

Newsletter

Productivity in Construction



Productivity has become one of construction's biggest talking points and rightly so. Rising costs, tighter margins, labour shortages and increasing pressure on delivery mean every hour onsite matters more than ever before. Projects are expected to move faster, budgets are under greater scrutiny and everyone is being asked to do more with less. So when productivity comes up, the conversation usually turns in a familiar direction. Better systems. Better software. Better technology and while all of those things have a role to play, I have often found myself thinking that perhaps we are still starting in the wrong place.

After more than sixteen years working as an electrician, I do not believe construction's biggest productivity issue has ever been that people are not working hard enough. In my experience, the overwhelming majority of people onsite take real pride in what they do. They want to do a proper job. They want to go home feeling like they achieved something. The problem is not that construction lacks hardworking people. The problem is that hardworking people are too often expected to work against unnecessary obstacles.

The Real Problem

Too many days in construction begin the same way. Early start. Long drive. Arrive onsite ready to work. Then find out the materials have not arrived, the drawings have changed, another trade is behind or a decision still has not been made. By that point, productivity has already been lost long before anybody picks up a tool. That is why I have gradually changed how I think about the whole conversation. I no longer believe productivity is mainly about getting more from people. I believe it is about removing the things that stop people giving their best in the first place.

Whenever organisations talk about productivity, the focus usually turns towards output. How can we build faster. How can we recover time. How can we get more done but perhaps the better question is not how we can make people work harder. Perhaps it is what stops good people from doing good work in the first place. In my experience, the answer is very rarely laziness. More often, it is friction. Poor communication. Delayed decisions. Weak planning. Constant disruption. The same worker can look highly productive on one site and constantly delayed on another and the difference usually comes down to the environment around them.

When Delay Becomes Pressure

That is one of the biggest frustrations in construction. A lost morning becomes a rushed afternoon. Somebody else's delay quietly becomes everybody else's emergency.

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The pressure shifts towards the people on the tools, even when the original issue had nothing to do with them. Can you move quicker. Can you stay later. Can you recover the time but it was never their time to lose in the first place. That is not productivity. That is recovery culture.

Over the years I have lost count of the number of times a day has been thrown off course before it even properly began. Materials missing. Approvals delayed. Work areas not ready. Information changed too late. None of those things happen because the workforce lacks effort. They happen because friction has been allowed to build into the system and once that happens the burden usually lands on the same people at the end of the chain. That is where so much wasted time, frustration and pressure really comes from.

Leadership Sets the Tone

This is why I do not believe productivity starts with the workforce. I believe it starts with leadership. Good leaders do not just manage people. They remove obstacles. They create clarity, make timely decisions and reduce uncertainty before it reaches the people doing the work. They understand that productivity is shaped long before the first task begins, in planning, procurement, communication and the choices made before anyone even arrives onsite.

The best projects I have worked on were often the calmest, not because people cared less and not because standards were lower, but because the planning was better, communication happened earlier and problems were dealt with before they turned into chaos. When people are not constantly firefighting, they have far more time and energy to focus on producing quality work. That is where real productivity comes from.

People Perform Better in the Right Environment

Mental wellbeing matters here too. Stress, fatigue, burnout and constant pressure all affect concentration, communication and decision-making. Construction still has a habit of normalising exhaustion as if it is simply part of the job but tired people do not perform at their best, and burnt-out teams do not work at their best. If the industry is serious about improving productivity, then it cannot treat wellbeing as a separate conversation.

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People perform better when they feel supported, when expectations are realistic and when the environment around them allows them to focus on doing the job properly rather than constantly firefighting problems that should have been prevented.

Maybe the real question is not how we get more from people. Maybe the better question is what keeps good people from doing good work because construction has never lacked hardworking people. What it has too often lacked are the conditions that allow those people to perform at their best.

The Onward Shift Perspective

At Onward Shift, we believe better outcomes in construction do not come from simply applying more pressure to already stretched people. They come from better leadership, clearer communication, healthier cultures and working environments where people can actually perform properly. The real secret to improving productivity in construction has never been about asking people to work harder. It has always been about removing the things that stop good people doing good work.

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