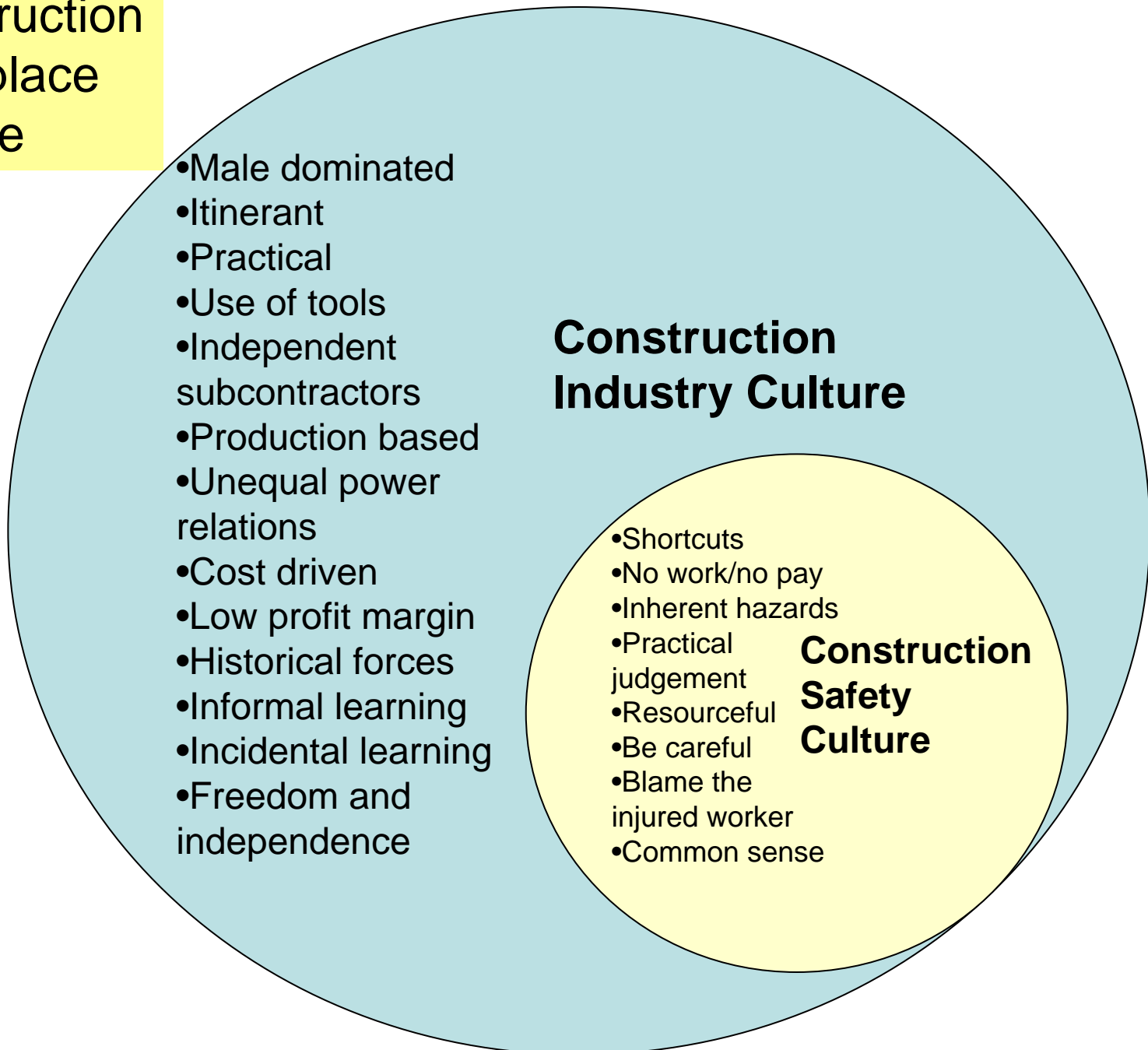


# Results: Survey

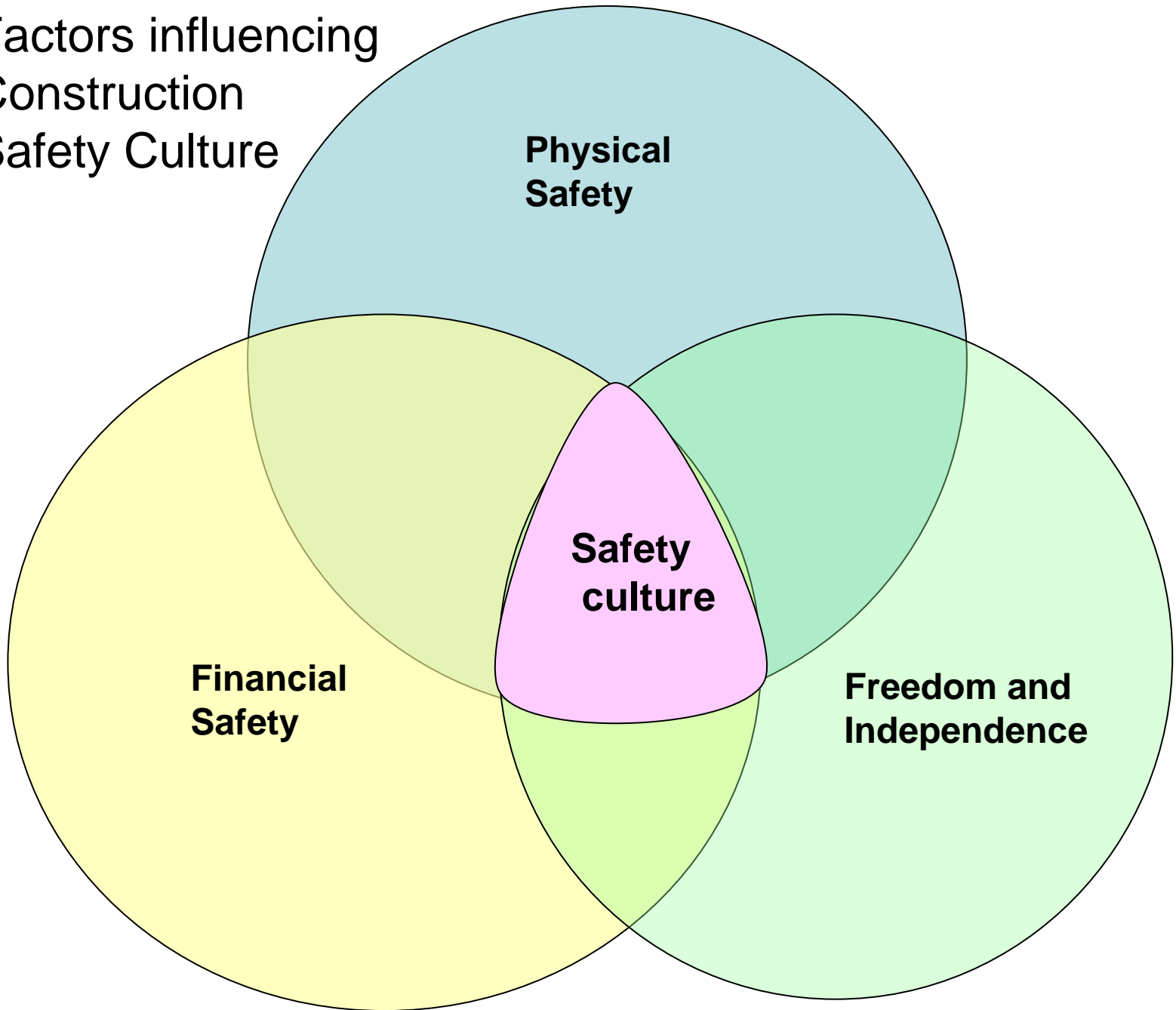
**Table 1. Responses to the question: 'How did you learn to work safely?'**



# Construction Workplace Culture



Factors influencing  
Construction  
Safety Culture



**Physical  
Safety**

**Financial  
Safety**

**Freedom and  
Independence**

**Safety  
culture**

# Attitudes, sentiments and opinions

- Paperwork is irrelevant and ineffective: many find ways to 'be seen to comply'
- WorkCover's enforcement strategies are ridiculous, unfair and inappropriate and cost subcontractors their time and money
- OHS courses are a 'waste of time'
- OHS is neither practical nor effective (which are the two cornerstones of working successfully in the industry)

# Safety concerns as perceived by subcontractors

- Repetitive movements
- Constant manual handling
- Poor organisation of the construction process
- Time and money pressures
- Poor coordination/communication between trades
- Unclear areas of responsibility
- Noisy/dusty working environment

# Safety knowledge

There are 3 layers of safety knowledge in the construction industry:

1. The individual's knowledge of how to do their own job safely – most subcontractors believe that they possess this kind of knowledge. It consists of them being competent workers who know how to do their job and use their tools properly. Safe working is integral to how they do their job.

2. Shared understandings of how to work together across those trades. All agreed that this area needs to be improved

3. This third layer is now imposed by WorkCover and exists outside the subcontractors lived experiences. It is being forcibly thrust onto them by a bureaucracy whose power is based on threat of force rather than perceived legitimate safety knowledge.

