

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Workplace psychosocial stressors in the construction industry: Perspectives of construction industry stakeholders

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Research overview

Understanding the psychosocial stressors of an industry or workplace is vital for developing solutions to mitigate their adverse effects on mental health.

This research provides a **comprehensive exploration of the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders in the construction industry regarding psychosocial stressors, their mental health impacts, and possible solutions to help mitigate those impacts.**

The qualitative research design including **19 focus groups and two interviews with a total of 115 participants** allowed for a nuanced, deeper dive investigation of psychosocial stressors as experienced and seen by key occupational groups within the construction industry. The research included 15 apprentices, 30 'boots on the ground' (blue-collar) workers, 16 migrant workers, 15 workers from a mix of construction roles, 18 health and safety managers, 14 white collar workers, and seven peak body and government agency representatives.

Through qualitative analysis, **this research identified five workplace-based psychosocial stressors common to and affecting all stakeholder groups** directly or indirectly. **(1) Financial instability**, driven by the industry's boom-and-bust cycle, emerged as the most significant stressor, influencing almost all other workplace issues. **(2) Poor communication** further exacerbated stress, contributing to a negative work environment, while the **(3) entrenched culture of old-school masculinity** fostered harmful behaviours and attitudes. **(4) Low pay and job insecurity**, especially in the context of a cost-of-living crisis, compounded the stress experienced by workers. Additionally, **(5) a lack of mental health understanding and support in the workplace** hindered efforts to address these issues effectively.

Stakeholders' proposed solutions included government intervention through infrastructure spending, better regulation of procurement processes, and encouraging business diversification. Improving communication skills, fostering supportive workplace cultures, and providing financial literacy training were also suggested solutions. Specific interventions, such as limits on overtime, workplace based mental health programmes, and integrating workplace wellness initiatives, will likely be needed to improve worker wellbeing.

The findings align with previous research, highlighting persistent issues in the construction industry. However, **there is optimism as cultural change is evident, with increasing discussions on mental health and wellbeing in the sector.**

The following pages summarise the key psychosocial stressors and mitigation strategies identified by each occupational group, followed by an overview of the common psychosocial stressors across all groups, and stakeholders' suggested mitigation strategies.

Apprentice focus group findings

“my boss was super old school ... it's essentially just, I've been through shit and so I'm fine with you going through shit”

The voices of 15 apprentices were collected across three focus groups. 10 apprentices described their gender as male and five as female. All were aged 20-34 years bar two aged 35-44. 11 identified as Māori or Pasifika, three NZ/European, one Middle Eastern, and one Japanese. One apprentice was in Wellington, and the rest in Auckland or Northland.

Psychosocial stressors

Low pay, lengthy apprenticeships, the mismatch between training and job requirements, job insecurity, a culture of stoic traditional/old school masculinity, and sexual harassment were key psychosocial stressors.

The stress of low pay was felt more by some apprentices than others - a number of apprentices were aged 30 years plus and had children or family/whānau to support.

Despite low pay, apprentices suffered the stress of job insecurity – they did not have guaranteed employment throughout their apprenticeship and the boom bust cycle impacted them as it did other workers.

Limited opportunities through their employer to achieve training requirements and financial incentives for employers to hold onto apprentices kept many apprentices in training for longer than should be necessary.

Apprentices spoke about a "harden up" culture where they were expected to endure difficult conditions without complaint.

Apprentices said that they were not provided with enough instruction at work, were expected to learn “by osmosis”, and were often not sure of what they should be doing, worried about asking for help, and hid their mistakes for fear of the consequences.

Female apprentices described some unfavourable encounters from some of their male co-workers, ranging from inappropriate comments to instances of “shocking” and “derogatory” remarks, loud yelling, aggressive posturing, and threatening behaviours.

Solutions canvassed

Some apprentices coped with low pay by working longer hours and some proposed seeking additional benefits from employers, while others proposed increasing pay rates or guaranteeing minimum hours. To address mismatches in training and employer tasks, solutions included seeking supplementary work experiences, improving communication between education institutions and employers, and assigning mentors. Solutions to workplace culture issues involved promoting more communication between education providers and employers/supervisors, better instructions, improved recognition of apprentice’s work, stronger leadership education, targeted support for marginalised groups, and addressing sexual harassment through education, clearer policies and reporting procedures, and better support networks.

