

Understanding the builder-client relationship – Part 1: Builder perspectives

Kate Bryson and Orin Lockyer



 Funded from the
Building Research Levy



1222 Moonshine Rd, RD1, Porirua 5381
Private Bag 50 908, Porirua 5240
New Zealand
branz.nz

© BRANZ 2021
ISSN: 1179-6197



Preface

This research was undertaken by Axon Consulting Limited in collaboration with BRANZ. This report is part 1 of a two-part research project that takes an in-depth look at both sides of the builder-client relationship in an effort to understand what is and what is not working for each party.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank:

- our research partners Registered Master Builders Association (RMBA), New Zealand Certified Builders (NZCB), CHASNZ, and Switched On Group – we particularly acknowledge the support of RMBA and NZCB who assisted us immensely with recruitment of their members to participate in this research
- the residential builders who took the time to complete the survey
- the residential builders and clients who volunteered to be interviewed and shared their stories with us so that we could better understand the builder-client relationship.



Understanding the builder-client relationship – Part 1: Builder perspectives

BRANZ Study Report SR461/1

Authors

Kate Bryson and Orin Lockyer

Reference

Bryson, K. & Lockyer, O. (2021). *Understanding the builder-client relationship – Part 1: Builder perspectives*. BRANZ Study Report SR461/1. Judgeford, New Zealand: BRANZ Ltd.

Abstract

Anecdotally, the builder-client relationship has been a source of tension and stress for builders and clients. This research set out to investigate whether there was any evidence to support these anecdotes and, if so, what impact it was having on the wellbeing of each party. This report describes the results of an online survey and interviews with builders to understand the builder perspective of the relationship and its impact on builder mental health. Builders reported several tension points that cause relationship strain with clients and that client disagreements cause symptoms of depression and anxiety for some builders. Recommendations are made that focus on improving communication and managing client expectations to avoid client conflict during the build process. Further recommendations suggest greater mental health support for residential builders.

Keywords

Residential builder, build client, communication, relationship, conflict, mental health, wellbeing.



Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. METHODOLOGY	6
2.1 Scope.....	6
2.2 Definitions	6
2.3 Approach.....	6
2.3.1 Surveys	7
2.3.2 Interviews.....	9
3. RESULTS	11
3.1 Demographics and industry background.....	11
3.2 Communication with clients – when and how?	15
3.3 Working with clients – the tension points	19
3.4 Working with clients – the rewards	38
3.5 Disagreements with clients and their impact	43
3.6 Mental health impacts of builder-client conflict.....	47
3.7 A comment about COVID-19	52
4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	53
4.1 Communication demands.....	54
4.2 Tension points	54
4.3 The impact of disagreements	57
4.4 Concluding comments.....	58
4.5 Limitations of the research	59
4.6 Summary of recommendations	60
REFERENCES	61
APPENDIX A: BUILDER SURVEY	62
APPENDIX B: BUILDER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE	68
APPENDIX C: THEMES IDENTIFIED FROM BUILDER AND CLIENT INTERVIEWS	71

Figures

Figure 1. Age of participants (n=195).	11
Figure 2. Gender of participants (n=195).	12
Figure 3. Regions where participants built (n=195).	12
Figure 4. Years worked in residential building (n=195).	12
Figure 5. Industry organisation membership (n=195).	13
Figure 6. Main role of participant (n=195).	14
Figure 7. Business ownership (n=195).	14
Figure 8. On or off the tools (n=195).	14
Figure 9. Frequency of communication with client (n=195).	15
Figure 10. Builder communication methods (n=195).	16
Figure 11. Number of communication channels used by builders (n=195).	16



Figure 12. Proportion of builders dealing with clients outside business hours (n=195).
17

Figure 13. Frequency of dealing with clients outside business hours (n=161). 18

Figure 14. Frequency of dealing with clients during the weekend (n=161). 18

Figure 15. Clients often have unrealistic expectations of their builder (n=195). 20

Figure 16. There is very little trust in the builder-client relationship (n=195). 24

Figure 17. Clients do not trust builders to get the job done (n=195)..... 26

Figure 18. Builders must communicate with clients so much that it is slowing down the
build process (n=195). 26

Figure 19. Clients want to know about everything that happens on site (n=195). 28

Figure 20. Clients seem to be asking increasingly complex and technical questions
about their build (n=195). 29

Figure 21. The leaky building crisis has made clients more anxious about the build
process (n=195). 30

Figure 22. Builders are having to manage client frustrations about the consenting
process (n=195). 30

Figure 23. Clients hold all the power in the builder-client relationship (n=195). 31

Figure 24. A client will only be dissatisfied if the builder isn't doing their job properly
(n=195). 33

Figure 25. There are some clients that are never satisfied (n=195). 33

Figure 26. Some clients can be aggressive in how they communicate (n=195). 34

Figure 27. If I lose sleep at night over work, it's usually because of an issue with a
client (n=195). 35

Figure 28. If I am stressed out about an issue with a client, it affects the quality of my
work (n=195). 36

Figure 29. Dealing with clients is the most stressful part of my job (n=195)..... 36

Figure 30. When I get together with other builders, we often find ourselves venting or
complaining about our clients (n=195)..... 37

Figure 31. When I see a client is trying to get hold of me, I start to feel anxious
(n=195). 37

Figure 32. I am open to new ways of dealing with "tricky" clients (n=195)..... 38

Figure 33. When the relationship with the client is good, the job is more enjoyable
(n=195). 38

Figure 34. Working with clients is one of the most rewarding parts of the job (n= 195).
39

Figure 35. The majority of my clients are great, and I enjoy working with them
(n=195). 40

Figure 36. Clients are usually really grateful for the work I do for them (n=195). 40

Figure 37. I find the more I communicate with my clients the happier they are with the
build (n=195). 41

Figure 38. I look forward to giving clients updates about their build (n=195). 42

Figure 39. Have you ever had a serious disagreement with a client? (n=195)..... 43

Figure 40. I have considered changing jobs due to the stress of a disagreement with a
client (n=145). 43

Figure 41. Following a disagreement with a client I have lacked the motivation to
continue with the build (n=145). 44

Figure 42. Client disagreements are so distracting that they affect my ability to work
safely (n=145)..... 45



Figure 43. Have you ever found yourself so distracted by a client disagreement that you had an accident on site? (n=145).....	45
Figure 44. In the past I have been able to resolve disagreements with clients successfully (n=145).	46
Figure 45. I have had a disagreement with a client that has negatively impacted my mental health. For example, I felt anxious or depressed about what was happening (n=145).....	47
Figure 46. Proportion of builders at each depression mean scale score during client conflict situation (n=145).	48
Figure 47. Proportion of builders at each anxiety mean scale during client conflict situation (n=145).....	49



Executive summary

The mental health and wellbeing of construction industry workers has been in the spotlight in recent years after the publication of Bryson and Duncan's (2018) report on mental health in the construction industry. In that study, representatives from across the industry acknowledged that the mental health of the workforce was in desperate need of support. Since then, organisations and businesses in the industry have redoubled their work to raise awareness around mental health for people working in construction.

This research moves beyond describing the mental health crisis for the industry towards investigating the factors that may be contributing to it. Anecdotal stories from builders and clients have suggested that the builder-client relationship could be one cause of significant distress for both parties during residential house builds. This study set out to investigate if there was any evidence to support these anecdotes and, if so, what impact builder-client relationship tension is having on the wellbeing of each party. This research examined both sides of the relationship, but this report describes the builder's perspective. The findings relating to clients are reported in BRANZ Study Report SR461/2 (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021), a separate report entitled *Understanding the builder-client relationship – Part 2: Client perspectives*.

Research questions

- Is the builder-client relationship a significant cause of stress for residential builders?
- If so, what factors contribute to the builder-client relationship problems and how prevalent are they?

Methods

This research used a mixed-methods approach – 195 builders responded to an online survey, and 19 took part in semi-structured telephone interviews. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data is used to measure the prevalence and describe the tension points that lead to builder-client conflict. Measures of mental health outcomes were also used to test whether disagreements with clients had any impact on builder mental health.

Results

The results of this research fall into three areas:

- Communication demands on builders.
- Tension points during the build process.
- The impact of disagreements on builder wellbeing.

The theme that runs throughout the findings is communication. Conflict and disagreements very often emerged when the client's expectations were not met. Builders described how clear, honest and early communication could assist with managing client expectations and reducing the risk of disagreements.

Communication demands

The communication demand on builders appears to be high. The majority of builders reported communicating with clients outside normal business hours and in weekends, using multiple communication channels. It was often accepted by builders that this was



a necessary part of the job. Some builders described putting some professional boundaries in place to manage this, while others felt they needed to be available at all times.

Tension points

Several tension points were identified as potential causes of conflict between builders and clients. Tension points lead to conflict when the client's expectations around them are not met or were mismanaged:

- **Site visits:** Client access to site was a source of conflict. Site visits were also described as providing an opportunity for disagreements over other issues to do with the build that the client might identify while on site.
- **Variations:** Builders reported that sometimes clients do not understand the implications of a variation to the original plan and that this can at times lead to disagreements.
- **Budget:** Builders said that client disagreements about unexpected costs or changes to the budget were common. Clients withholding payments due to disputes was a significant cause of distress for builders.
- **Building defects:** Builders described clients as having a low tolerance for defects and that this can lead to disagreements.
- **Delays:** Builders acknowledged that clients were often unhappy about delays during the build, and this could be a catalyst for conflict.

The impact of disagreements on builder mental wellbeing

Three-quarters of builders had experienced a serious client disagreement. Of those, more than half experienced moderate to high symptoms of depression and anxiety. Builder-client disagreements appear to have a detrimental effect on builder mental health. In the interviews, builders described client conflicts impacting on their families and their personal wellbeing. The level of distress experienced by builders during client disagreements was significant and should provide the motivation to industry to develop solutions to reduce builder-client relationship problems.

Recommendations

Managing the relationship with the client

The Building Together resource should be developed – a proposed workbook that would guide builders and clients through an early conversation about how they will work together throughout the building process. It is suggested it could provide space to record what has been agreed between the builder and client and should function as a mutually agreed code of conduct.

As a starting point, the areas covered in this resource should include:

- when and how a builder can be contacted
- the frequency and duration of site visits
- supervision during site visits
- health and safety requirements at site visits
- interactions with subcontractors or other tradespeople on site
- defect identification processes
- other tension points identified by clients in the client perspectives report (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021).



The development of the Building Together resource should be done in consultation with residential builders and clients. This should be done via facilitated workshops or focus groups where these research findings are presented to builders and clients to provide further input on the format, structure and content of the resource.

Supporting builder mental health and wellbeing

Education should be made available for builders around managing their work-life balance to encourage better professional boundaries and greater investment in self-care. The ways in which this kind of information is delivered should be informed by builders. It is suggested that builders be consulted about this at the same workshops or focus groups convened for the Building Together resource.

Existing mental health help options within and outside the industry should continue to be promoted and supported.

Residential building leadership organisations should prioritise the development of mental health and wellbeing programmes that work well in a residential building context.



1. Introduction

The mental health and wellbeing of construction industry workers has been in the spotlight in recent years after the publication of Bryson and Duncan's (2018) report on mental health in the construction industry. In that study, representatives from across the industry acknowledged that the mental health of the workforce was in desperate need of support. Since then, the industry has been mobilised into action with many organisations and businesses working to increase awareness around mental health and the MATES in Construction suicide prevention programme launching in 2019.

While work is under way to support construction industry workers who are in distress, the authors of this research frequently engaged in conversations with industry stakeholders wanting to understand why the problem was happening in the first place. Many offered theories. One hypothesis repeatedly suggested by those working in the residential building sector was that significant stress is induced for builders when the relationship with the client deteriorates. This issue was repeatedly raised by builders, so an informal process of stakeholder engagement was undertaken with members of the residential building industry. The goal of this engagement was to verify whether this was a problem worthy of further investigation. Stakeholders consulted included all the research partners listed in the acknowledgements for this report, other residential builders known to the researchers and the Mental Health in Construction Strategy Group led by CHASNZ.

During this stakeholder engagement, a shift was noted regarding what the industry wanted from research in this field. Stakeholders expressed a desire to move beyond describing the problem towards investigating the causes. This shift from research focusing on what the problem looks like to what is causing it is a natural progression towards answering the question "How do we fix it?" Stakeholders were clear that, if distress related to builder-client conflict is a contributing factor to poorer builder wellbeing, the research must identify solutions and a way forward, not just describe the problem.

At the same time, BRANZ was undertaking research investigating client experiences of building a new home (Lockyer & Marston, 2020). Clients described some of the difficulties they encountered when trying to understand the building process. In this study, there was evidence that the client's relationship with the builder was negatively impacted when their lack of building knowledge and poor communication from their builder led to unmet expectations. The relationship with the builder was identified as an important factor in quality building outcomes. This work focused on the client experience and build quality but did not consider the builder's perspective or wellbeing outcomes of the builder-client relationship.

