

## Multicultural workplaces: A state of the art study of the Norwegian construction industry

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**ABSTRACT:** A multi-method case study, including interviews, a survey and participatory observations, was undertaken to describe opportunities and challenges related to multicultural workplaces in the Norwegian construction industry, and the consequences for occupational safety, working environment and work performance. The findings show that challenges related to language and cultural differences are the most common, and that employment relationships and duration of relations have proven to affect many of the challenges. Consequences due to challenges related to language and culture were found more prominent for working environment and work performance than for safety. The focus on opportunities is limited and the potential is not fully exploited. Measures implemented to improve the conditions at multicultural workplaces mainly focus on solving the challenges and mitigating the consequences in a short-term perspective. A more future-oriented focus is needed, including measures that may lead to long-term gains for the industry.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

With the free flow of labour in most of Europe, companies in Norway are experiencing potential for innovation and effectiveness, but also some challenges. In the Norwegian construction industry, it is estimated that around one-third of the work force are migrant workers (BNL, 2017). This paper discusses the opportunities and challenges found in a study on multicultural workplaces in the Norwegian construction industry which was conducted between August 2016 and August 2017 (Kilskar et al., 2017).

The study was carried out to bring more knowledge on how internationalisation influences the working environment and safety in the construction industry, including culture, management, attitudes, expectations, communication and behaviour amongst both workers and their employers.

The overall objective of the study was to enable organisations and businesses in the Norwegian construction industry to work systematically in improving performance and productivity through good working environment, collaboration and increased safety at multicultural workplaces. An

important aspect has been to not only look for problems and challenges at multicultural workplaces, but also to find the potential benefits of having a multicultural working environment.

The study aimed at solving three research questions:

1. What are typical characteristics, strengths and challenges related to safety and working environment by using multicultural labour in the construction industry?
2. How do challenges related to multicultural work force influence safety, working environment and work performance?
3. What measures exist and are proposed by the construction industry to create good multicultural workplaces?

#### 1.1 Concepts and definitions

*Construction* can be used as a collective term for more sectors. In Norway, the construction industry is divided mainly in the building sector (e.g. building houses, commercial buildings) and construction sector (e.g. construction of roads, railways).

This study was limited to the building sector; however, the term *construction* is used in this paper.

The study mainly focused on migrant workers from eastern Europe, but interviews were also conducted with workers from other nationalities to get a broad understanding of multicultural workplaces in the construction industry. In this study, *eastern European workers* are defined to include nationalities from countries in the old Eastern-Block (i.e. former Soviet countries; Bulgaria, Czech Rep., Hungary, Poland and the Balkans). However, the large focus of the study was on workers from countries which joined the European Union (EU) in 2004; Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 *The Norwegian construction industry*

The construction industry is one of the fastest growing industries in Norway and it stands for approximately 12.5 percent of the Norwegian BNP. In 2016, the industry turnover reached 521.8 billion NOK, and the combined work force was at almost 235 thousand employees (SSB, 2017a). It is characterised by many small and medium sized companies, with union density lower than average in Norway (43 percent in the construction sector versus 54 percent for other industries in Norway) (Nergaard, 2016). The industry is project based with temporary organisations consisting of multiple actors, which are forming and dissolving with each project. The large companies account for a smaller share of the construction output.

Unemployment rates in Norway have been stable on a low level, which has resulted in a shortage of skilled workforce. Traditionally, the majority of Norwegian workers have been permanently hired, and possibilities for temporary employment are somewhat limited through the Norwegian Working Environment Act. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in use of temporary staffing agencies hiring migrant workers in the construction industry.

### 2.2 *Working environment and occupational safety in the construction industry*

The construction industry in Norway is one of the main-land industries in Norway with the highest number of fatal accidents. In 2016, 8 out of 45 work-related fatal accidents occurred within this industry (NLIA, 2017a). There has also been reported 5.8 accidents at work that resulted in prolonged absence from work per 1 000 employees in the construction industry, whereas the average for

other industries was 3.7 (SSB, 2017b). The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority (NLIA) focuses on controlling and guiding companies and workers in the construction industry, highlighting the importance of preventive measures.

