

# Irish and Non-Irish National Construction Workers

Is there really a difference?

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This is a summary of Health and Safety Authority (HSA) research which examined the root causes of the high proportion of accidents involving non-Irish national workers in construction. The research was designed to inform HSA activities, as well as provide useful information to employers.

Most differences between Irish and non-Irish national workers' work behaviour and their approach to health and safety are because, as two groups of workers, they are very different (in terms of age, experience, job type etc.), rather than because of anything to do with their nationality per se.

The research involved surveys of 200 construction companies and 600 workers (300 of whom were non-Irish nationals) across Ireland, as well as in-depth interviews with 30 non-Irish national workers.

Construction employers were identified using the HSA database and a business listings facility. Participating companies completed a short survey over the phone and were asked to give permission for a researcher to go on site to survey workers. 29 different sites were visited in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. On site, workers were asked to complete a short written survey (provided in a range of languages). In addition, contacts with intermediary groups and community organisations were used to identify 'hard to reach' workers to take part in in-depth face to face interviews (for which translators were available).

Employers felt that non-Irish national workers generally pay attention to health and safety, and most employers (70%) felt that the attention of non-Irish national workers to health and safety was as good, if not better than Irish workers.

Employers felt that non-Irish national workers understand spoken English relatively well, but do less well in terms of understanding written English. Those from smaller firms (ie those with fewer than 10 employees) were more positive both about non-Irish national workers' language skills and their attention to health and safety. When asked specifically to discuss why statistics at that time showed higher rates of injury amongst non-Irish national workers, employers often put this down to these workers having a worse *understanding* of health and safety issues, potentially due to differences in the safety culture of Ireland when compared to their home countries.

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Employer ratings of how well non-Irish national workers pay attention to health and safety on site



Source: IES survey of construction employers for the HSA, 2008, N = 200

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Compared to their Irish counterparts in our sample, non-Irish national workers tended to be younger, newer to the industry, more likely to be working in skilled trades having left education later, and to be working on civil rather than domestic projects. It is likely that some of these factors are, in themselves, related to accidents and risk taking behaviour.

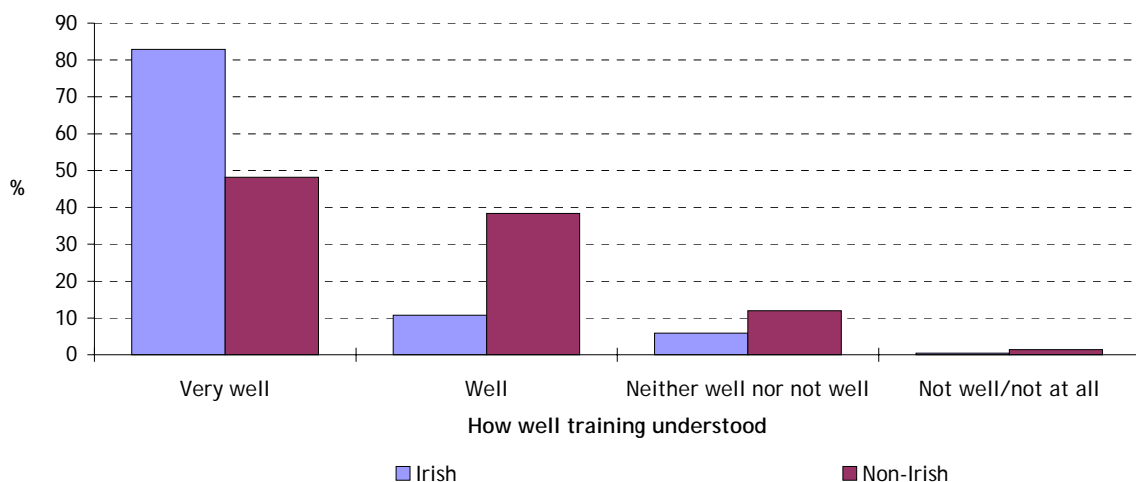
It is not possible to draw conclusions about the whole of the construction industry in Ireland based on the results in this sample. However, our results do raise some questions about whether differences in the behaviour of Irish and non-Irish national workers are really due to their nationality, or just reflect differences between the groups in relation to other factors such as age, education or project type.