# Struggle for Power

- The effectiveness of OHS implementation is being compromised as it turns into a struggle for perceived power over the workers body
- Rather than being seen as the protector of the health and safety of the workers, WorkCover is being seen as the powerful bureaucracy representing such people as insurance companies.
- OHS is understood to represent the ulterior motive of making profits for people who have nothing to do with the production – construction process

**•Subcontractors safety knowledge has been forged during the process of performing construction work.**

**•It is embedded in the bodies of the workers and constituted within the construction site.**

**•The building site is a space and place of significant cultural heritage.**

**•Many important aspects of these workers identities have been forged here.**



# What can be done?

## What are the loci of change?

1. Address issues at the design stage (the new National Standard for Construction Work is doing this, although it is not adopted as law).
2. Integrate 'soft skills' training into courses for builders (who control most of the construction process): that is, communication, planning, organising, leading, motivating, conflict resolution and so on.
3. Integrate soft skills training for subcontractors: such as communication, planning, organising, conflict resolution and ethics
4. Design workplace based training for builders and subcontractors. Engage participants in discursive critical reflection about what they actually do at work. Use and validate their knowledge, skills and experience
5. This training could be integrated into the NSW Dept of Fair Trading's licence renewal scheme in which subcontractors have to accumulate a certain number of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points each year for their contractor's licence to be renewed.