To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has been done to investigate the interpersonal aspects of the builder-client relationship or its impact on the wellbeing of either party. As a result, this research is exploratory in nature. It seeks to investigate whether there is any evidence to support the anecdotal stories shared during the period of stakeholder engagement with industry. More specifically, this study aims to assess whether the builder-client relationship is a source of stress for builders and, if builder-client relationship stress does exist, to measure its impact on builder mental wellbeing. The results of this research will be used to make recommendations and inform solutions, if any are required.



The client perspective of the builder-client relationship was also investigated as part of this research, and findings are presented in a separate report (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021). Together, these reports look to provide a detailed explanation of the builder-client relationship from both perspectives. The goal of this research is to describe both sides of the builder-client relationship – not to attribute blame to either party but to understand the perspectives of both. This will enable us to identify ways of supporting builders and clients to work together in a healthy way that supports their wellbeing and better building outcomes.

Research questions

- Is the builder-client relationship a significant cause of stress for residential builders?
- If so, what factors are contributing to the builder-client relationship problems and how prevalent are they?



2. Methodology

2.1 Scope

This study investigates the relationship between residential builders in New Zealand and their clients. The study used quantitative online surveys and qualitative interviews of both builders and clients to understand the prevalence and impact of builder-client disagreements on builder mental health and client satisfaction. The methods described here were undertaken for both builders and clients. This report describes the results of the builder survey and interviews.

The commercial building sector was not included in this study as their clients and procurement and project management processes are different to those of the residential builder. This study focuses on the interpersonal relationship between individual builders and their clients.

2.2 Definitions

For the purposes of this research, the term 'builder' is used to describe the person acting on behalf of the company that constructed the home for the client. In most cases, this is the person building the house, but in some cases, it will be a project manager or sales representative. A detailed breakdown of the roles represented by the term 'builder' is provided in the results section.

The term 'client' is used to describe the people who engaged the builder to build them a house. This excludes developers.

The 'builder-client relationship' is the term used to describe the way builders and clients worked together as people. There is a distinction here between the legal or contractual relationship each party had entered into and the way they interacted with each other throughout the building process. The builder-client relationship referred to in this report means the interpersonal relationship between the individuals involved in the build.

2.3 Approach

The methods described here were undertaken for both builders and clients. This report describes only the results for builders. Results for the client study are published in a client perspectives report (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021).

This study utilised a mixed-methods approach. Online surveys were used to gather quantitative data from builders about their experiences dealing with clients.

At the end of the survey, participants were invited to be interviewed about their experience, and qualitative data was collected to give the quantitative findings greater context.

The results of both approaches are reported together. Each survey finding is presented along with interview excerpts that help to further explain the dynamics of the relationship and put the survey data into context.

The goal of this study together with the client perspectives study is to describe both sides of the builder-client relationship and to measure the prevalence of issues



previously only described anecdotally. This research will inform initiatives to assist builders to better manage builder-client relationships.

2.3.1 Surveys

The builder survey was designed to gather quantitative data to measure whether builder-client relationship tension was an issue, to identify possible causes of the conflict if any existed and to understand how this conflict impacted the mental wellbeing of builders.

The survey was run in February and early March 2020. The data collection period for the survey was cut short due to the COVID-19 Alert Level 4 and 3 lockdown. The research team decided that it was inappropriate to continue with recruitment given the impact the pandemic response was having on the industry. Additionally, reactions to the lockdown may have skewed responses to the survey and impacted our results. The shortened data collection phase did impact sample size. However, enough data had been gathered to allow for meaningful descriptive analysis. Confidence in the quantitative data is further strengthened by the addition of the qualitative findings. The combination of these two data sources ensures the results of this study are reliable despite the smaller than expected sample.

The survey was delivered online using Qualtrics survey software.

The builder survey consisted of several sections. All the questions in the survey are presented in Appendix A.

The first section asked about demographic information and industry experience. Builders were asked about:

- their age
- their gender
- what region they worked in
- length of time in the industry
- their role in residential building
- whether they own the business they work for.

The second section asked builders about the amount and kind of communication they had with clients. Builders were asked about:

- how often they dealt with clients
- what communication channels they used
- how frequently they dealt with clients outside normal business hours.

The third section presented a variety of statements about the builder-client relationship and builders were asked to select how much they agreed or disagreed using the options 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. This section measured the prevalence of builder-client relationship problems and tested whether anecdotal stories were real phenomena. Statements about the negative aspects of the builder-client relationship were balanced with statements about the rewarding aspects. Example statements from this section of the surveys:

- Dealing with clients is the most stressful part of my job
- Working with the client is one of the most rewarding parts of the job
- Some clients can be aggressive in how they communicate
- Clients are usually really grateful for the work I do for them



- When I see a client is trying to get hold of me, I start to feel anxious
- The majority of my clients are great and I enjoy working with them

The fourth section examined the impact of serious client disagreements on builders' job satisfaction, wellbeing and workplace safety. Builders were asked if they had ever had a serious disagreement with a client, and those who had were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements that measured the impact that disagreement had on them. The same response options were given as those in the previous section of the survey. Example statements from this section of the survey:

- I have had a disagreement with a client that has negatively impacted my mental health. For example, I felt anxious or depressed about what was happening
- Client disagreements are so distracting they affect my ability to work safely
- Following a disagreement with a client I have lacked the motivation to continue with the build

The fifth section used adapted versions of existing measures of depression and anxiety to measure the extent to which builders experienced symptoms of these mental health issues in response to client disagreements.

The PHQ-9 is the depression assessment module of the Patient Health Questionnaire (Kroenke, Spitzer & Williams. 2001). Normally comprising of nine items, it was reduced to five for this survey to assess for the five most-common, less-severe depression symptoms.

The General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) is a screening tool for anxiety (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams & Lowe, 2006). It measures the severity of anxiety symptoms. Usually consisting of seven items, only five were used for this survey, focusing on the more-common, less-severe anxiety symptoms.

For both the PHQ-9 and the GAD-7, items that probed the more severe end of the scale of these disorders such as self-harm or suicidal ideation were not included. This was done to reduce the risks to participants and to keep the research in scope. The identification of severe mental health problems and suicidality is outside the aims of this research.

Builders were asked to rate how often they experienced each of the five symptoms of anxiety and depression when dealing with their most recent client disagreement. The response options were 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'. A response of 'never' was scored as 1, with responses of 'always' receiving a score of 5. The scores for the five items were then added together and divided by five to generate a mean scale score. The mean scale score gives an indication of how severe a builder's depression and anxiety symptoms were overall in reaction to a client disagreement. A score of 1 indicates low or no symptoms, a score of 3 indicates that some symptoms were experienced to a mild or moderate degree and a score of 5 indicates that symptoms were frequently experienced.

The final section asked a single question assessing builders' self-reported mental health and physical health.

Recruitment

Our research partners Registered Master Builders Association and New Zealand Certified Builders shared the link to the online survey with their members. The link was



sent to all members by email, it was included in newsletters and it was promoted on their social media channels.

Participation was incentivised by offering survey participants the chance to win a \$300 trade voucher.

Informed consent for survey participation was inferred by completion of the survey. The first page of the survey gave potential participants an overview of the study, what kinds of questions to expect and the ethical considerations around confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were invited to continue on to begin the survey if they were happy to do so.

Analysis

Responses to the survey were downloaded from Qualtrics into Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software for analysis.

The quantitative results presented in this report are descriptive. Graphs describe the proportion of builders in the survey that responded in different ways to each question. The goal of presenting descriptive statistics is to provide a picture of how common these experiences are for builders. The qualitative data from the interviews is then presented to flesh out each finding with explanations and descriptions of the situation for real builders.

2.3.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with builders and clients were undertaken to provide qualitative data to help explain and provide context for the quantitative findings. Qualitative data is used in this study to assist in understanding why builders and clients might have certain perceptions or experiences. As this research is examining two sides of a potentially challenging relationship, qualitative data helps both sides to understand each other better.

Interview design

The semi-structured interview schedule for builders can be found in Appendix B. Semi-structured interviews are conversational, with the interviewer often taking the interviewee's lead on the direction of the interview. For this reason, every interview is different. The interview schedule is a guide to the interviewer around which ideas should be investigated during the course of the interview. Not every question in the schedule is answered by every interviewee. However, the issues each question is addressing should be covered in most cases.

The builder interview asked builders to describe what happens when the relationship with the client deteriorates and how it impacts their work and mental health. Builders were asked about what stage of the build they often encounter relationship problems with the client and why they thought that phase of the build was challenging. Builders were also asked to describe ways they had managed to resolve a tricky relationship with a client in the past. An important part of the interview focused on what builders are already doing to build and maintain healthy functional relationships with clients.

Recruitment and data collection

Interviewees were recruited via the online survey. At the end of the online survey, participants were invited to leave their contact details if they would like to be interviewed. Interview participation was incentivised with \$40 gift vouchers.



Survey participants who provided their contact details were contacted by email and provided with further information about the study. If they agreed to proceed with an interview, a time was arranged for a researcher to contact them by telephone and conduct the interview.

Telephone interviews were recorded using a call-recording app. At the start of the interview, the interviewer explained what the interview was about, confidentiality, treatment of the interviewee's data and the audio recording and the voluntary nature of the interview. The interviewee was asked to give verbal consent to continue with the interview, and this was recorded as part of the interview.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service and a research assistant.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used by the researchers for the analysis of the interview data. This is a method for systematically identifying and organising and offering insights, which allows researchers to make sense of collective experiences across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis for this study was inductive. The primary aim was to give voice and meaning to the experiences of participants. An inductive approach to data analysis is bottom up where the results are driven by the data. This means that the themes that are identified come from the data.

Themes are trends or patterns in the data. They capture something important that helps us answer our research questions. In this study, the researchers read all the interview transcripts to recognise recurring patterns in the data. Points of interest relevant to the research questions were coded, and when codes appeared repeatedly in the data, they formed themes. This process was iterative, meaning the transcripts were read multiple times and themes evolved as new patterns were noticed. The researchers met regularly throughout the analysis process to discuss and debate the themes identified until agreement was reached.

A diagram of all the themes that emerged from the interview data is presented in Appendix C.



3. Results

Results from the survey and interviews are presented together in this section.

Survey data is reported and excerpts from the interviews are provided to explain each quantitative finding and give greater context based on the themes identified.

This study generated a large number of quantitative and qualitative findings related to:

- demographics and industry background
- communication with clients – when and how
- working with clients – the tension points
- working with clients – the rewards
- disagreements with clients and their impact
- mental health impacts of builder-client conflict.

3.1 Demographics and industry background

The survey was completed by 195 builders, and 19 builders were interviewed. In the survey, they were asked for some demographic information and about their time in the residential building industry.

These questions enabled us to understand who was responding to the survey and what kind of industry experience they had.

The majority of builders were aged 35–54 years old (Figure 1) and were male (Figure 2).

Builders from all over the country took part, with greater numbers of responses from the larger centres, as would be expected (Figure 3).

Builders tended to have worked in residential building for a long time (Figure 4).

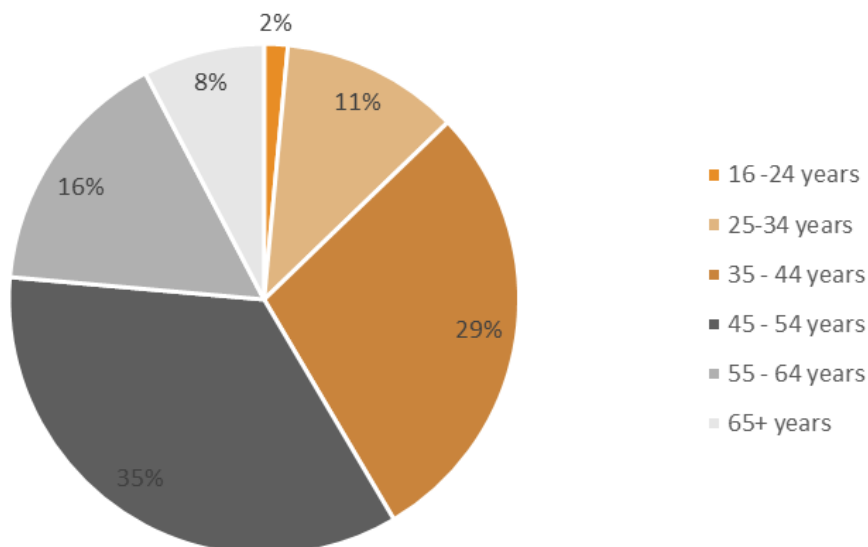


Figure 1. Age of participants (n=195).