'Boots on the ground'/blue collar workers focus group findings

"contracts have been signed, time and money are factors, and if projects aren't completed on time, someone loses money - potentially thousands"

Thirty 'boots on the ground' (blue collar) workers participated across four focus groups. 22 boots on the ground described their gender as male and eight as female. 22 boots on the ground were aged 25-54 years, five aged 15-24, and three aged 55+. 12 identified as Māori or Pasifika, 14 as NZ or other European, and seven as Middle Eastern or Asian. Two workers were in the South Island and the rest Auckland or Northland.

Psychosocial stressors

The high, compressed, fast paced workload, poor communication (including abusive, bullying and other poor behaviours), financial pressures, and work-life imbalance were identified as the main psychosocial stressors.

In the face of the urgency of much work in the construction industry, safety measures could be neglected, with workers instructed to proceed without proper safety mechanisms.

Lack of communication between various parties, and poor communication about priorities and expectations were key problems faced by workers in the construction industry and English language barriers added to the stress of poor communication. Communication was often felt to be rude and could be aggressive and accompanied by other bullying behaviours.

Participants described disrespectful and abusive behaviours - often targeted towards migrant workers, women, and those working in labour hire. Poor communication between workers resulted in feelings of anger, resentment, discontentment, distress and low self-esteem, and a sense of the unfairness of the industry.

Boots on the ground experienced stress from two levels of financial pressures, those related to the boom or bust of construction which impacted on workloads and job security, and the impacts of low pay on their ability to meet and pay for necessities and family/whānau responsibilities leading many to increase their hours of work.

High and compressed workloads, external pressures and job insecurity all contributed to work-life imbalances, impacting wellbeing and personal lives, causing sleep deprivation and leaving less time for rest, personal life, family/whānau time, and self-care.

Solutions canvassed

No real solutions to the problem of high, compressed workloads were canvassed other than more accurate project costing. Solutions to poor communication included training of leaders and site managers in interpersonal skills, making complaints, and better reporting processes. Suggestions for dealing with unfairness, abuse, and bullying included seeking alternative work, building stronger social support networks, and education about employment contracts. Solutions to financial pressures included working more hours and developing good relations with hire companies and managers, while solutions to work-life imbalance were individualised and included setting boundaries, prioritising personal wellbeing, and fostering open communication with managers.

Migrant worker focus group findings

“you think that if you ask too much from the employers, maybe one day you be fired, or you will be kicked out”

Two focus groups with 16 migrant workers were undertaken. In this group, 15 workers described their gender as male and one as female. 12 migrant workers were aged 35-54 years and four aged 25-34 years. The majority (13) identified as Filipino, alongside one of each of Cook Island/Māori, Latin American, and African. All migrant workers were in the North Island in Auckland, Gisborne, or Wellington.

Psychosocial stressors

Migrant workers identified shift work due to workload pressure, the high cost of living, visa issues, discrimination and sexism, separation from family/whānau, and language barriers and intercultural misunderstandings as psychosocial stressors.

Workload pressure and demanding deadlines, especially with shift work, created significant stress for migrant workers affecting their body clock and overall wellbeing.

The high cost of living in New Zealand was a major financial stress for migrant workers as they balanced financially supporting families here and back home.

Maintaining working visas involved significant financial and administrative burdens for migrant workers and the fear of losing employment due to visa-related issues meant that migrant workers navigated their employment with a heightened sense of caution and apprehension.

Discrimination was a stressor for many migrant workers who experienced racism at work, as was sexist behaviour experienced by the female migrant worker.

Despite the feelings of sadness and stress expressed as a result of being away from their homeland, migrant workers demonstrated resilience and commitment to supporting their families back home.

Communication challenges due to lack of English language proficiency and intercultural misunderstandings added to migrant worker stress, hindering their ability to comprehend instructions and communicate with others on site.

Solutions canvassed

Migrant workers proposed various solutions including collective worker efforts to manage workload pressure, financial planning to cope with the high cost of living, and obtaining residency status to address visa issues. Other suggestions were for employers to implement clear policies and procedures and fostering a collaborative work environment to combat sexism and discrimination. To address language challenges, migrant workers suggested implementing basic English-language courses and identifying key English language speakers within the migrant worker community on sites to help with translation and overcome communication barriers.

