

INDUSTRY SUMMARY REPORT SERIES - 2024

Team Belongingness and Wellbeing in a FIFO context

Mental Awareness, Respect and Safety (MARS) Centre Research Report



Abstract

In Western Australia, 30% of mining workers experience 'high' or 'very high' psychological distress. Individuals with psychological distress are likely to suffer symptoms of depression and anxiety in their everyday life. Previous research has also found that a person's sense of belongingness to their work team can influence their wellbeing and mental health outcomes.

We utilised a mixed-method approach to explore the role of team belongingness in shaping the wellbeing of FIFO workers at remote mine sites in Western Australia. In total, 72 surveys and 53 interviews were collected.

Findings from the survey revealed a moderate sense of team belongingness (72% on average), with client employees feeling more connected to their team (82%) than business partners (59%) - making the latter more susceptible to the negative effects of stress. A positive correlation between belongingness and wellbeing was also found. Analysis of the interview data elucidated the ways team belongingness forms, and the practical mechanisms by which it shapes a person's experience on remote mine sites.

Recommendations to grow and leverage from team belongingness in remote mine site include: i) targeted initiatives to strengthen belongingness, ii) increasing awareness of psychological assistance programs, iii) providing ongoing manager training to support a positive psychosocial climate, and iv) improving support for business partners by addressing their specific mental health needs.

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Research Background

The MARS Program Landmark Study (2023) found that 30% of Australian mining workers reported ‘high’ or ‘very high’ psychological distress, often associated with symptoms of moderate to severe depression and anxiety. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) notes that individuals with very high distress may need professional mental health support.

The mining sector's suicide rate is notably higher than the general population (25 vs. 12.3 persons per 100,000) and remains a cause for concern. Furthermore, high psychological distress increases the risk of workplace accidents and negatively impacts performance. These insights highlight the need for strategies to improve mental health and wellbeing in mining.

The present study is based on the 'belongingness hypothesis' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which posits that humans have a need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships as a prerequisite of wellbeing. Specifically, ‘team belongingness’ - the degree to which a person feels connected to their team, has emerged as a key variable that can shape a person’s sense of wellbeing (Hernandez Grande et al., 2024).

As such, this project aims to explore how team belongingness can shape mental health and wellbeing in a FIFO context with the following research question:

What is the role of team belongingness in shaping mental health and wellbeing for FIFO workers?

Quantitative Methodology

A survey ran within a single mining organization from March 26 to April 26, 2024, using two main methods of data collection. First, emails and on-site promotions encouraged employees and business partners to participate. In addition, a team from ECU’s MARS Centre visited the site from April 2 to April 5, distributing QR code cards to further boost participation. In total, 81 employees and partners accessed the survey link; one did not consent, and eight completed less than 9% of the survey. Ultimately, 72 surveys were collected. While the response rate was low, the survey offers indicative insights into wellbeing and belongingness among on-site employees and partners local to the case site.

Qualitative Methodology

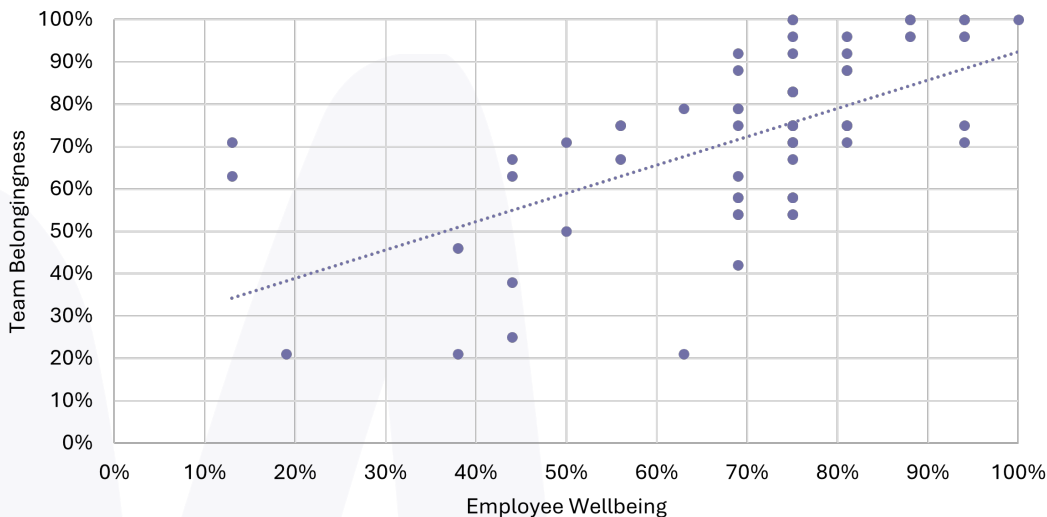
Before the ECU MARS team visited the mine site, employees and business partners working on site received an email from the Company’s Work Health and Safety Manager inviting them to take part in an interview with the research team. Overall, 53 individuals agreed to participate. The interviewees were asked a broad range of questions relating to their FIFO career, their short- and long-term plans, their teams, and their outside-work lives. Interviews lasted between 20-40 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, and the data was subsequently thematically analysed using NVivo 1.7.2.