Almost all workers (97%) have completed Safe Pass training, but a third of non-Irish national workers had received only this mandatory training whilst in Ireland. Despite being surveyed on the same sites, non-Irish national workers were less likely to receive site inductions and toolbox talks than Irish workers, and they gave lower ratings for their understanding of the training they had received.

Despite being surveyed on the same sites, there were other differences in who received training. For example, self-employed workers and those working for larger companies were the most likely to have received a site induction. Most non-Irish national workers felt that the training they had received in Ireland was the same quality or better than any they had received in their home countries.

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Workers' rating of their understanding of the training they received in Ireland




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Source: IES survey of construction workers for the HSA, 2008, N = 600

The attitudes of workers towards their bosses and colleagues were very similar across both Irish and non-Irish national workers.

One in five of all workers in the sample felt that their bosses might prefer them **not** to stop work even if their health and safety was at risk, just under one in three admitted that they sometimes feel pressure to work unsafely, and around a quarter would feel uncomfortable raising a health and safety concern. Non-Irish national workers were, however, more likely to feel that they weren't always provided with the personal protective equipment they needed. The two groups were similar in terms of how comfortable they would feel asking for help from co-workers.

Irish and non-Irish national workers rated their knowledge of health and safety law in Ireland about the same.

Non-Irish national workers were less likely to feel that some health and safety procedures weren't really practical. This may be linked to the fact that older workers tend to feel health and safety procedures are impractical (non-Irish national workers were, on average, younger than the Irish workers in our sample). Non-Irish national workers were marginally more likely to feel that health and safety wasn't important in the construction industry in Ireland.

Non-Irish national workers were more likely than their Irish peers to attribute accidents to events within their control, rather than attributing them to events over which they have no control.

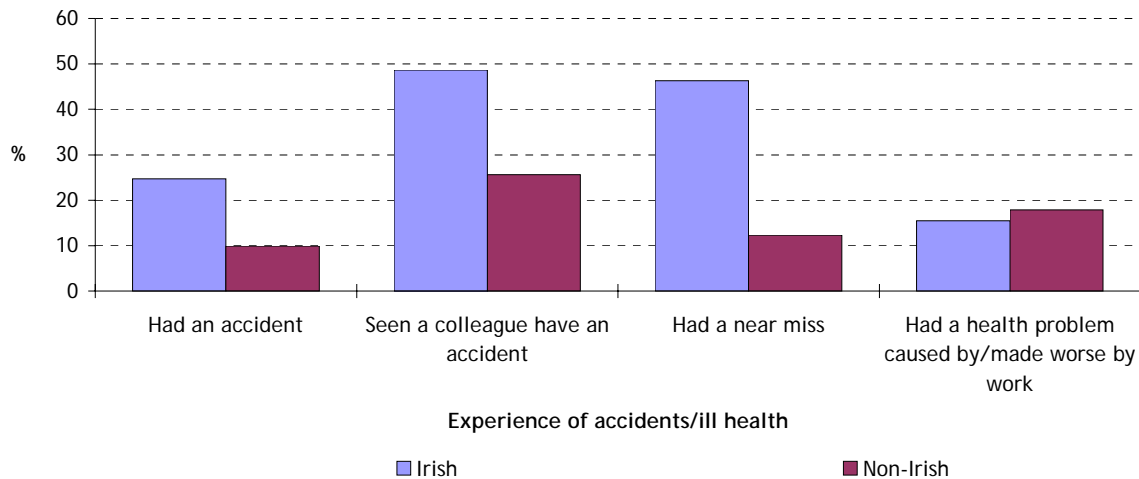
Non-Irish national workers were less likely to believe that having an accident was an inevitable part of working in the construction industry. Around two-thirds of both Irish and non-Irish national workers felt that accidents were usually caused by unsafe equipment and poor safety rules.