Mixed construction worker focus group findings

“If your boss is putting a heap of pressure on your performance, and not rewarding you ... then you get all sorts of weird dynamics happening”

The two ‘mixed construction’ focus groups capture the voices of 15 workers from a diverse range of occupations including apprentices, ‘boots on the ground’ (blue collar workers), and health and safety personnel. 11 workers described their gender as male and four as female. Eight workers were aged 25-44 years and six were aged 45 years plus. All workers were in Auckland or Northland. Nine workers identified as NZ/other European, seven as Māori/Pasifika, and four as Asian. This chapter offers nuance with multiple construction stakeholder perspectives discussed within the two focus groups.

Psychosocial stressors

Stressors identified through the mixed construction worker focus groups included the uneven work pipeline, lack of and poor communication, and for apprentices, low pay and an imbalance between host and apprentice expectations.

Participants described how construction industry workers faced significant stress due to fluctuating workloads influenced by market conditions, seasonal rushes, government contracts, and political changes. Small businesses were particularly vulnerable to uncertainties in the tendering process and employment stability. Efforts to increase efficiency could lead to uneven work schedules and redundancies.

Poor communication, both within teams and between supervisors, led to safety issues, work hindrances, frustration due to unclear messaging and cultural differences, and unplanned deliveries. This ultimately resulted in stress and underutilisation of mental health services, highlighting the importance of open and empathic communication to address these challenges effectively.

Participants highlighted additional financial stress faced by apprentices due to low wages and high living costs, leading to workers taking on additional work, such as Uber driving, leading to exhaustion.

Balancing apprentice and employer/host expectations was a challenge, particularly when work schedules were disrupted, and there were additional pressures from business owners expecting performance without adequate reward, which negatively impacted safety and the mental well-being of apprentices.

Solutions canvassed

Mixed construction participants did not offer any solutions to the construction industry’s uneven work pipeline and instead proposed solutions focused on interpersonal skills and cultural changes, emphasising mental health support, career flexibility, and fostering a supportive work environment. Suggestions for improving communication included enhancing empathy, understanding, and social connections through initiatives like regular social activities and toolbox talks, while also advocating for greater pastoral care roles onsite. Solutions for apprentices’ concerns included setting clear expectations and training apprentices properly through inductions on what the job involves, providing genuine praise, and ensuring open communication channels. No specific solutions were offered to address the low pay of apprentices.

Health and safety manager focus group findings

“We need steady workflow. We don't need this peaks and valleys. It kills us”

Two focus groups were conducted with 16 construction industry participants working in a variety of Health and Safety roles, including Quality Health and Safety & Environmental Managers, Project Managers/Site Foremen [sic], Supervisors, and General Managers/Managers. 12 participants described their gender as male and four as female. Ten participants were aged 25-44 years and six were aged 45-64 years. Eight participants identified as New Zealand European, two as Māori, and eight as ‘other’. Most participants were in Auckland or Northland.

Psychosocial stressors

Five psychosocial stressors were identified by health and safety personnel: workload and workplace culture, communication for good relationships, financial stressors, lack of mental health understanding, and industry wide challenges.

Discussions highlighted the unsustainable high workload faced by frontline workers due to unrealistic scheduling and tight deadlines, leading to intense stress and fatigue, impacting both work performance and personal life.

Discussion also highlighted the impact of poor communication on workplace relations and dynamics, and on employee wellbeing. Participants emphasised the importance and need for managers to have strong interpersonal skills.

Financial stress was a significant problem for many frontline construction workers, leading to a culture of overwork and detrimental effects on personal and social wellbeing. Financial stress resulted in instances of prolonged work without breaks, safety hazards, breakdowns in relationships, and poor mental health.

Lack of mental health knowledge and awareness was also identified with the result that mental health was often neglected, leading to risks to individual health and exacerbating health and safety hazards across construction sites.

Finally, health and safety personnel recognised the transient nature of the workforce, the profit focus of the industry, and the impacts of government change as challenges for the whole sector.