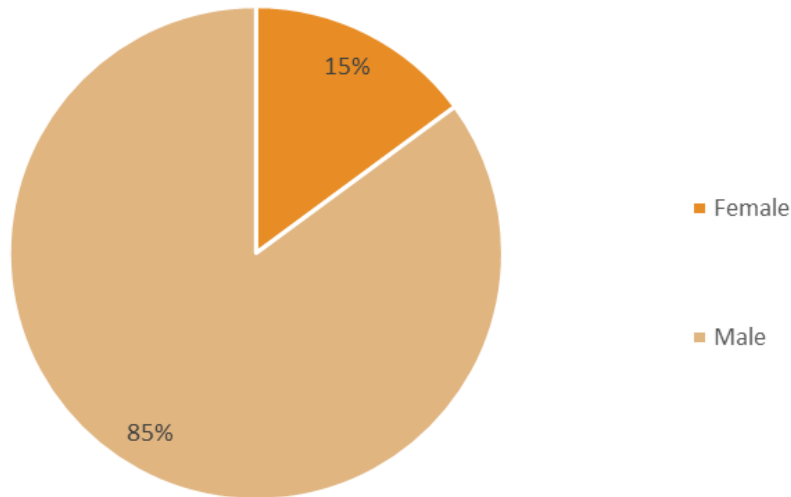


Figure 2. Gender of participants (n=195).

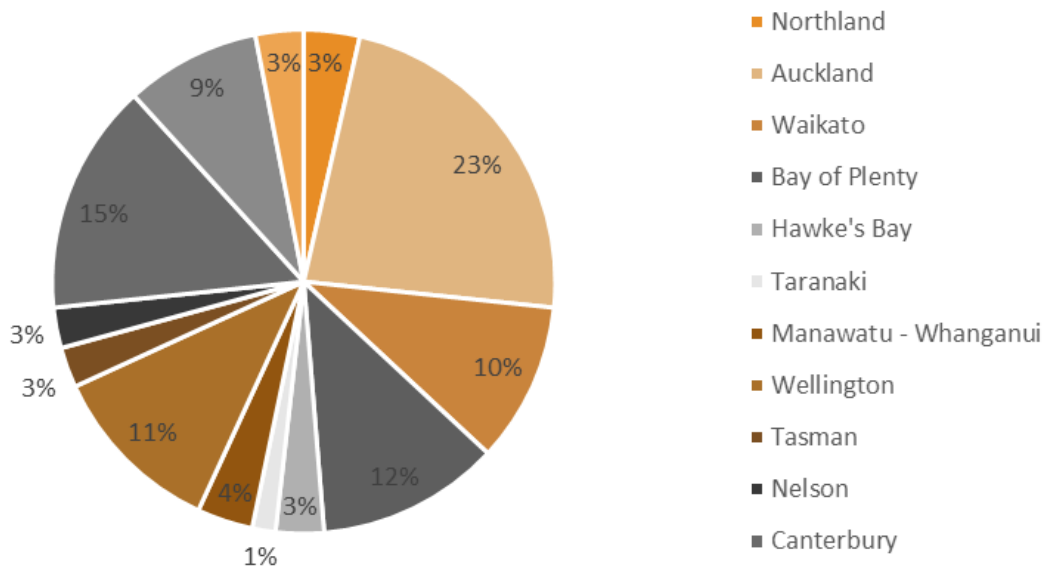


Figure 3. Regions where participants built (n=195).

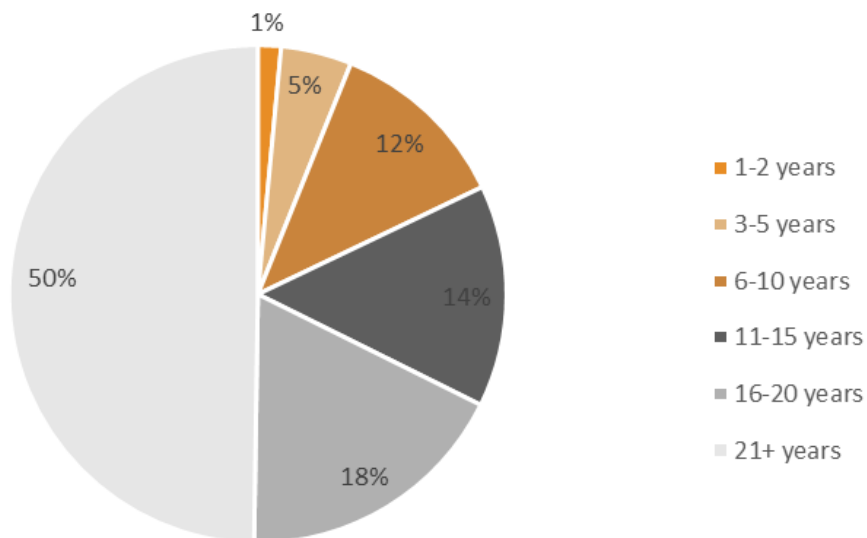


Figure 4. Years worked in residential building (n=195).



Almost half had worked in the industry for more than 21 years. This means that many of the builders responding to the survey will have experienced changes in the way builders and clients interact over time.

Examples of these changes were described by some builders in the interviews. In the following excerpt, a builder describes how clients have higher expectations now than they did 25 years ago and that this puts pressure on the builder.

“It does seem to be getting harder and harder to try please people. We do seem to be getting challenged a lot more. People seem to think that they know more about the quality of work or finishing on what we do or materials.

I think everyone’s expectations – like I’ve been in business too long probably, 25 odd years now. The difference now to 25 years ago ... once they’d picked a builder, the demands were not there ... Now, just the pressure, the expectations, the finish level, everything.

Builders who had been in the business for a long time tended to report feeling that clients require more work to meet their expectations compared to clients in the past.

Builders were asked which industry membership organisations they belonged to. Three-quarters said they were with the Registered Master Builders Association, and just over a quarter were members of New Zealand Certified Builders (Figure 5). A small number of builders belonged to both organisations.

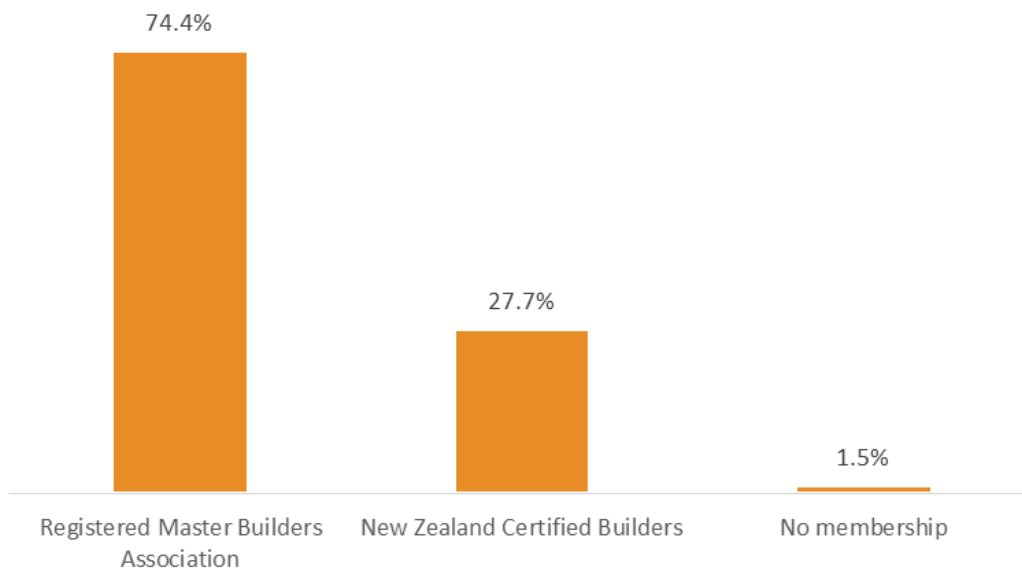


Figure 5. Industry organisation membership (n=195).

Almost two-thirds of the builders who completed the survey said their main role in residential building was business owner (Figure 6). The next most common role was builder (13.9%). About 10% selected “other” and indicated that they were a combination of two or more of the roles listed – usually business owner and builder.

Just over 89% of builders said they owned the business they were working in, indicating a high level of self-employment that corresponds to the high number of years of experience of survey respondents (Figure 7).

Builders were also asked if they were working on or off the tools (Figure 8).

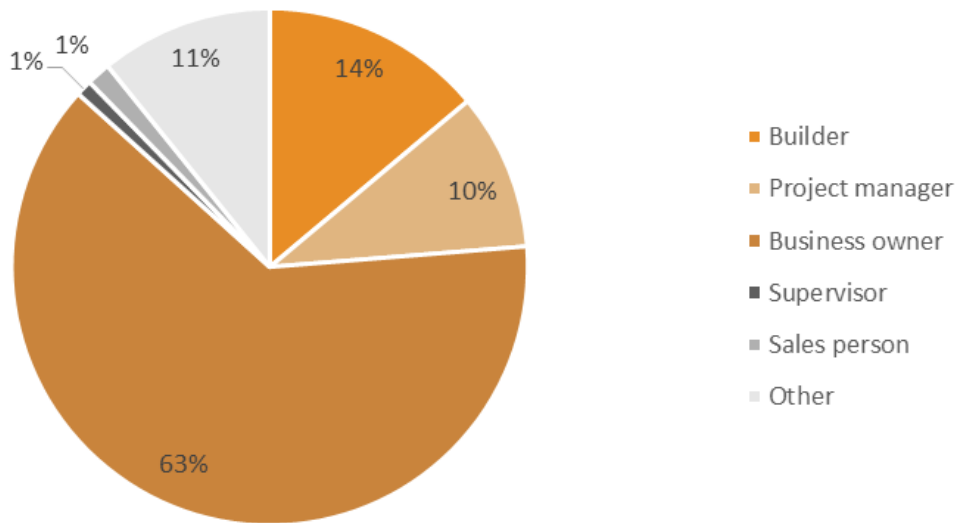


Figure 6. Main role of participant (n=195).

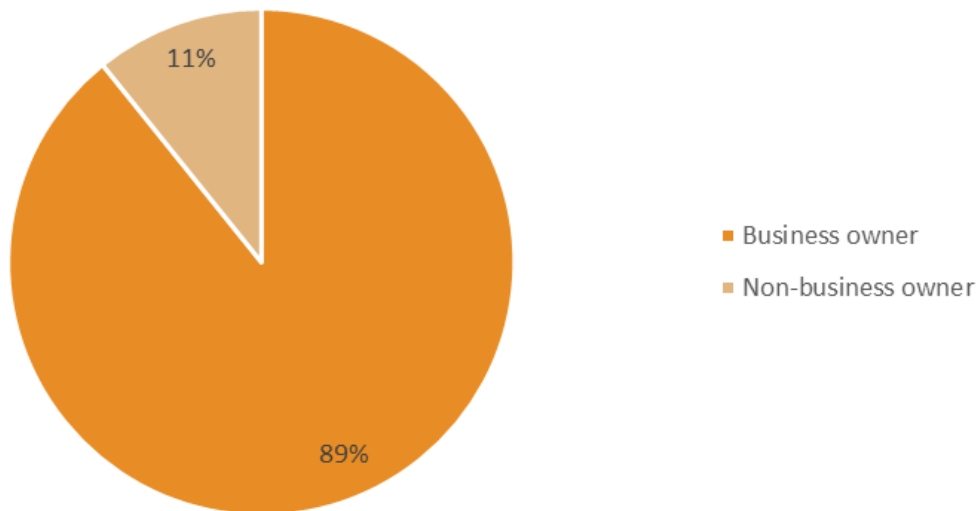


Figure 7. Business ownership (n=195).

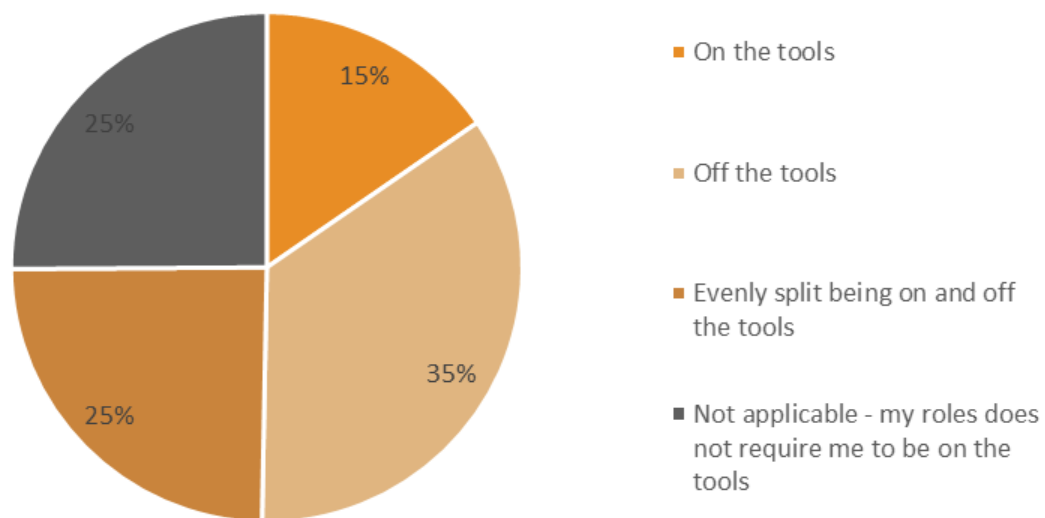


Figure 8. On or off the tools (n=195).