### 2.3 *Migrant workforce*

With low unemployment rates and shortage of skilled workers, the enlargement of the EU in 2004 gave companies access to recruit migrant workers, while at the same time foreign service providers got access to the Norwegian construction market. Between 2007 and 2015, work has been the most common reason for immigration to Norway, followed by family reunions. The largest groups of immigrants are from Poland, Somalia and Lithuania (SSB, 2017). Many of the male immigrants that came to Norway from eastern Europe after 2004, came to work in the construction industry. The process was not free of tension, as the work migration led to many challenges concerning migrant workers' wages and working conditions, accommodation standards, undeclared work, examples of exploitation and so called "social dumping" (Dølvik et al., 2005).

One of the serious concerns is the question whether migrant workers are more prone to work related accidents, which previous research both abroad and in Norway suggests (NLIA, 2012; Salminen, 2011). To look further into the background of such numbers, a mixed approach was chosen with a focus on the qualitative studies.

## 3 METHODS

Triangulation was used to combine the advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods; collecting data through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations and a survey. Additionally, a literature study was performed by searching in Scopus and Google Scholar for scientific documentation prior the data collection. Further, searches on the internet were done for news-articles. Search words used were "multicultural workforce", "building/construction industry", "management" and "migrant workers". The focus was on Norwegian publications.

As workers from Poland constitute the largest group of migrant workers in Norway, this is also the nationality most represented in the interviews and observations.

### 3.1 *Interviews*

Interviews were undertaken with 35 persons in seven cases, each case being either a construction

project or a construction company. The majority of the informants were from Norway (17) and Poland (10), while the remaining (8), came from other countries; Germany, Denmark, Russia, Estonia, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. The interviewees were managers, work team leaders, safety deputies and workers (including hired labour and apprentices).

A semi-structured interview guide was developed in Norwegian, and questions were adjusted for managers, Norwegian workers and migrant workers. The interview guide was translated into Polish and English for interviews with workers, and to English for managers. As a quality assurance, the interview guide was discussed with persons from the construction industry, and a pilot study was performed.

The interview guide was divided into five sections. Section A included questions about the informants' background, views on safety and working environment in general, and general questions about migrant workers in Norway. Section B consisted of questions about characteristics, opportunities and challenges at multicultural workplaces. Section C dealt with implications of having multicultural work teams, e.g. communication and cooperation between workers and managers, management and follow-up at the worksite, and characteristics of good multicultural workplaces. In section D, the focus was on good practices and solutions for creation of good multicultural work places. Finally, section E included questions to summarise the interview.

Interviewees were identified by the Federation of Norwegian Construction Industries (BNL). Factors addressed in the selection process of the interviewees were persons from different companies, disciplines, countries, and according to geography in Norway. Additionally, size of the project/company was one criterion. The projects where the interviewees worked varied from being small projects to large housing complexes.

The interviews were performed in the period from November 2016 to May 2017.

### 3.2 Observations

To verify data from the interviews, participatory observations were conducted at two construction sites over a period of three weeks. BNL facilitated contact with observation objects. The field work was performed by two anthropology students supervised by one of the project members. Two different methodological approaches were used; 1) observation with a high degree of participation in the daily work, supplemented with a limited number of interviews, 2) interviews, as well as observation, but less participation in the daily work.

The observations were important to gain knowledge about interactions and cooperation between Norwegian and migrant workers. The focus in the observations was on eastern European workers.

### 3.3 Survey

A survey was performed among managers in companies that are members of BNL.

The questionnaire was based on the results from the interviews and participatory observations, thus making it possible to lift the findings up to a general/national level. The questionnaire was based on the same topics as the interview guide (see 3.1).

A pilot test of the questionnaire was performed as a quality assurance of the content. BNL performed the submission of the questionnaire to the respondents electronically.