Solutions canvassed

A comprehensive set of solutions to address workplace stressors included increasing wages and regulating working hours to reduce overwork and its impacts, promoting open communication to enhance relationships and wellbeing, integrating mental health programs across construction sites, and embedding mental health outcomes in procurement processes to prioritize worker wellbeing from the outset. Additional suggestions included fostering a supportive workplace culture, incentivising retention of skilled workers, and integrating workplace wellness initiatives into contracting agreements to hold employers accountable for prioritising employee wellbeing.

White collar worker focus group findings

“So, I just texted him [a new guy onsite] to say, ‘hey, mate, you’re going great guns, and I’m hearing really good feedback about that’. And then he came in this morning and said, ‘well, that’s amazing, thanks heaps.’”

Three focus groups and one interview were held in person and online with 10 white collar workers, including several business owners/CEOs. Seven white collar workers identified as male and three as female. All were in the North Island. Seven identified as New Zealand European and three as ‘other’. Three workers were aged 20-34 years, three were aged 35-54 years, and four were aged 55 years plus.

Psychosocial stressors

Psychosocial stressors identified by white-collar workers were uneven work stream, poor communication, poor leadership and lack of “soft skills”, and “paperwork, permits, consents and the council”.

The boom-and-bust cycle of the construction industry led to periods of intense workloads that demand long hours and risked worker burnout, followed by quieter times that brought job insecurity and financial strain, especially for smaller businesses.

Workers described poor communication in the construction industry characterised by senior staff keeping crucial information to themselves, leading to uncertainty, frustration, increased stress, poor relationships between managers and teams, and compounded by high staff turnover and language barriers faced by migrant workers.

Poor leadership and lack of good interpersonal skills led to significant stress and disillusionment among workers, who felt unsupported and undervalued, exacerbated by micromanagement and a lack of trust.

White-collar workers in the construction industry faced significant stress from the burden of extensive paperwork, permits, and consents due to complex regulations and a slow, bureaucratic council, which often failed to provide sufficient information, causing delays and increased pressure from management.

Solutions canvassed

White collar participants suggested solutions such as training managers in interpersonal skills, fostering a family/whānau-like company culture, and providing mental health materials in migrant languages. Participants also recommended mental health activities like paid “blue sky” days, guest speakers at toolbox talks, and an industry roundtable to address workplace stressors, expressing optimism about improvements due to initiatives like MATES in Construction.

Peak body and government representative focus group findings

“we’ve got a little bit of a sick industry financially about the way it works and the way that it operates ... this is a big part of the systemic issue in the construction industry.”

Representatives from seven peak construction industry workplace safety bodies and key governmental organisations were captured via a series of two-person and individual interviews conducted on-line via Teams, with two participants in Auckland and five in Wellington. All seven representatives described their gender as male, were aged 45 years plus, and identified as New Zealand/Other European. Note: This group typically spoke about the stressors of others in the industry and not themselves.

Psychosocial stressors

Financial stress and ‘job demands’ – being job characteristics that made working in the construction industry particularly challenging – were significant stresses, followed by pressures outside of work, labour hire issues, poor communication, and interpersonal relationship challenges. Different industry sectors experienced different stressors.

Financial stress from the construction industry's boom-bust cycle impacted businesses and individual workers, leading to heightened anxiety, depression, and poor mental health due to job insecurity, low wages, and fierce competition.

Job demands in the construction industry, including heavy physical labour, long hours, tight deadlines, and hazardous conditions, led to significant mental health impacts such as fatigue, depression, anxiety, strained relationships, and higher injury rates.

The stress of “stuff outside of work” encompassed various socioeconomic challenges that workers brought to the jobsite, leading to mental health impacts.

Labour hire issues including job insecurity and inadequate support from some companies exacerbated poor mental health among such workers, leading to feelings of instability and lack of belonging due to constant changes in supervision and workplace conditions.

Poor communication and interpersonal challenges in the construction industry compounded stress and dissatisfaction among workers. Industry sector differences in psychosocial stressors highlighted workplace challenges and preferences among workers, underscoring the need for tailored solutions.