The phrase “on the tools” is a term used by builders to describe working on building sites and participating in the physical construction of homes. Conversely, “off the tools” means that builders are working in other roles that do not involve them actively constructing homes.

Around a third of builders were off the tools, with another quarter splitting their time evenly between being on and off the tools. A quarter of builder responses were from people in roles that did not require them to be on the tools at all.

When interpreting the findings in this report, it should be noted that a quarter of the builders in the sample are not trade certified builders, but other kinds of residential building professionals.

3.2 Communication with clients – when and how?

It was important to understand how much of a builder’s time is spent communicating with clients and what that communication looks like.

Builders were asked how often they communicate with clients, and almost half said multiple times a day (Figure 9).

Builders reported communicating with clients through multiple channels (Figure 10). About 82% spoke to clients on the phone, and roughly the same number emailed clients. Three-quarters of builders dealt with clients face to face. Just over half used texting or other messaging apps, and a minority used build communication software or social media.

41.5% of builders were communicating with clients using four different methods (Figure 11). The average number of ways a builder communicated with clients was three. Builders were communicating frequently with their clients, using multiple channels.

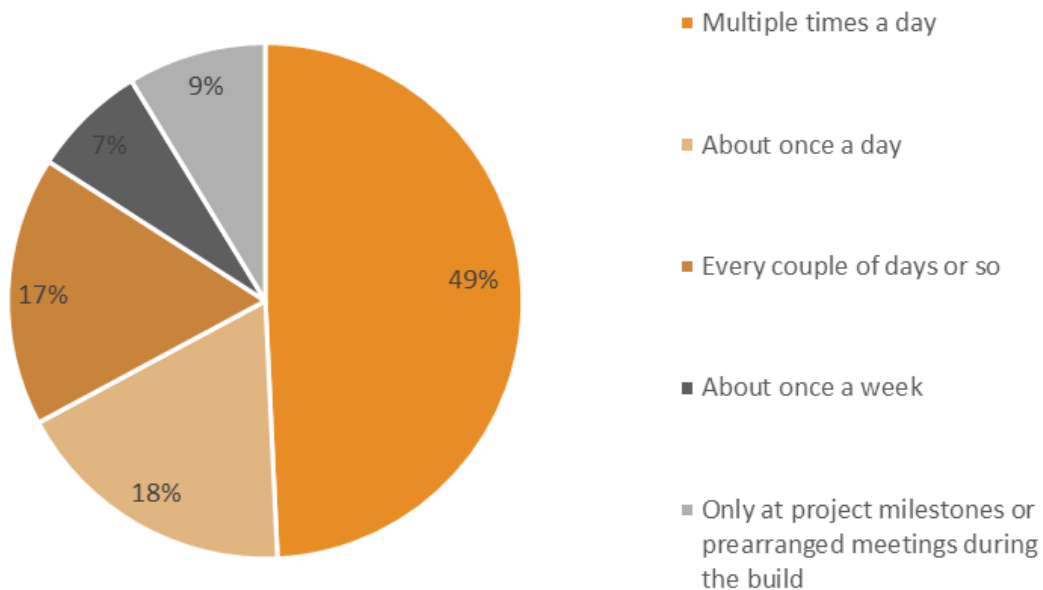


Figure 9. Frequency of communication with client (n=195).

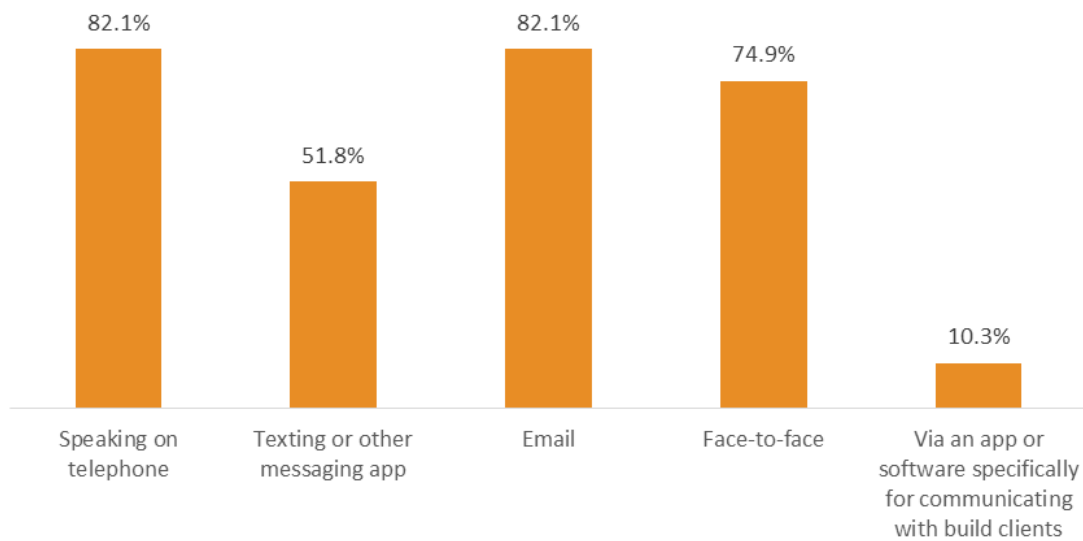


Figure 10. Builder communication methods (n=195).

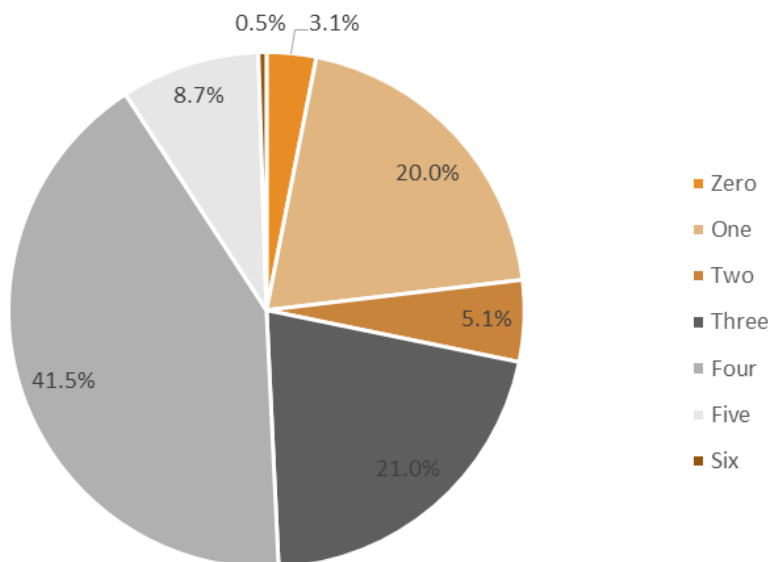


Figure 11. Number of communication channels used by builders (n=195).

The builders who were interviewed often adopted a two-pronged approach to communication. They used phone calls or face-to-face communication followed up with emails to communicate with their clients. Emails were a common method of communication between builders and clients, and builders often stressed the importance of documenting in writing their conversations with clients that may impact the build or the client’s expectations of the build.

Yeah, I do. I just make a conscious effort of trying to keep most of the communication via email. Even if we’ve had a conversation and talked about something, I’ll normally confirm it at some point with an email as well.

Typically, yeah, obviously discussions [or something] and then backing up with emails and potentially making sure that they’ve understood.



However, there were concerns for builders when they only communicated in writing, as it was difficult to know how their messages or advice were received by the client. The following two excerpts describe the ways builders preferred to move to verbal forms of communication if they sensed an issue brewing for the client.

It's hard to get a feeling from an email so when I write something to them ... If I send you something and you're not quite sure, just give me a call instead of sending me an angry email back to me. That could be it for both of us, just give me a call and I'm happy to explain it to you. Yeah, I've definitely done that.

It's no different than dealing with one of your friends. It's like, kind of, try and see some common ground ... If it's an email trail and you kind of sense that something's getting a wee bit titchy via email, then stop emailing and start talking and take your time on things.

Builders often described the need for written communication to keep everything on the record but also acknowledged that relying solely on this more-formal communication channel was not always good for the relationship with the client. Maintaining a healthy functional relationship required the use of multiple methods of keeping the client up to date, and face-to-face or telephone contact was reported as being the best way to keep clients feeling informed but also looked after.

To get an idea of how much builders felt client communication was intruding on their personal or non-work lives, we asked about when they dealt with clients. Most builders (82.6%) reported dealing with clients outside normal business hours (Figure 12).

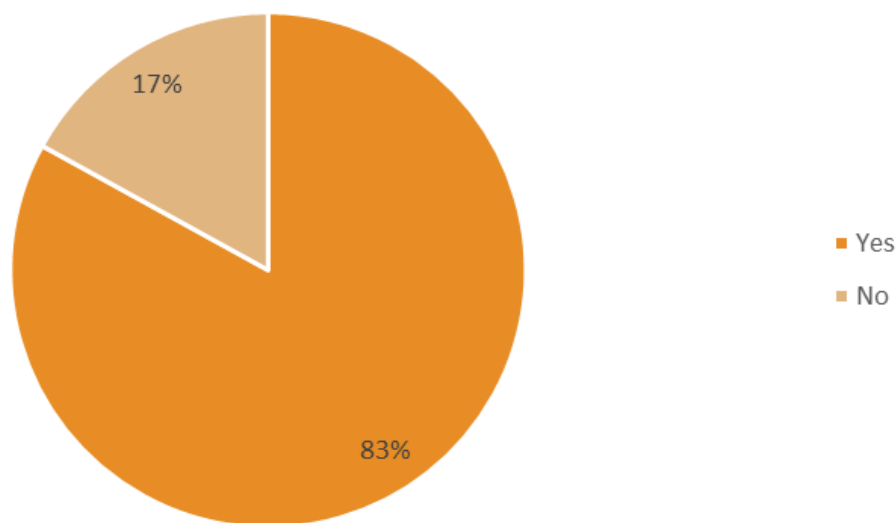


Figure 12. Proportion of builders dealing with clients outside business hours (n=195).

Half said that they would deal with a client outside of business hours several times a week, with a further 31.1% doing so about weekly (Figure 13). These results indicate that this has become standard practice in residential building.

Those builders who said they dealt with clients outside normal business hours were asked how often this happened in the weekends (Figure 14). A large majority (93.8%) dealt with clients in the weekend, although for most (61.6%) this was only the occasional weekend. A quarter (25.2%) were dealing with clients most weekends.

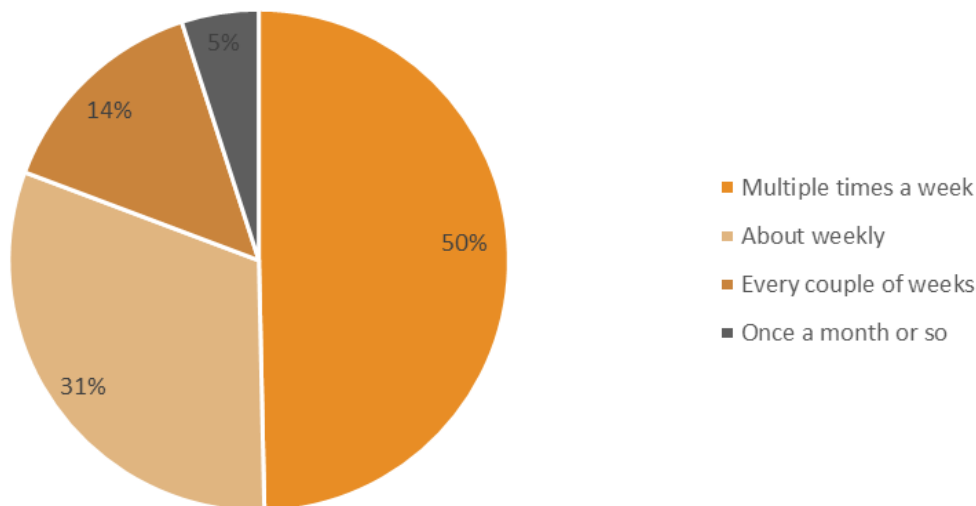


Figure 13. Frequency of dealing with clients outside business hours (n=161).