In total, 5 774 managers were invited by e-mail to answer the survey. 350 e-mails were returned because of "unknown recipients". Moreover, several persons replied and told they were not managers, but in the administrative or economical department. This was estimated to be about 870 persons. Finally, 886 persons in 562 distinct construction companies answered the survey, resulting in an approximate response rate of 19.5 percent for individual respondents and 21 percent for companies.

### 3.4 Limitations

BNL is a business and employer policy organisation for companies in the construction industry, and an umbrella organisation for 15 industries that organise a wide range of companies (in total over 4000 companies with nearly 70,000 employees). The companies range from the smallest companies to the largest in the industry including manufacturing companies, plumbers, carpenters, landscape gardeners, masons, painters and entrepreneurs (BNL, 2018). Most of BNL's branch associations have defined requirements for a company to apply for membership. The organisation advocates that Norwegian society should be built by serious, honest companies and that customers should be able to trust their suppliers.

Most of the companies that participated in the study were members of BNL. These companies are thought to be performing in a serious way, as well as ensuring health, safety and environment (HSE) according to regulations. This could have influenced the results.

The survey was directed only towards managers, since BNL has contact information only to managers and administrative personnel among their members.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show the importance of several factors for ensuring the working environment, cooperation and safety at construction sites. The main findings of the study are presented in the following.

### 4.1 *Differences between migrant and Norwegian workers*

The study looked at perceived differences between migrant and Norwegian workers. In many aspects, including skills, competence and quality of performed work, the differences were found to be minor. However, it was seen that groups of migrant workers and Norwegian workers often have different views on each other. In example, several of the Polish workers that were interviewed perceived themselves as more efficient and solution oriented than Norwegian workers. The Norwegian workers on the other hand, had the same perception, but in their own favour. This can be a source of misunderstandings as their perception differs. However, the survey showed that there is, in many aspects, a minor difference in how managers perceive Norwegian and migrant workers, respectively.

Even though there were many similarities between workers, one aspect appeared to be very different. When it comes to reporting of unwanted events there was a major difference between eastern European workers and Norwegian workers. The eastern European workers report fewer unwanted events and dangerous conditions. One reason the workers gave was that they do not wish to report on others to the management. These findings also coincide with previous research (Wasilkiewicz et al., 2016). However, these major differences were not found for all aspects related to safety. For compliance with safety regulations the results from the survey showed that the managers observe differences, however in much smaller degree than for reporting unwanted events.

Findings from the survey further shows that perceptions on migrant workers to a large degree depend on managers' experiences with migrant workforce. Managers from companies with permanently employed migrant workers were less critical towards migrant workers, than managers from companies without permanently employed migrant workers. As an example, the leaders were asked the following question: "To what degree do you experience that migrant workers do not comply with existing safety requirements (e.g. do not use required protection equipment)?" Nearly 44 percent of the respondents from companies with no permanently employed migrant workers answered this question with "to a large degree" or "to a very large

degree". The corresponding proportion among the respondents from companies that do have permanently employed migrant workers was only close to 23 percent. The interviews also supported this finding, as managers with a lot of experience with permanently hired migrant workers were the most positive when discussing this topic.

The perceptions of managers on migrant workers also appear to be somewhat influenced by the size of their respective companies, as managers in medium sized companies (which in the study was defined as companies with 22–51 employees) answered in more positive terms than the managers from smaller and larger companies did.

This shows that there are large individual differences between workers within a nationality, as well as individual differences between managers (e.g. their expectations and requirements) and their experiences with migrant workers, resulting in different opinions.

### 4.2 *Potential not fully exploited*

The interviewees were asked what Norwegian workers and managers and migrant workers can learn from each other. Additionally, it was looked at what the benefits are, related to having migrant workforce, as well as possible opportunities.

The opinions varied; some stated that there is nothing to learn, while others had examples of what they had learned. The opinions in large degree reflected personal experiences.