Solutions canvassed

Some participants suggested financial literacy training could alleviate financial stress for some individuals and businesses while others argued that systemic issues such as low pay and insecure employment contracts were the root causes and could not be solved through training. Government intervention was proposed to regulate boom-bust industry fluctuations through infrastructure spending. Implementing minimum wage standards in supplier contracts and tendering processes were suggested. To address job demands, efforts to improve mental health support were highlighted, including partnerships with organisations like MATES in Construction. However, concerns were raised about the effectiveness of the many different intervention options available, emphasising the need for evidence-based approaches and clearer guidance for employers. Other stressors, such as communication breakdowns and literacy challenges, could be mitigated according to participants through interpersonal skills training, and pastoral care-focused health and safety approaches.

Overview of psychosocial stressors by occupational group

Psychosocial stressors by occupational group

Occupational grouping	Psychosocial stressors identified by participants
Apprentices	<p>Low pay.</p> <p>Lengthy apprenticeships.</p> <p>Mismatch between training and job requirements.</p> <p>Job insecurity.</p> <p>A culture of stoic/old-school masculinity.</p> <p>Sexual harassment for female apprentices.</p>
'Boots on the ground' (blue-collar) workers	<p>High, compressed, fast paced workload.</p> <p>Poor communication.</p> <p>Financial pressures.</p> <p>Work-life imbalance.</p>
Migrant workers	<p>Shift work due to workload pressure.</p> <p>High cost of living.</p> <p>Visa issues.</p> <p>Discrimination, and sexism and sexual harassment for the female migrant worker.</p> <p>Separation from family/whānau.</p> <p>Language and communication barriers.</p>
Mixed construction workers	<p>Uneven work pipeline.</p> <p>Lack of communication.</p> <p>For apprentices, low pay, imbalance between host and apprentice expectations.</p>
Health and safety managers	<p>High workload and a culture of overwork.</p> <p>Communication issues and poor relationships.</p> <p>Financial stressors.</p> <p>Lack of mental health understanding (literacy, stigma).</p> <p>Industry wide challenges.</p>
White collar workers	<p>Uneven work stream.</p> <p>Poor communication.</p> <p>Poor leadership and lack of soft skills.</p> <p>'Paperwork, permits, consents and the council'.</p>
Peak body/government representatives	<p>Financial stress.</p> <p>Job demands.</p> <p>Stressors outside of work.</p> <p>Labour hire issues.</p> <p>Poor communication and interpersonal relationship challenges.</p> <p>Different psychosocial stressors for different sectors (offsite, onsite, vertical, horizontal construction).</p>

Common psychosocial stressors across all occupational groups

Common psychosocial stressors and their impacts

Main psychosocial stressors identified	Impacts identified by participants	Most affected groups
Financial instability and the boom-bust cycle of the industry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uneven workload. Job insecurity. Underwork. Overwork. Staff shortages in boom period. Layoffs in quiet period. Financial pressure for businesses. Pressure to cost projects low. Health and safety issues. 	<p>Everyone in the industry.</p> <p>Job insecurity more impactful for those on low incomes.</p>
Poor communication skills leading to poor relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of instruction at work. Lack of respect in communication. Poor relationships at work. Lack of cultural awareness and competence. Lack of instruction. Language barriers. Lack of understanding about mental health. Health and safety issues. 	<p>Apprentices, labour hire labourers, some boots on the ground, white collar workers, migrant workers, female workers.</p>
Culture of old-school/traditional masculinity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Harden up' culture. Endure injury and dangerous conditions. Sexism and sexual harassment. Discrimination. Poor behaviour at work, yelling and abuse. Culture of overwork and a 'work comes first' culture. Lack of recognition for good work. Culture of silence. Health and safety issues. 	<p>Apprentices, labour hire labourers, some boots on the ground, migrant workers, female workers.</p>
Low pay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial pressures at the individual level. Working additional hours to make ends meet. Seeking work elsewhere. Dissatisfaction and frustration. Taking longer to complete apprenticeships. Leaving apprenticeship. Benefits to host org. if apprentices kept on low wages. Health and safety issues. 	<p>Apprentices, labour hire labourers, some boots on the ground.</p>
Lack of mental health understanding and support in the workplace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health stigma. Lack of talk around mental health. Lack of workplace options other than EAP. 	<p>All workers.</p>

Solutions to help mitigate workplace stressors

Please note: the following table reports solutions identified and discussed by participants. The solutions presented do not reflect all possible solutions nor all evidence-based interventions. Further, the researchers did not systematically canvass the viability or efficacy of the solutions identified by participants. Supplementary research is required to compare how the solutions identified by participants align (or not) with best practice, including an industry roundtable discussion to develop a list of acceptable and effective interventions to improve worker wellbeing.