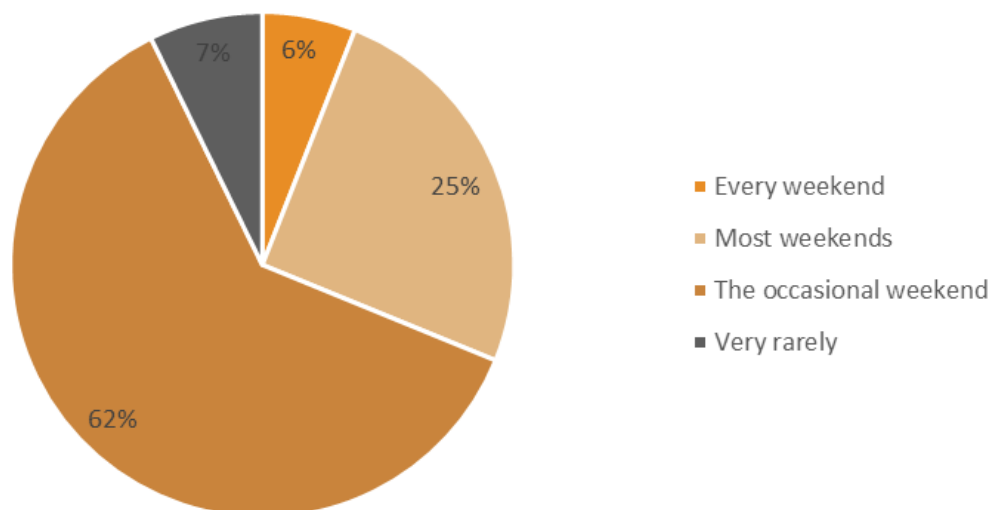


Figure 14. Frequency of dealing with clients during the weekend (n=161).

These survey results indicate that it is relatively common for builders to work outside of the traditional working week. In the interviews, some builders explained why this was necessary.

For me personally, I don't [set boundaries] because I'm involved at the start of forming a relationship and a connection with the clients. I do find a big part of my success that I have is I communicate quite strongly and quickly with my clients. I sort of feel like the quicker that I respond to them or communicate with them, the more chance they are feeling trust and a connection with me. If I build their trust, I feel like they are going to ignore the other building companies that they might be talking with very early on. So yes, sometimes it is phone calls at 8 o'clock at night, 10 o'clock on a Sunday morning.

I keep my phone on, I mean I only have one phone and that's the phone number that's on all our vehicles, signs and everything ... In the end, I want the jobs, and I have no salesperson ... Sometimes it's super busy and I can't find time to do anything. Sometimes I have all the time in the world. So it does go up and down.



Being available to clients was considered essential in building a trusting relationship, which was in turn important to secure the job. Being available by phone at all times was a common theme for the builders who were interviewed, and it was generally accepted that this was just how it had to be.

There was more variation in builders' approaches to working with clients in the weekends. Some builders saw the need to communicate on weekends to fit around clients, acknowledging that many clients may be unavailable during the working week.

I do a lot of my stuff on the weekends because that's when a client can see you, these days, with financial pressure and that they both need to be working. I tend to take time off during the week rather than the weekends. I work weekends to help the clients.

I try and keep my communications as consistent as I can. I do set parameters about what I do ... But if someone rings me in the weekend and it is a client I've worked on before, usually there's a reason for that so I will answer that phone call.

Other builders put boundaries around client contact in the weekends.

No ... generally, I won't answer an email at the weekend, or I won't answer a text at the weekend. Once you start doing that, especially in the early parts of a job or the sales process type thing, then you're kind of doing it ... they expect you to do it all the time. I always make a conscious effort not to get back to my clients until Monday just so I can keep the weekends to myself.

While builders described a variety of approaches to dealing with clients outside normal business hours, very few mentioned whether they explicitly explained their availability to clients. A lack of clarity for clients over when they can expect to get hold of their builder could be creating tension in the relationship.

Builders didn't discuss the impact out-of-hours communication with clients was having on their personal lives or their mental health. The mental health impacts of tension in the relationship are covered later in the results section. Disagreements with clients can have significant detrimental effects on builder mental health. It is possible that some builders might be making themselves available to clients at all times to avoid the distress caused by unhappy clients.

3.3 Working with clients – the tension points

Builders were asked a variety of questions about what it was like to work with clients. They were presented with statements about working with clients and were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each one.

The statements described issues that might be impacting the builder-client relationship, both positively and negatively. Some statements reflect the anecdotal stories the research team heard from builders and clients as this study was being designed, and others tap into issues that are commonly accepted as tension points in the residential building process (such as consenting).

The results are presented for each statement from the survey along with excerpts from the interviews that give the results context and provide some explanation of why or how the issue is experienced by builders.



Client expectations

Almost two-thirds of builders (64.1%) said that clients often have unrealistic expectations of their builder (Figure 15). Client expectations were frequently discussed by builders in the interviews regarding issues such as budget, build time, defects, builder availability, variations, build quality and access to site.

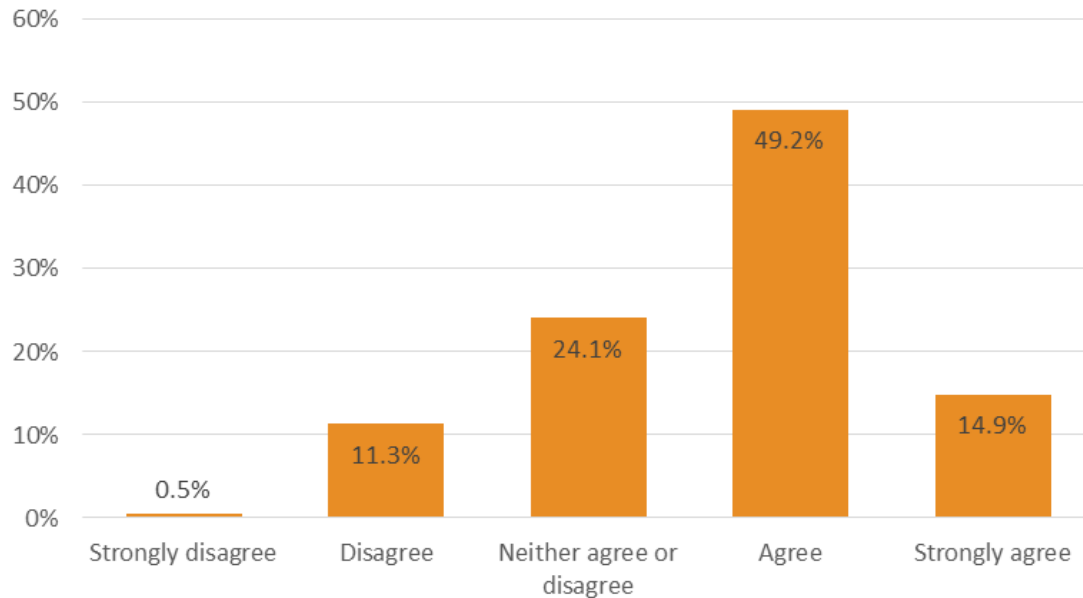


Figure 15. Clients often have unrealistic expectations of their builder (n=195).

During the interviews, tension points in the client relationship were identified. These often arose where clients' expectations did not match what a builder was delivering. Builders described how client expectations are often very high, and it can be difficult to manage these without straining the relationship. Tensions arises when the build progress or the product itself differs from what a client might have expected. Builders often mentioned various other stressors that might be exacerbating tensions alongside client expectations. Finances or the cost of the build was a common co-stressor.

The big thing is expectations – that's the biggest problem in our industry is controlling their expectations. It doesn't matter how good or bad the job goes, if they get what they expect, that's it.

I find the last few weeks quite stressful managing the client's expectations. Some clients are obviously great and then you get the other ones that nit-pick every tiny little element ... Especially when it comes to paint finish, I find it to be the biggest thing that clients expect it to be this airbrushed magazine product. There's always going to be tiny little fix ups and bits and pieces. But I think being able to explain to them the colour that they choose and what is acceptable is really important. I mean somebody just gets them on a bad day, especially if finances are getting tight when we're getting towards the end of the build.

I think the expectation, you know, when you build a home. When you first start building the house, you've got this renovating mindset. First you see the frames, and the next minute you have these room. It's looking good. Then suddenly, all these prices come up for the house and you've got all the prices that they must pick over. Then you hear things like, I don't like this, I didn't



sign up for all these prices, but that's part of the building process. Clients don't kind of get that because they haven't done it before. It's expectation, it's not necessarily quality of work, it just the expectation on how the process works.

Builders described the way clients' expectations can be high in terms of the amount of information they want about the build. Some builders told us about clients who rely on the builder to inform them about the build process to a high level of detail. Others described clients who did their own research and whose expectations might be elevated due to information they have found online.

Well, they think they know. They find out a bit about construction and then they think they know a lot about construction, but the reality is they don't. That's why they want to be a lot more involved, which makes it really difficult. I mean one of the projects going at the moment, the lady, she is very involved. She wants to know about the products and things like that which results in me spending a lot of time going through products with her and recommending them. I say, you know, that's a good idea, you can use that or no you can't use that. If you want to use it, the consequences are this and that. I am spending a lot of time basically helping her choose materials, which normally I wouldn't have to because I know straight away what is actually suitable and what is not.

They look it up on Google and then they come back saying, you're not doing that right and all this type of stuff, and you just explain to them that, hey, I've been doing this over 30 years. I think I know what I'm doing. This is the way that we do it ... you'll find at the end of it all it'll be checked off. The inspectors will tick it all off and you'll have a nice, safe, healthy, waterproof home.

What we found is, due to the internet, people have access to more information. As a result of that, people become more of a problem because they don't believe everything you say. Back in the early days, the builder would come in and would know everything, they knew nothing. Whatever he did worked. Now the client feels that they have got a certain amount of knowledge that they've picked up from the internet, also stories they've heard of good jobs or bad jobs. They may believe now that they have a lot more say, and I don't have a problem with that in general, but they also believe at times they know more. We're not or the industry were not doing things the right way because somebody told somebody. For me now is the single biggest challenge.

With information available online, clients are in a better position to be able to question and involve themselves in the build process. More knowledgeable clients are not necessarily a negative. However, it appears that more-informed clients are asking for more engagement with their builders and the building process than in the past.

Some builders described the ways in which clients' expectations might be impacted by bad building experiences in the past or have heard others' stories of other people's bad experiences. The excerpt below describes how "bad builders" are damaging the reputation of the rest of the industry and eroding client trust in all builders.

A lot of the cases it's because they've had a bad build with someone before, something's happened before and so they don't trust builders. You know you would have heard stories of bad builders out there. Some builders just give the industry such a bad name. People got in their mind that all builders are the same, but they're not.



All these factors may be working together to create a more vigilant client who demands more involvement in the build process. The greater demand for information about the build and high expectations around the quality of the finished product is putting more pressure on builders.

Setting a client's expectations early in the build process was one way builders managed these issues. Explaining what the client should expect right from the start was one way to prevent client expectations from mismatching what the builder could deliver.

You set out all those expectations right in the beginning and kind of explain to them that this is the practice that we follow. I especially like to explain the earthworks side of it and the council side of it and the delays that we can experience at times. Also, the fact that they may see the build with no tradesmen for a few days at a time doesn't mean that there's nothing happening. There's behind the scenes such as orders arriving or things being processed, and they expect, of course, to see a physical person there.

Other builders told us about how they make an effort to put themselves in the client's position and to understand where they might be coming from. They had an awareness that, unlike builders, clients might never have built a home before and there is a need to support them through the process.

I always look at as the client's point of view, whether they understand what building is all about. I find that a lot of clients don't really understand the process. So they get all stressed and uptight, and you've just got to de-stress their lives rather than take things personal. Yeah, a lot of people take things too personal. So you just got to de-stress the client. Once you have de-stressed them, usually you can repair the relationships and move on.

I definitely do my best to look at the client's point of view and try and understand that, hey, they don't build all the time and maybe there's a misunderstanding there somewhere ... Whatever's happened, as long as you explain it in a way that they'll understand, and as long as they think you're genuine, it generally doesn't become an issue.

Every job incurs a challenge in one way or another. It's really just a matter of how you handle it or what the reaction is. Or maybe if it's been a really smooth job, and there's a wee challenge that might come towards the end. It could be anything from something caused by another contractor who's obviously working for you ... it could be over an invoice that was potentially a provisional sum, and then you've had to on-charge something there that the client got a surprise for. Every job will have a wee challenge, it's just a matter of how it gets handled, I guess.

We asked builders about when the relationship with the client tended to get into trouble. They agreed that tension points normally occurred towards the end of the build process.

The end is always very stressful because you're coming to the end of the job. You've got a deadline coming up or there's always so much going on at the end. I would say the end would probably be the most challenging, near the end. At the start everything is fine, everyone is learning.