When Norwegian managers were asked about what they think is positive with migrant workers, their *flexibility* was accentuated, e.g. migrant workers' higher willingness to work overtime, stability in the workforce (e.g. not taking work days off due to sick children), and willingness to continue work to complete tasks before the day is over. According to the managers, these points were in large degree related to culture. However, they can also be related to other factors, such as the fact that many migrant workers have their families abroad, and therefore want to work as much as possible while they are in Norway. It is important to be aware that the described behaviour can also be related to power relations. Persons from different cultures can have different expectations and relations to managers (House et al., 2004; Warner-Söderholm, 2012a; 2012b), and thus perceive managers' requests, such as working over-time, as duties rather than options.

When it comes to learning potential in general, most Norwegian interviewees did not see that they could learn anything from the migrant workers, however several managers pointed out that Norwegian workers could take advantage of learning better *working moral* from the migrant workers and to be "less lazy". A few pointed out that migrant

workers could teach local workers other *working techniques* and vice versa.

Some of the migrant workers pointed out that they value the *characteristics of the Norwegian working life*, e.g. “calmness” and less stress, thinking things over before starting a work task, and that they could learn this from Norwegians both for work, as well as for their personal life.

The industry is not highly conscious of the benefits and learning opportunities, and utilisation of the potential that migrant workers might bring in. Earlier research shows that multicultural and diverse groups can be both more efficient and less efficient than groups consisting of one single culture (Adler & Gundersen, 2008, p. 140). Through good collaboration, multicultural teams can be more efficient and innovative than homogeneous teams. By sharing knowledge and having different perspectives and experiences, such teams can achieve better solutions for common problems.

From the free text field in the survey undertaken, an example was found of how the construction industry can benefit from the knowledge of migrant workers:

*“Migrant workers and Norwegians have discussed product alternatives from abroad (...) with the consequence that products or alternative products are being imported from abroad now. (...) This resulted in economic benefits in the company because of a better calculation of the price, and often easier handling in production (a win-win situation for workers and the company)”. (Survey respondent).*

Migrant workers in the construction industry represent a larger resource than what is being utilised. The full utilisation of their potential is often prevented by poor linguistic skills (in Norwegian or English) and insufficient recognition of their formal competence from abroad.

#### 4.3 Challenges affected by employment relationships and duration of relations

Results from the interviews, the participant observations, as well as the survey indicate that language is the most common challenge related to multicultural workplaces. The Norwegian informants did, however, consider this more of a problem than many of the migrant workers did. Shortage in Norwegian skilled workforce is part of the issue, as illustrated by the following response when asked whether speaking Norwegian should be an absolute request:

*“Yes, I believe so. It is, however, hard to get hold of enough people. Finding a man who knows both the language and how to do the job is not easy”. (Eastern European work team leader).*

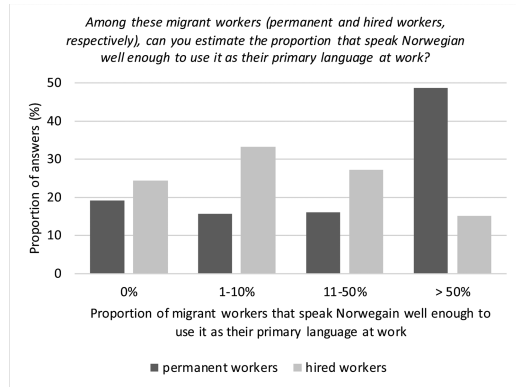


Figure 1. Distribution of manager's answers regarding linguistic skills among their permanent and hired migrant workers.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of managers' answers regarding linguistic skills among their migrant workers.

Close to 50 percent answered that more than half of their permanent migrant workers know Norwegian well enough to use it as their primary language. However, only 15 percent said the same about their hired migrant workers. In fact, close to 60 percent answered that less than one in ten hired migrant workers speak Norwegian well enough.

In addition to language related challenges, issues related to cultural differences were often mentioned. As an example, many migrant workers and eastern European workers particularly, tend to say “yes” and give the impression that they understand messages when they do not. The following quote from a worker from Poland is illustrative:

*“I sometimes make mistakes when I don't understand. I don't know why I don't ask again. I don't know people working here, and I think I should understand”. (Eastern European worker).*

Thus, in several cases where communication fails, language related issues cannot be seen irrespectively of those related to cultural differences. The respondents of the survey mostly agreed that managing migrant workers is more challenging than managing Norwegian workers. It is thus important both for managers and fellow workers to gain necessary understanding of such differences, and how, for example, differences in perceiving hierarchy and power distance can make Norwegian and eastern European workers act differently.