Quantitative Results

Key quantitative findings of the study highlight:

- A significant percentage of the respondents reported experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress in line with the MARS Program Landmark Study.
- Overall, team belongingness was high at the remote mine site. However, there was a substantial group of individuals who reported lower levels of team belongingness. Additionally, a significant difference in belongingness scores was identified between client employees (82% on average) and business partners (59% on average).
- Findings indicate that client employees reported consistently higher wellbeing scores than individuals who were business partners.
- Individuals who reported an increased level of team belongingness also had higher levels of employee wellbeing (see Figure 1). While this cannot be considered causal, team belongingness and shaping employee wellbeing appear to be related to each other – consistent with previous research.

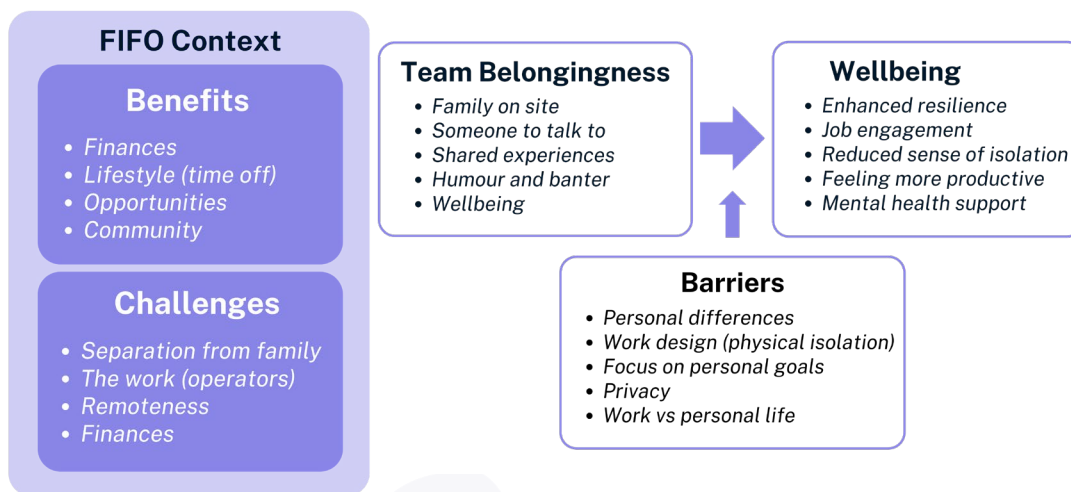
Figure 1. Relationship between team belongingness and employee wellbeing



Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several recurring themes. These are visually presented in Figure 2. The primary themes related to the benefits and challenges of FIFO work, the elements of team belongingness, as well as factors which may inhibit a sense of team belongingness, and ways in which perceived team belongingness may shape wellbeing.

Figure 2. Qualitative themes



The themes identified built on the quantitative findings of the study, suggesting that team belongingness can play a role in shaping the wellbeing of FIFO workers on a remote mine site. Many interviewees indicated that if it wasn't for their team they would not be able to continue working FIFO. Many saw their team members as members of their own family. One respondent said:

“I know it's a cliché [but...], because you're away from your family, it's almost as if they are my family up here.”

However, there were also factors which inhibited individuals from experiencing a sense of team belongingness. For example, operators experienced a strong sense of isolation because of their role.

Some ways in which interviewees proposed that team belongingness supports wellbeing is through enhancing their resilience and job engagement, reducing their sense of isolation, increasing overall productivity and providing mental health support. This was encapsulated by the words of one interviewee who said:

“When you've got a strong team, you really want to just get on that plane and go to work to see them.”

Implications for Industry

The findings of this study have generated a number of important insights and considerations for remote mining organisations. These include:

- To **support team belongingness** strengthening initiatives, organisations could develop or build on already existing activities. Provisions which were found to be helpful were activities such as collective fitness classes, ‘paint and sip’ evenings, and a venue where colleagues could spend time together outside of work hours. Care needs to be made to ensure business partners feel included, alongside client employees.
- Ensuring that all client employees and business partners are **aware of the psychological assistance programs available**. Such awareness might be achieved through centralised communications, visits from organisations such as Mates in Mining, and potentially testimonials from individuals who have benefited from these services. A person's team, and its strength of belongingness, can be used as a referral pathway for support services where challenges are recognised. Building team mental health literacy, through the prism of belongingness, can thus reduce risk of isolation, mental health challenges and suicide.
- Managers and supervisors play a **key role in supporting a high psychosocial safety climate**. As such, regular and a continuous manager and supervisor training and development might be appropriate to assist them in further developing the people-focused elements of their roles.
- Building on the first point - while further research is pertinent, initiatives to **support the wellbeing of business partners** on mine sites appear an important consideration. Oftentimes, business partners work alongside client employees, and (whether or not this occurs) building a sense of belonging between all team members may strengthen communication, safety and positive group protective behaviours. Seeking the input and experiences of business partners to develop new support mechanisms and resources is recommended.

A full technical report from this study will be available on the MARS Centre website in due course.



References

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