Many builders told us that, at the end of the build they are often dealing with multiple factors that could cause tension between them and the client. Timeframes and budgets were frequently mentioned as end-of-build tension points, and these builders said things break down due to the culmination of several different stresses for clients.

I know when we get to that final month and that everything is getting to the end, then the clients get really, really difficult in a sense that they want to move in, they set a date for themselves in their heads. You've given them a date, but then they would make changes or there won't be supplies or it'll be raining or whatever the case may be.

Usually clients are sort of like over and sick of the project or they just get over things, I guess. It's not till the end that all the costs are added up. I suppose in effect they probably realise how much they spent. We're transparent of the numbers such as whether we would do something for a fixed price or start quite openly. But that doesn't stop people from sort of being disappointed as to how much they've spent.

Issues related to variations and access to site were also common. These tension points again relate to a mismatch in expectations between builders and clients, causing the relationship to deteriorate if not managed early on.

Some builders described clients who requested variations to their build midway through the process without understanding the impact the change will have on things like building consent, budget or delivery timeframes. Client expectations in some cases appear to be that the plan is able to be changed at any time.

I mean, sometimes we've got clients that we're building a house for, we're halfway through their house, and all of a sudden they request ... how much would it be to add a garage to this side of the house? It's like, oh my god, where did this conversation come from? I can think of three clients in the last year that have said that. How much to build a garage on? We have building consents, and we got the roof on. Then they ask to put a garage on. A lot of clients seem to express or think that they know what we do. There's lots of it, it just shows how oblivious they are to the building consents, designs, sign-offs and timeframes.

Access to site was frequently mentioned by builders as a cause of tension, with client expectations of relatively unrestricted access to site being at odds with the builder's need to control the site. This issue elicited some of the most extreme stories of clients behaving inappropriately towards builders. It appears that access to site may be one of the issues where client expectation and builder reality are furthest apart.

He hounded and disrupted the builders when they were putting up the frames. Him and his wife actually pulled out some beach chairs and sat there having coffees and sandwiches just watching the guys. They're builders, they know what they are doing. They know what they are doing when they put the frames and trusses up. Meanwhile, there's the bloody homeowner sitting there just watching them on their beach chairs. That was quite intimidating, and I thought, well, I got to phone them up and say, "Oh, can you get off your beach chairs and let the guys work?" They said, "Well we're not talking to them and we're not stopping them. We just like to watch our house getting built, it's quite entertaining and interesting."



The builder in the excerpt below described flow-on effects of allowing clients to visit the site unsupervised. Site visits appear to be a trigger point for misunderstandings if not managed well.

I mainly get clients to text or call me if they want to go to site. I have no problem showing them around. However, when clients turn up to site to look and there's no one around to explain things to them, that's where we'll have the most problems only because they didn't understand what they were looking at or what it should look like. Usually, we give them times that they come through to make choices and decisions anyway. They know that if they want to, they just need to give me a call. We have a lock box code that we don't give them ... because then they take family members there like mum or friends. Then the mum or friend will tell them something which will be said back to us. Therefore, they have to be accompanied by a manager to be allowed on site.

Builders told stories of clients accessing site without permission. They interpreted this as clients as viewing the site as theirs to access because they're paying for the build.

We've got an electronic lock system we put into our builds. [Clients] would bypass the lock system ... I've had clients sit and watch my builders build and the builders will call me and go ... I can't even go to the toilet. These people are sitting there in deck chairs watching us work ... Clients feel because they're building the house and they're paying for it, they have the right to everything. They don't get the clear thing. You've actually signed over your site. Your site is my property up until I'm done. I could exclude you if I wanted to, but we don't. But it still creates friction. It still creates friction.

Below, we discuss good communication practice and the importance of setting boundaries to mitigate tension points. Where client expectations are out of sync with the realities of the build process, clearer communication earlier on might be helpful. Many builders told us that the key to maintaining a healthy functional relationship with a client is taking an empathetic approach across the build process and building trust.

Trust

Trust was a consistent theme in the builder interviews, with many describing the ways they worked hard to build and maintain trust with clients. In the survey, more than half (56.4%) the builders disagreed with the statement that there was little trust in the builder-client relationship, with a further 30.3% responding neutrally (Figure 16).

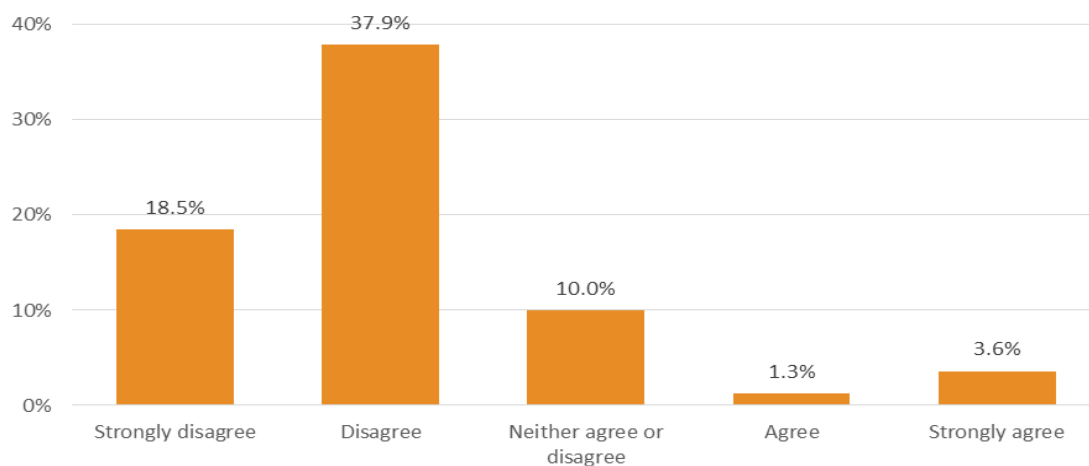


Figure 16. There is very little trust in the builder-client relationship (n=195).



This indicates that a lack of trust is not perceived to be an issue for most builders navigating the builder-client relationship. In the interviews, builders described the time and effort they invest in creating a trusting relationship with clients. Many told us that the key to building a trusting relationship with clients is communication. One builder described how ensuring that clients feel well informed and listened too can prevent tension points from cropping up.

Clients actually don't care if I don't know the technical stuff. What they want is someone to listen to them. So I sort of find that as long as I can, then I'll go away and get them the answers. They're not that worried. All they want is to get their point across and feel heard. They really want to be kept in the loop.

A lack of communication or slow communication was described as eroding trust in the builder.

Yeah, if they communicate with you and they don't hear back from you for more than a day or two, then they started asking what's going wrong? You don't respect me, and you don't communicate with me. I like to communicate with our clients to make them feel like they're being heard and keep them on our side.

One builder told us about giving advice to other builders on their team to encourage them to foster a trusting relationship. They recommend early and transparent communication to avoid tension later on.

The clients got hundreds of thousands of dollars tied up in this and that's something that they don't have control over, which they're probably not used to. They don't understand and don't know what to expect. So I sort of said to all of them, if a client trusts you, that's half the battle. If you're not talking to them and not being transparent, it's not helping you. You need to initiate that contact right from the beginning. Introduce yourself and let them know if they have any problems, they can give you a call. So the client can be like, OK, that's fine. I've got this, I don't need to stress or have my guard up when I'm communicating with them either.

Trust was also gained by builders through being honest in their dealings with clients. One builder explained that they are honest about things that go wrong during the build but also honest in the way they do business. Other builders also described the need to be honest with clients when things didn't go to plan.

I'm as honest as I possibly can be about any situations that occur, if stuff ups happen or something ... I've found that, if you give people a good deal, then they trust you. As soon as you've got people's trust, it makes a whole lot of work a lot easier. If there's a credit due for a wealthy client, if it's \$4.60, I give them the credit \$4.60. I don't try and just sort of shrug it off and just take the money, you know, that sort of approach. I found that's helpful.

In the survey, builders were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'Clients don't trust builders to get the job done'. Responses showed that most builders do not see a lack of trust as a problem in the builder-client relationship. Nearly half (48.2%) did not agree with the statement, and 29.2% responded neutrally (Figure 17). This issue was not raised by builders in the interviews, although it was a theme for clients.

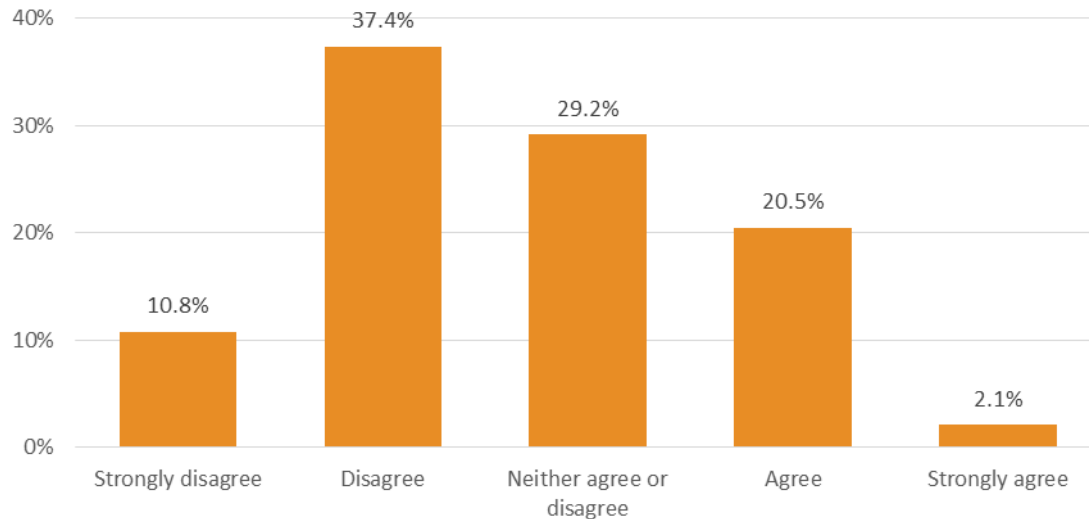


Figure 17. Clients do not trust builders to get the job done (n=195).

Communication and information demands

In the survey, builders were asked about the amount of communication they were engaged in with clients (Figure 18). Builders were divided over whether the level of communication required of them today was impacting the speed at which they are delivering homes. There were examples of both opinions in the interviews too. Some builders felt that regular communication was a necessary and important part of the job, while others thought it was excessive and hindered delivery.

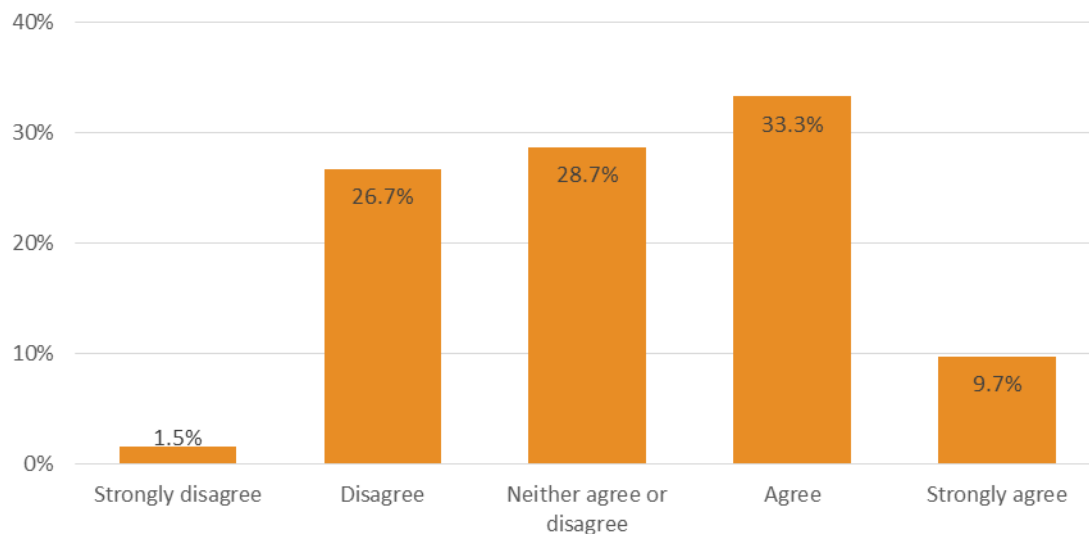


Figure 18. Builders must communicate with clients so much that it is slowing down the build process (n=195).

One builder described feeling like they were giving away advice for free compared to other professions that charge for their communication time with clients. At the end of the excerpt, they alluded to building the costs of communication time into the build price.