Other challenges included some migrant workers feeling that they were treated differently from their Norwegian co-workers, arguing that they were assigned to “harder” and more boring work.

In addition to specific challenges that may occur at multicultural workplaces, several of the Norwegian managers and workers raised a concern that an extensive use of migrant workforce may negatively affect the recruitment of young, Norwegian workers to the industry.

What is common for many of the identified challenges, is that they appear to be enhanced by employment relationships and conditions. The study shows that employment relationships are of greater importance than nationality when it comes to the challenges at multicultural workplaces. Hired workers from staffing agencies are less likely to learn the language, and companies are equally less likely to invest in language courses for these workers.

As mentioned, many managers find it harder to manage migrant workers, than Norwegian workers. Findings from the interviews, however, indicate that leadership challenges are greater when involving hired workforce rather than permanent workers. It is also the hired workers that most often claimed to be treated differently. As an example, some had experienced having to accept poor working conditions due to the fear of not being hired again.

The findings also show that the challenges seem to be affected by the duration of relations; that is, when workers are staying at a building site for just a short amount of time, which may cause problems:

*“You know, when a subcontractor comes to the construction site, like those balcony fitters, they are staying for two, maybe three weeks before finishing their work. You don’t have the time to get to know them. You don’t know what they stand for and what their interests are for doing the work in a safe manner”.* (Norwegian project manager).

#### 4.4 Greater consequences for work performance and working environment than for safety

Some argued that the number of unreported unwanted events is larger among migrant workers,

and quite a few imagined migrant workers being harmed at work more often than Norwegians. Despite this, most of the informants said that they had no basis for stating that migrant workers are overrepresented in their company’s accident records.

Results from the survey clearly indicate that language related challenges and culture related misunderstandings cause building errors or disagreements at work more often than they cause accidents or near accidents. This implies that language and culture related challenges cause greater consequences for work performance and working environment than for safety. The distribution of the answers is shown in Figure 2. The proportion of respondents answering that they have experienced construction errors due to language related challenges and culture differences were 66 and 44 percent, respectively. Some would argue that these numbers, and the corresponding numbers regarding the working environment and safety are unacceptably high. Still, when asked, very few could tell of any concrete examples in which any of these were the case. It is also important to note that the percentages represent the number of respondents that have either experienced or observed any of these things within the *past three years*. Thus, they do not necessarily indicate that these are common problems over time. Also, when asked related questions in the interviews, almost no one could tell of any concrete events in which language or culture related challenges caused accidents or near accidents.

Segregation at the construction site leaves many workers with an experience of being divided into “us and them”. The various nationalities typically keep to themselves during lunch and other breaks; especially in cases where the different professions constitute pure national working groups. This minimises the chances of extensive inclusion and involvement. The study also revealed several examples of Norwegians that felt alone among eastern European co-workers.

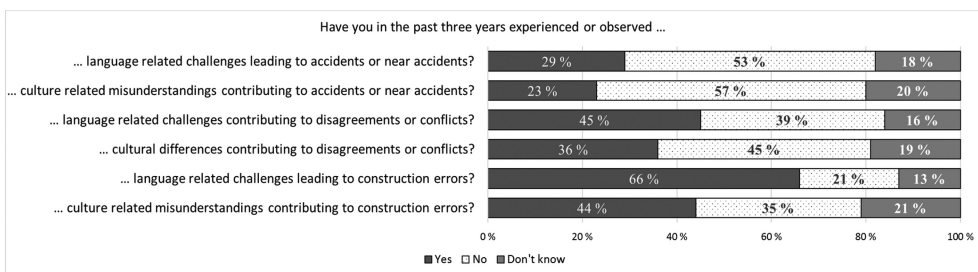


Figure 2. Results from survey. Managers’ answers as to whether they have experienced or observed construction errors, disagreements/conflicts or accidents/near accidents due to culture or language in the past three years.

