

## IS IT SAFE TO...BE A 'MAN'?

Contrary to what the title may lead you to believe, I'm not about to launch into a 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus' rant about the gender divide. This is more a discussion about some interesting research I managed to stumble upon.

Dean Laplonge, a researcher from Western Australia's Curtin University, has spent two years looking at gender behaviours and safety in the mining industry, with a particular focus on men and masculinity.

Earlier this year he told *ABC Radio*, in country WA, about a link between the way men on mine sites behave and think – as men – and their safety outcomes, which the research has revealed.

Laplonge argues that the blokey culture in male dominated industries, such as mining, impacts workplace safety. He also warned against certain safety strategies with short-term outcomes, such as behavioural safety observations, as a way of improving safety on mine sites.

"What happens is a man, or a woman, working in the mining industry can be observed doing their job and then they get some feedback – hopefully constructive feedback around how they might do it safer," he told *ABC Radio*. "These are proven to be very popular because they give short-term outcomes or short-term improvements in safety.

"But I think what happens is that it creates a system of surveillance, so once I'm there and being watched I will perform a certain way.

"What happens on a mine site when those observations are not taking place, or in the middle of the night for example, can be completely different."

He said it's better to get men to try to understand what the impact of the way they see themselves as 'a man' has on their safety outcomes.

"As men, right from birth, we're encouraged to participate in at-risk behaviour...because that's what shows us to be a real man and it continues into the workforce," he continued.

He urges mining companies to drop the tough "hard-yakka" workplace image and look at their HR practices and policies, but in particular at their recruitment strategies – down to the way that they advertise for staff and the images they use, so as to not perpetuate the gender culture that would have a negative effect on safety.

However, as most of you reading this are well aware, mining at the coalface is tough, hard work. You put in long hours, you get dirty and you need to be physically and mentally fit. All of this sounds very blokey to me! So if mining

companies were to drop this image, would it make finding workers more difficult? Laplonge believes it won't.

He also urged mining companies not to stick their employees in a classroom to drill in rules and regulations – but rather get together with them at the coalface to explain rules and regulations and work alongside them to gather information about the way that they work and encourage discussion about certain workplace policies.

"We want to get the group talking amongst themselves, to give them the language, to give them the tools, to have these real complex debates around being a man and what it means to be a man in that space right now, surrounded by all the machinery, surrounded by all the dirt..."

"Men in general are encouraged not to worry about safety, in fact quite the opposite, we're encouraged that if we take risks and if we come through those risks unscathed, we're the hero, we're a true man.

"The culture is actually saying to us quite the opposite of what the safety narrative is saying."

You can listen to the full interview online here: [http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rural/wa/countryhour/click\\_here\\_m1975346.mp3](http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rural/wa/countryhour/click_here_m1975346.mp3)

I would be very interested to hear your thoughts on Laplonge's research. How safe is it to be 'a man'? What, if anything, can be done about the blokey culture in Australia's mining industry?

In this issue of the *Australasian Mine Safety Journal* we speak with CEO of Safety Action Pty Ltd, Gary Rowe, about zero harm, safety culture and Australia's shifting OHS landscape.

Safety psychologist David Broadbent explores risk tolerance.

We feature the issue of fatigue and workplace safety, as Dr Murray Johns attempts to clarify the difference between drowsiness and fatigue, and Dr Angela Baker and Madeline Sprajcer argue that the interaction between responsible employees and a successful and efficient Fatigue Risk Management System is vital for the effective control of risk.

Steve McLeod discusses key preparations to prevent confined space fatalities within the mining industry.

Norman Jennings writes about health management and says putting the "H" back

into Occupational Health and Safety means working systematically towards the prevention of foreseeable harm arising from identified health hazards.

Laurie Glossop says there is a 'tsunami' of hazardous substances/chemicals information and regulation occurring around the world and it is coming to Australia.

Phillip Byard discusses permanent injury in the workplace and says for zero harm to be achieved we must give vehicle operators a smooth ride.

Finally, we count down to this year's Asia-Pacific's International Mining Exhibition (AIMEX), which will be the largest mining exhibition ever held in Australia.

I would be very interested to hear your thoughts on Dean Laplonge's break-through research and on the mine safety issues featured inside this edition, so please drop me a line at: [editor@aprs.com.au](mailto:editor@aprs.com.au) or follow me on Twitter: @KathrynEdwards.

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