Non-Irish national workers were, on the whole, less likely to recognise situations as high risk and more likely to report that they engaged in risk taking behaviour (in relation to risks such as working at height and manual handling).

One exception was that non-Irish national workers were less tolerant of risks posed by moving vehicles. The responses of Polish workers in relation to risk perceptions and safety behaviour were more like their Irish peers than other non-Irish nationals.

Non-Irish national workers tended to be highly satisfied with their working conditions, and rated health and safety in Ireland as good or better than in their home country. Those in our sample also had less experience of accidents whilst working in Ireland than their Irish co-workers.

Worker's experiences of accidents/ill health whilst working in Ireland



Source: IES survey of construction workers for the HSA, 2008, N = 600

When we take out the effects of factors like age, education, site size, employment status, and attitudes towards risk, most differences in the experiences and behaviour between Irish and non-Irish national workers disappear. So, there doesn't seem to be a particular effect of nationality in relation to health and safety issues.

Both groups of workers, once everything else was held constant, were equally likely to have had:

- an accident
- ill-health caused or made worse by work.

Factors that seem to be important in predicting accidents and ill-health include:

- size of site – accidents being more likely on larger sites
- type of project – accidents and near misses are less likely on civil projects
- training – accidents are less likely for those who received off-site training
- English language – those studying English are less likely to have accidents or near misses.

Most risk taking behaviour could also be explained by factors other than nationality, but non-Irish national workers did have a greater propensity to take some risks related to working at height and manual handling.

## The experiences of non-Irish national workers - in their own words

### Coming to Ireland:

*'He left Poland, as everyone leaves Poland, for better payment, better work, better conditions. He has family here – they helped him.'* (through an interpreter)

### On working hours:

*'Sometimes when it's very short time to finish the contract and there is not too much done already, you know everyday is busy, busy, so they're working longer, or like seven days a week you know because boss he want to finish the job.'*

### On using English:

*'They're trying to help and explain so most of the time they're speaking very slowly and clearly, they want to be sure you understand.'*

*'It would be difficult if there wouldn't be no Polish guys round me, but another side is if you're working with Polish people you're going lazy, you don't want to learn English because there is no point.'*

*'He finds himself limited by the fact that he doesn't speak English and he finds it kind of embarrassing and ashamed so very often instead of asking a question ... he prefers to think you know and figure himself ... the last thing if he really has to would be to go to the foreman.'* (through an interpreter)

### On work risks:

*'If you're not focused on your job, actually everything can put you at risk. If you're not using protective equipment, if you're not looking ... use the proper ladder.'*

*'Here employers are much more strict about complying with the training legislation. In Slovakia bosses don't worry so much.'*

### On bosses:

*'He was rushing us. You can feel like he wants to be done more every day, like. It is not about me because I am Polish, all of us.'*

*'He's a good man never scream for me if I do something wrong. He explain me everything. He's the best boss what I have.'*

### Ideas for the future:

*'I think employers they should do something for example sending people for courses of English.'*

*'Maybe start employing Polish people with good English for positions like manager of the site, or maybe there should be let's say Irish manager and Polish manager.'*

## Main points

The experiences of non-Irish national workers in construction vary greatly. There are as many differences in experiences, attitudes and behaviours amongst this group of workers as there is in any other.

The overall experiences of non-Irish national workers in Ireland are positive, but there are exceptions. Employers do appear to be making allowances in how they communicate on site to take account of the needs of non-Irish national workers, but they tend to offer less in the way of specific health and safety training.

Poor English language skills can cause problems and in such cases workers may not feel able to ask questions or raise concerns.

The research suggests that there are non-Irish national workers who are struggling with spoken/written English, but employers don't always know about this. Only half of non-Irish national workers had ever actually studied English. Translation support (eg through colleagues) is often available, but in emergency situations workers with poorer English could be at greater risk.