As described in 4.3, challenges may be affected by the duration of relations. As such, focusing on duration of relations is also important to maintain safety and working environment at multicultural workplaces. For the workers, getting to know each other may affect whether one is able to communicate well about the daily work. This may again influence everyday working environment and safety. For employers, on the other hand, the duration of relations affects how much one is willing to invest in the workers, for example through training and competence building. This, in turn, influences the prerequisites for the individual worker to work safely and in accordance with expectations from the employer and colleagues.

#### 4.5 *Many measures focus on short-term solutions*

The study explored measures that exist to utilise the opportunities and cope with the challenges that come with using migrant workforce. It was found that most employers and construction sites do not put in direct efforts to promote the opportunities and fully utilise the resources that are represented by migrant workers. Measures in large degree aim to cope with specific challenges in the present. As language is mostly brought forward as a challenge, most measures are also related to cope with linguistic issues. These include among other, translations of safety materials, HSE training in other languages, language courses, language requirements at work sites, and arrangements of working groups by language.

In practice, some measures, such as language requirements can be difficult to comply with due to available workforce. Further, measures such as arrangement of working groups by language contribute to a bad spiral where migrant workers do not get the opportunity to learn Norwegian as they only work with people that speak the same language as themselves. And again, they do not get to work with Norwegians because they do not speak Norwegian. This is an example of a measure that is reactive in nature and contribute in a short-term perspective to reduce linguistic challenges at a specific construction site, but do not focus on coping with the challenges in the long run.

Many of the informants highlight communication as a key to success at multicultural workplaces. Language is a large part of communication, however not the only part. Cultural differences also influence communication at workplaces.

In the study, it has been seen that duration of relations is important for successful construction sites. Knowing each other and having a relation to each other is also important for understanding and communication between workers, and between workers and managers.

The study indicates both opportunities and challenges with multicultural workplaces. However, to reduce the challenges and to benefit from the potential that lies in a migrant workforce, further solutions need to be developed, e.g. tools and measures. The study shows that there are already many measures in place, especially to cope with challenges, but many of them aim to solve problems in a short-term perspective. There is also a need for measures and tools which aim to reduce the challenges in the future, rather than reducing consequences here and now. Further, there is a need to look for opportunities that come with migrant workers.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The challenges with migrant workers are quite well documented and studied both internationally and recently in Norway. There has, however, been many unjustified assumptions when it comes to multicultural labour and consequences for safety, working environment and work performance. This study has documented both challenges and strengths by using migrant workers, and also a construction industry that has introduced different measures to create well-functioning multicultural workplaces.

The findings in this study cannot conclude that migrant workers are involved in more accidents than Norwegian workers. However, when it comes to reporting of unwanted events, significant differences were found between migrant and Norwegian workers.

Rather than resulting in many accidents or near accidents, challenges related to language and culture were found to lead to more consequences for work performance and working environment. Several informants said they imagined language and culture causing safety related consequences, but few could provide concrete examples of events in which this had been the case.

Further, it was found that employment relationships are of greater importance than nationality when it comes to challenges related to multicultural workplaces. Duration of relations is important to maintain safety and working environment at multicultural workplaces.

The study also shows that the potential for benefiting from knowledge and experiences among migrant workers is to a small degree realised, and the obvious focus in the industry is on the challenges.

Measures to cope with the challenges were found to mostly be of a short-term nature handling challenges right here and now, whereas few measures are of such a nature that they improve long-term conditions.

Migrant labour has become a natural part of the Norwegian construction industry, and the industry partners must take responsibility and work together to cope with the challenges and promote the opportunities. Measures to promote good multicultural workplaces include improving managers' understanding of cultural differences, adapting leadership style, as well as making conscious decisions regarding organisation of the work. A future-oriented focus is needed, including measures that may lead to long-term gains for the industry, and measures to lift the opportunities and exploit the potential that lies in the inequalities between different groups of workers at multicultural workplaces.

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