It's frustrating but you're doing it for free. I don't know exactly what your background is, but for example, lawyers will charge you for 10 minutes or 15 minutes slots. They charge you, don't they? I'm quite often on the phone for half an hour sometimes and always with a client while I'm doing something on



my computer. But when I'm in the office, it can be that I'm on the phone with a client for a for an hour. And that's all time. They ask me questions. I'm giving it away. So I need to charge it. Sorry, that's what it is.

Increased levels of communication are not just about keeping the relationship on track. Builders told us about clients who want greater involvement in the build process and to make more-informed decisions about the build. There were mixed opinions about more-informed clients – some builders felt clients had a responsibility to educate themselves about the build process and recommended they rely on the internet to do this. Others found more-informed clients to be challenging and did not appreciate them bringing what they'd learned online onto site. One builder described how time-consuming it is for them to be educating the client about things like materials. Where a builder might usually be left to make these kinds of decisions on the client's behalf, it appears that clients are increasingly wanting a greater level of understanding about some of the technical elements of their house build.

They find out a bit about construction and then they think they know a lot about construction, but the reality is they don't. That's why they want to be a lot more involved, which makes it really difficult. I mean one of the projects going at the moment, the lady, she is very involved. She wants to know about the products and things like that which results in me spending a lot of time going through products with her and recommending them. I say, you know, that's a good idea, you can use that or no you can't use that. If you want to use it, the consequences are this and that. I am spending a lot of time basically helping her choose materials, which normally I wouldn't have to because I know straight away what is actually suitable and what is not.

The builder in the next excerpt has taken a different approach to managing client communication demands. They have put a process in place where another staff member steps in to manage clients when they need more time invested. Consistent with builders in the survey, this builder acknowledged the need to watch how much time is spent dealing with clients as it impacts delivery time.

Once they start getting a bit demanding, I step back ... I'm one of the more expensive labour units there, so why not get the receptionist to take them to the house? So now they'll come down to the sales office. I don't even get called. They don't come see me. The receptionist will take them up to the house and the builders and look at it from a distance. We try not to get them to talk to the builders either. Again, they'll take up time talking with someone. Then, of course, my productivity is gone and the builders. It's been such a tight ship that we're running here that I've really got to keep an eye on how many hours it takes for each house. That's one of things, when clients turn up, they're basically instructed to keep conversations very brief with the guys building the house. You got to be personable but there's a limit.

Builders perceive an increasing demand on their time from clients who want more information and greater involvement in the building of their homes. Builders report that these communication demands are impacting delivery, and some are introducing new strategies to manage this.

Half the builders (50.3%) agreed that clients want to know about everything that happens on site (Figure 19). Tension around site visits is also relevant here. Clients don't just want to be told about the build progress – builders report that they want to see it for themselves and on a regular basis.

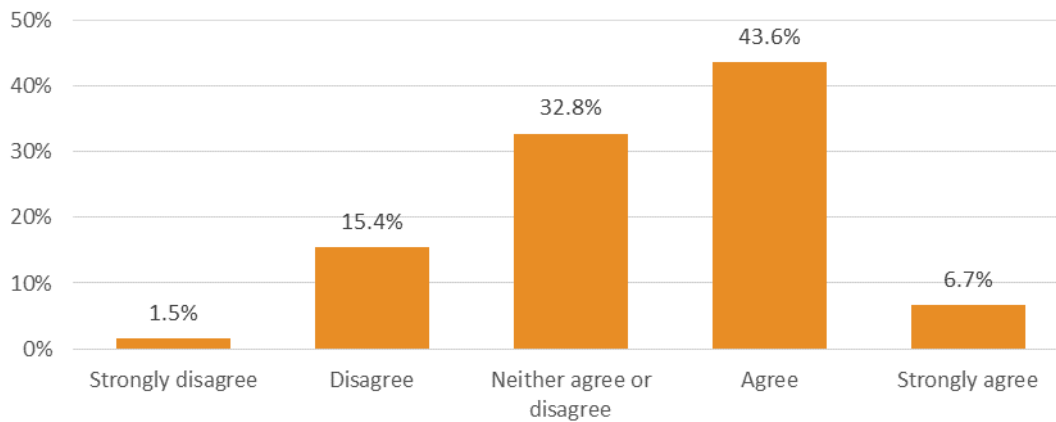


Figure 19. Clients want to know about everything that happens on site (n=195).

Site visits often appeared to be the precursor to tension between the builder and the client. Builders described clients who, in their opinion, didn't understand what they were looking at or didn't see what they expected to see, and this precipitated conversations with the builder that sometimes led to conflict.

It's just one of those things when working on site. So some clients are really good in understanding and others have to look at everything and analyse it and all those things. They look it up on Google and then they come back saying, you're not doing that right and all this type of stuff, and you just explain to them that, hey, I've been doing this over 30 years. I think I know what I'm doing. This is the way that we do it ... you'll find at the end of it all it'll be checked off.

The builder in the excerpt below talked about ensuring the site is presentable in anticipation of clients visiting. They stressed the importance of fixing mistakes quickly and keeping a tidy site so that there's nothing to trigger complaints from clients.

Get out information weekly and say this will be where the house will be at – we don't want anyone on site at that stage or this is what you're going to see when you're on site. If the client turns up on site and someone scheduled the roof. Even though you're going to replace that sheet of iron, it's 5 o'clock on a Friday and you don't get a chance to. I try to tell my guys, if you stuff up, fix it before you leave if you can. Don't leave it for a week for the client to see the mistakes that you've made. Then the weekend comes, and the clients want to see the progress. They see the mess and the things from the roof, things like that. Keeping a tidy site is the best form of getting your clients on site.

The proliferation of information on the internet has enabled clients to become more knowledgeable about the building process. This is seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage by builders. Builders were asked if they were receiving more-informed questions about their build, and if so, whether the questions were challenging to answer. Almost half (48.7%) of builders reported that clients were asking more complex and technical questions during their builds (Figure 20). However, the majority (72.8%) reported that they felt able to answer these complex client questions.

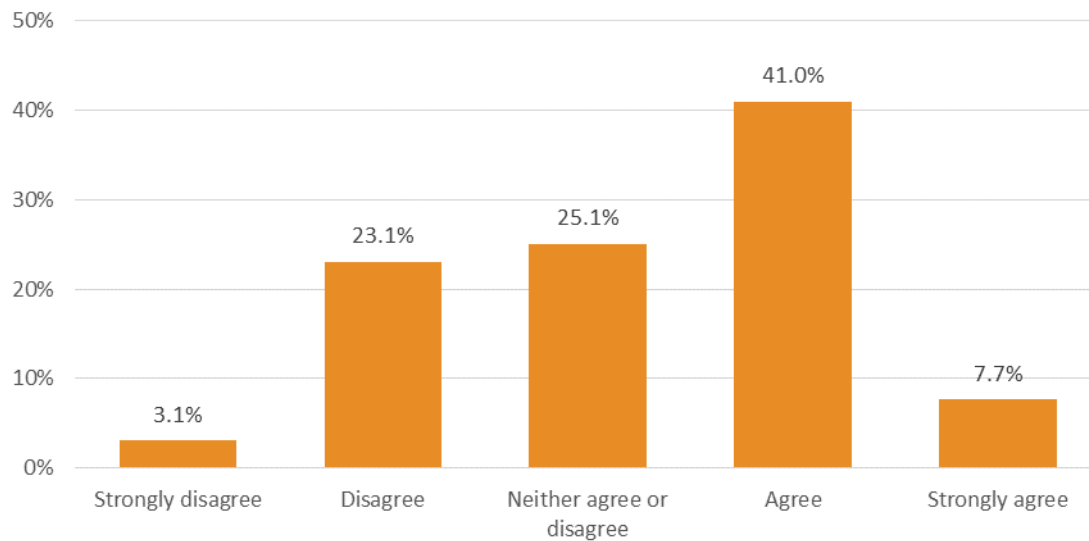


Figure 20. Clients seem to be asking increasingly complex and technical questions about their build (n=195).

In the interviews, builders often described clients using the knowledge they'd gained from the internet to question a builder's methods. Similar to the survey findings, in the interviews, builders appeared confident responding to clients questioning their work.

The other single battle would be people thinking they have all the answers or know the answers based on the article. My great uncle Google. I point out to the clients now, because of Google and with all the information out there, they can do more research on what they would like and want in their home. Then they can actually bring those answers to me and instead of me having to spend hours researching on their behalf. You get the two extremes, the one that knows it all or the one who plays totally dumb.

What is happening nowadays is everyone has an advice and are watching these TV programmes, then suddenly they think they're experts in construction. They get on the internet and they find this and find that, which results in them just getting confused even though we finalised everything before we started the job. They'll be challenging, and most of our clients would rather make the job up as they go.

I had one customer that owed me all that money ring me up one day. He goes, "Dude, you're doing your job wrong." I said, really? How do you know that? He goes, "Mate, I was on Google last night" and he says he was watching how you're supposed to lay blocks. You're doing it all wrong.

While builders expressed frustration at clients bringing their own knowledge to the build process, most appeared confident to explain to the client that they know what they are doing.

External factors driving relationship tension

The research team had several ideas about external factors that might be contributing to relationship strain for builders and clients. The first was the leaky building crisis. To test whether builders agreed that this issue was a factor, they were asked whether they believed the leaky building crisis was making some build clients more anxious about building their homes (Figure 21). About half (51.8%) reported that they felt it was. Just over a quarter (25.1%) disagreed that leaky homes were a factor.

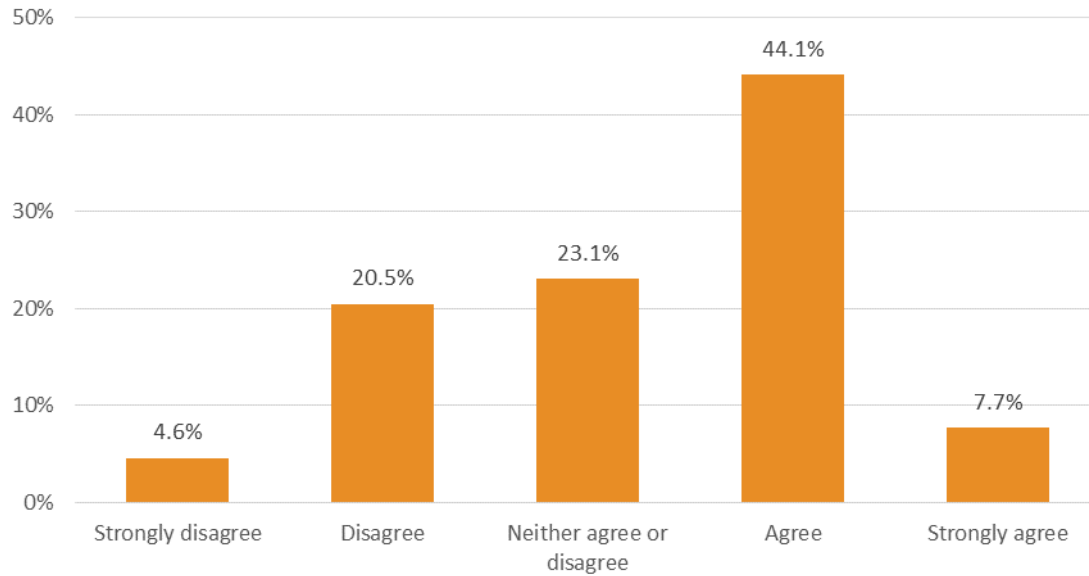


Figure 21. The leaky building crisis has made clients more anxious about the build process (n=195).

In the interviews, builders did not discuss the leaky building crisis from the client’s perspective. It was not a subject that was raised often. The builder quoted below explained how hurtful it was that all builders were blamed for the crisis.

Yet under the leaky homes, that every builder, no matter what, has to prove that he is innocent, that everybody can automatically call you and say you’re guilty, that hurt.

A further explanation for tension between builders and clients might be the consenting process. More than three-quarters (78%) of builders reported that they found themselves managing client frustrations over the consenting process (Figure 22). This also came up in the interviews. Builders told us that, when the consenting process drags out, it causes frustration for the client, and it puts pressure on the builder.