Psychosocial stressors and solutions across occupational groups

Psychosocial stressor identified by participants	Solutions canvassed by participants
<p>Financial instability and the boom-bust cycle</p> <p>Uneven workload/overwork/underwork. Staff shortages in boom period/ Layoffs in quiet period. Financial pressure for businesses. Pressure to cost projects low. Health and safety issues.</p>	<p>Government intervention was proposed to regulate boom-bust industry fluctuations through infrastructure spending. Better planning or regulation of government procurement of construction. Encourage business to have diverse portfolios. Limits on overtime and implement hourly limits for work done per week. Developing good relations with hire companies. Develop flexibility in workforce. Incentivising retention of skilled workers. More accurate forecasting of project costings. Collective worker efforts to manage workload pressure. Good communication about business economic situation. Financial literacy training.</p>
<p>Poor communication skills leading to poor relationships</p> <p>Lack of instruction at work. Lack of respect in communication. Poor relationships at work. Lack of cultural awareness and competence. Language barriers. Lack of understanding about mental health. Health and safety issues.</p>	<p>Training of leaders and site managers in interpersonal and communication skills. Selecting leaders or promoting staff with cultural competence and interpersonal skills. Fostering open communication between managers and workers. Building stronger social support networks. Pastoral care-focused health and safety approaches. Improving communication between education institutions and employers. Assigning mentors and allowing more flexibility. Better recognition of apprentice's work/overtime work. Establish higher-level liaisons with employers of migrants. Upskill language and cultural champions. English courses and identifying key migrant English speakers. Providing mental health materials in migrant languages. Targeted support for marginalised groups. Education about employment contracts.</p>

<p>Culture of old school masculinity ‘Harden up’ culture. Health and safety issues: injury and dangerous working conditions. ‘Traditional’ masculinity and sexism. Discrimination. Poor behaviour at work, yelling and abuse. ‘Work comes first’ culture. Lack of recognition for good work. Stigma around mental health. Culture of silence.</p>	<p>Foster a supportive workplace culture. Building stronger social support networks. Speak up. Find allies. Addressing sexual harassment through education. Praise and recognition for work well done. Employers to implement clear policies and procedures and fostering a collaborative work environment to combat sexism and discrimination. Individuals and leaders to set boundaries and prioritise personal wellbeing and family/whānau time. Fostering a family/whānau-like company culture.</p>
<p>Low pay Financial pressures at the individual level. Working more hours to make ends meet. Seeking work elsewhere. Dissatisfaction and frustration. Taking longer to complete apprenticeships. Leaving apprenticeships. Some benefits to host organisation if apprentices kept on low wages. Health and safety issues.</p>	<p>Increase hourly wages. Employers to provide additional benefits. Guaranteeing minimum hours. Government underwriting of apprenticeships to guarantee a minimum number of hours and employment stability. Government funded income support. Financial planning to cope with the high cost of living. Implementing minimum wage standards in supplier contracts and tendering processes were suggested.</p>
<p>Lack of mental health understanding and support in the workplace Mental health stigma. Lack of talk around mental health. Lack of workplace options other than EAP.</p>	<p>Integrating mental health programs across construction sites. Promoting open communication to enhance relationships. Embedding mental health outcomes in procurement processes and contracting agreements to prioritise worker wellbeing from the outset and hold employers accountable for prioritising employee wellbeing. Fostering a supportive, family/whānau-like workplace culture. Training managers in interpersonal skills. Providing mental health materials in migrant languages. Mental health activities like paid "blue sky" days. Guest speakers at toolbox talks. Partnerships with organisations like MATES in Construction. Need for evidence-based mental health and wellbeing interventions and clearer guidance for employers. Interpersonal skills training and pastoral care-focused health and safety approaches. Offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). An industry roundtable to address workplace stressors.</p>

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For the full research report, please visit <https://mates.net.nz/research/>