Non-Irish national workers tend to get less training on site and don't always understand the need for training.

There is little formal training available to many non-Irish national workers beyond Safe Pass. Some workers are managing to get work without taking Safe Pass. Places on courses in other languages are not always available in time for individuals to get straight to work. This means that workers may be taking the course in English even when they don't understand it, and therefore not really getting much out of this minimum training.

Experiences of job insecurity/poor economic conditions in their home countries can affect how non-Irish national workers behave. They may feel less able to question unsafe practices or more likely to take on risky jobs when asked.

Non-Irish national workers are less likely to perceive some risky behaviours as high risk, and are more likely to engage in them more often. This stems in part from a different approach to health and safety in non-Irish nationals' home countries. In addition, some non-Irish nationals are prepared to take short cuts or work quickly in order to increase their earnings.

**Are there really differences between Irish and non-Irish national workers?** Yes, but these can generally be explained by factors other than a worker's nationality. However, when non-Irish national workers have poor English language skills or are vulnerable for other reasons, they can be at increased risk.

## Recommendations for employers

The research indicates that there are some key things that employers could do, such as:

- **Ensure that non-Irish national workers are getting at least the same training as Irish workers.** Non-Irish national workers should, as a minimum be offered equivalent levels of training as their Irish colleagues.
- **Think about whether you should offer more/different training to non-Irish national workers.** Whilst these workers might not put themselves forward for training opportunities, many would benefit from training which specifically addressed their need for translation, and/or differences in safety culture between Ireland with their home country. Tailoring site inductions and toolbox talks to the needs of your non-Irish national workers could be a useful start. Check with workers, however, that the training they do get is useful for them and be prepared to make changes when it isn't.
- **Look carefully at how well you demonstrate your commitment to health and safety to non-Irish national workers.** Have you made it clear to non-Irish national workers that risk taking behaviour is not acceptable, even when they don't speak English very well? Do you specifically check to ensure that non-Irish national workers have, or are given, all the equipment they need to do the job safely?
- **Consider how a worker with poor English language skills could practically raise any problems or concerns they might have.** How exactly can non-Irish national workers ask questions on your site/s? Have you put in place any way that they can talk to someone senior, either directly or indirectly through bi-lingual colleagues?
- **Ensure that non-Irish national workers understand the main risks on site, and the ways that they can protect themselves.** Have you looked at how well they understand what is acceptable on your sites/s in terms of, for example, working at height and manual handling?

Basically, this research has found that **nationality alone is not a risk factor** for accident and injury. Employers cannot, therefore, blame their nationality when things go wrong for non-Irish national workers. It is actually down to employers to make sure that their actions do not put workers at unnecessary risk by:

- what they ask workers to do
- how long workers are given to do things
- a lack of concern for any difficulties that non-Irish national workers might have in understanding Irish safety culture or English language.



## Find out more

You can download the full report for this study, as well as this short summary for employers from:

[www.hsa.ie/eng/Statistics/Research\\_Series/Construction/](http://www.hsa.ie/eng/Statistics/Research_Series/Construction/)

## About the Health and Safety Authority

The HSA is working to create a national culture of excellence in workplace safety, health and welfare for Ireland. They are the state sponsored body with responsibility for securing safety, health and welfare at work, and operates under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Working in partnership with employers and employees, it is the HSA's responsibility to ensure that safety and health in the workplace is a key priority for everyone.

See [www.hsa.ie/eng/](http://www.hsa.ie/eng/) for more details.

## About the Institute for Employment Studies

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) undertook this research on behalf of the HSA. The Institute for Employment Studies is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and organisational human resource issues. It works closely with employers in the manufacturing, service and public sectors, government departments, agencies, and professional and employee bodies. For 40 years the Institute has been a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and human resource planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation which has over 60 multidisciplinary staff and international associates. IES expertise is available to all organisations through research, consultancy, publications and the Internet.

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