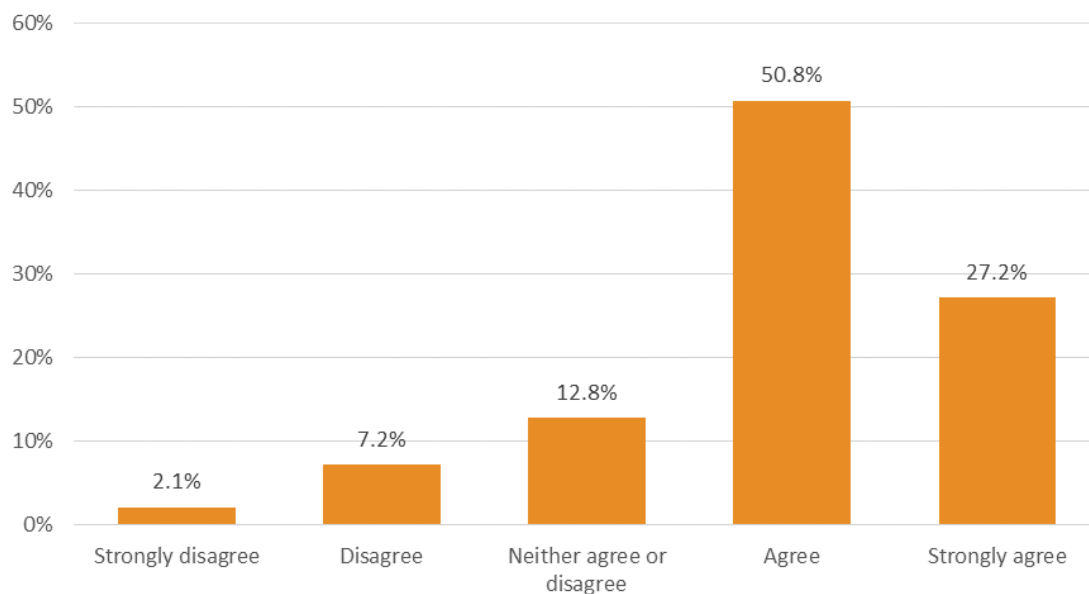


Figure 22. Builders are having to manage client frustrations about the consenting process (n=195).



One builder described how they feel that builders get left holding the responsibility for long or difficult consenting applications. As the person receiving the payment for the job, the client has an expectation that the builder will get consent on their behalf.

We've been in ... headlock with [our local building consent authority] since last year, May. We actually applied for a building consent in May last year, and we are still not even at the point where we could get consent. Now, the funny thing is, what our engineer suggested in June last year, the council now last week have actually suggested we do, and this has cost my clients three more engineers, more reports, more money in change in design and a huge amount of additional work. But if these things are just out there, how do you deal with it, how do you battle with them? Because the building company goes, "Oh, actually, it's not our problem", the designer says, "Well, it's not my problem", the client says "Well, I've come to you guys, I'm paying you guys to do the work". But if you pay someone to do the work, do you know what work he should be doing, what you're getting for your money's worth?

In the following excerpt, a builder explained how the unpredictability of consenting timeframes can disrupt delivery when there are multiple jobs under way. The builder is then left to manage client expectations that the build starts as soon as the consent is granted.

Sometimes consent can take between 4 weeks, other times it can take 6 weeks. Then jobs can suddenly all be ready at the same time. That can put a lot of pressure on you, yeah. So the clients are so up to date, they know exactly when the consent has been granted. You can't say, "Listen I'm not ready to do this", then the client would say, "Why?", and we would say because we have this other job, and the clients say I don't care as the consent is ready.

It appears that builders are telling us that factors largely outside of an individual builder's control are contributing to builder-client relationship strain. Builders report that clients are looking to them to manage consenting hold-ups and timeframes. In the survey data, the leaky building crisis was acknowledged as contributing to clients' anxiety, but builders did not raise it as a central issue during the interviews.

Relationship dynamics

Builders were asked who holds the balance of power in the builder-client relationship (Figure 23).

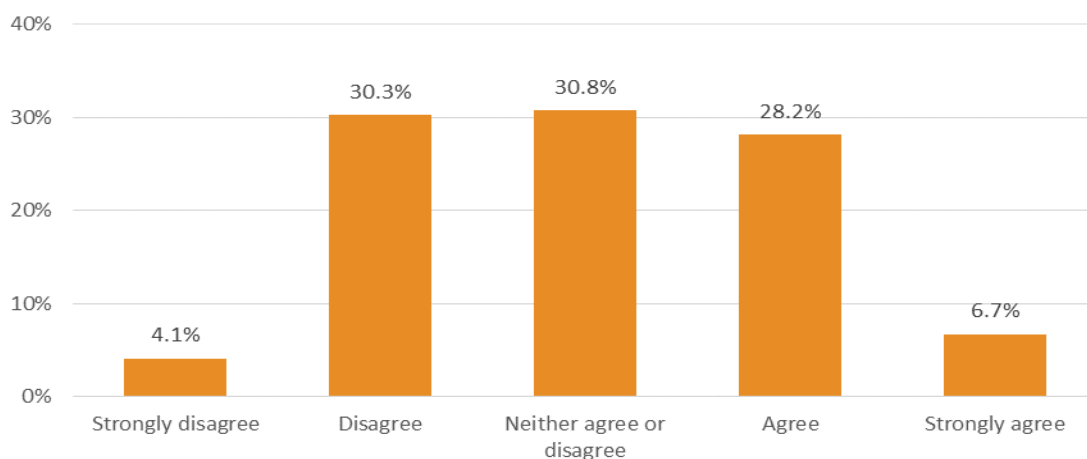


Figure 23. Clients hold all the power in the builder-client relationship (n=195).



This question aimed to assess whether builders were experiencing a power imbalance between themselves and the client. This question is important because when a person feels powerless in a relationship, they can feel helpless to change or improve it.

Builders' views in the survey were evenly split regarding whether clients held the balance of power in the builder-client relationship. When the conversations turned to the idea of power and control over the build process during the interviews, builders often shared stories about unhappy clients withholding payments and the need to go back to the contract or seek legal advice to resolve any issues.

The builder in the excerpt below shared a story of a client relationship that became highly dysfunctional. A consistent theme from the builder interviews was that of clients withholding payments if they were unhappy with any element of the build. Many builders described ending up in disputes or legal battles with clients to recover payments they said they were owed. This builder also described the relationships descent into arguments and name calling. These sorts of examples were relatively common in the builder interviews – we look at aggressive client communication in more detail later in this section.

We had battle after battle after battle from right from the start, right through ... it's been a year and a half to 2 years now, I think since we started, and we finished. He's living in there now and he still owes us. He still owes us money. We're still battling with them. He was one of our sorts of newish clients, sort of midway through a long contract, newish processes. A lot of the stuff we did was right. Some of the stuff we could've done better. But, you know, like right from the start, it made that build absolutely painful. So having arguments with the client, getting abused by the client, getting midnight emails from the client, calling me f*ing names, f*ing this and f*ing that.

The builders in these excerpts told us how they feel compelled to take responsibility for issues with the build even if they're not the builder's fault. This is done to avoid clients becoming unhappy with the builder and are examples of situations where the client is exerting some power over the builder.

But you always have to put the blame back on yourself to make sure the client feels good. Well, that's what I feel because then it is not an issue. If you tell a client, "Well, the reason that we're running late is because you couldn't decide, and you couldn't do this so we couldn't do that" and all that is going to do is get their back up, isn't it?

You just have to deal with that and just understand, hopefully by the end of it all, they're either happy – I haven't really had any real failures in my life ... one or two that sort of stretched you to the limit, but, you know, you just got to hold your tongue and keep it going because you're better off that way in the end. If you have that relationship just disappear, you just have trouble getting your money, that sort of thing. It's better to keep zipped. Deal with it the best way you can and box on through it all.

Client satisfaction with their builder

Builders were asked whether they felt they were able to satisfy their clients and whether doing a good job was enough to keep clients happy. Builders were asked whether they agreed with the statement that clients are only dissatisfied with their builder if they're not doing their job properly (Figure 24). Just over half (51.2%)



disagreed, indicating they believed clients are sometimes dissatisfied despite everything going to plan on site. Almost a third (32.8%) agreed with the statement. Responses to this question highlight that some builders feel that some clients will be unhappy even when the builder is delivering their home for them as planned.

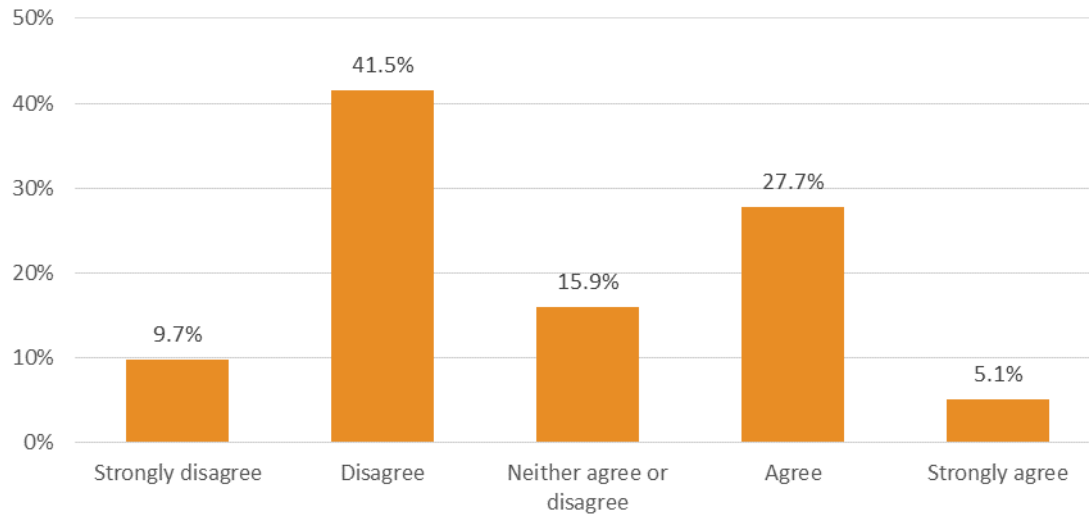


Figure 24. A client will only be dissatisfied if the builder isn't doing their job properly (n=195).

In a follow-up question, builders responded even more resoundingly, with 87.2% agreeing with the statement that some clients are never satisfied (Figure 25). Responses reveal a perception that there are some clients who will never be happy, no matter what the builder does.

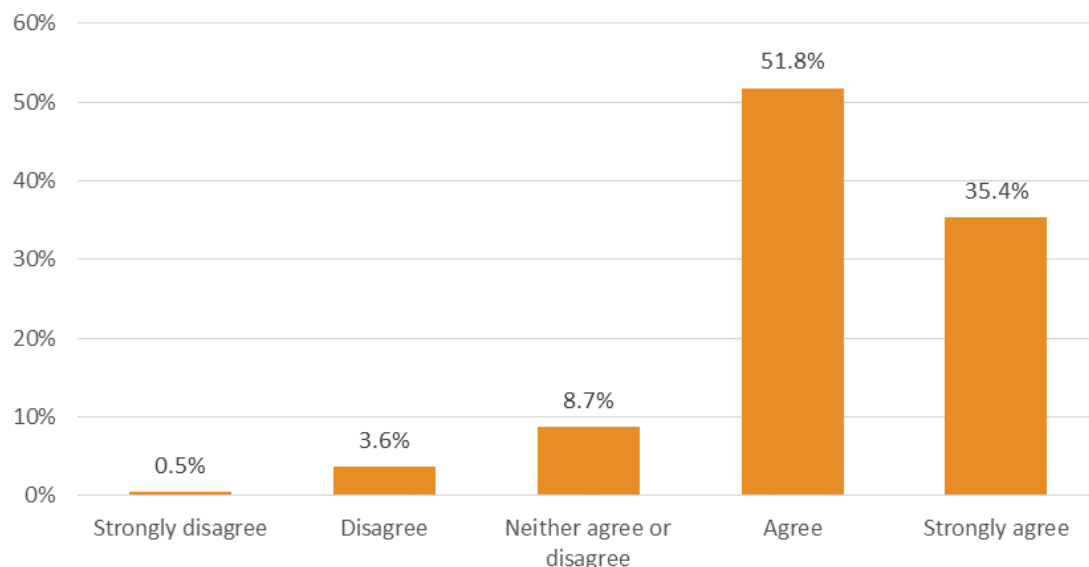


Figure 25. There are some clients that are never satisfied (n=195).

In the interviews, builders described being able to identify these sorts of clients early in the process. Some described refusing to do business with them entirely or having open and frank conversations with the client to avoid potential conflict as quickly as possible. Others reflected on the privileged position they were in to be able to pick and choose which clients they worked with to avoid difficult clients.



Generally I interview the clients. That's generally because some clients we won't work for. Whether we just, you know, I can smell a rat before we start the job. I think they just sometimes got too high expectations of what they can do for their budget. I think you can see it before we even start this, it's going to end us in trouble.

Some builders described times in their business where they could not afford to refuse jobs even though they recognised a client was likely to cause them stress.

So you sort of get caught sometimes on that seesaw ... I actually need to sign up this contract to justify the amount of time I put into it today. Sometimes you do sit there and go this client is actually one I need to steer off from. I probably don't actually want this client. Sometimes it does get a bit tricky.

During the stakeholder engagement as this research was developed, builders shared stories of clients communicating aggressively. To test whether this phenomenon was a common experience, builders were asked whether some clients can be aggressive in how they communicate during the build (Figure 26). Three-quarters (75.9%) of builders agreed that they are.

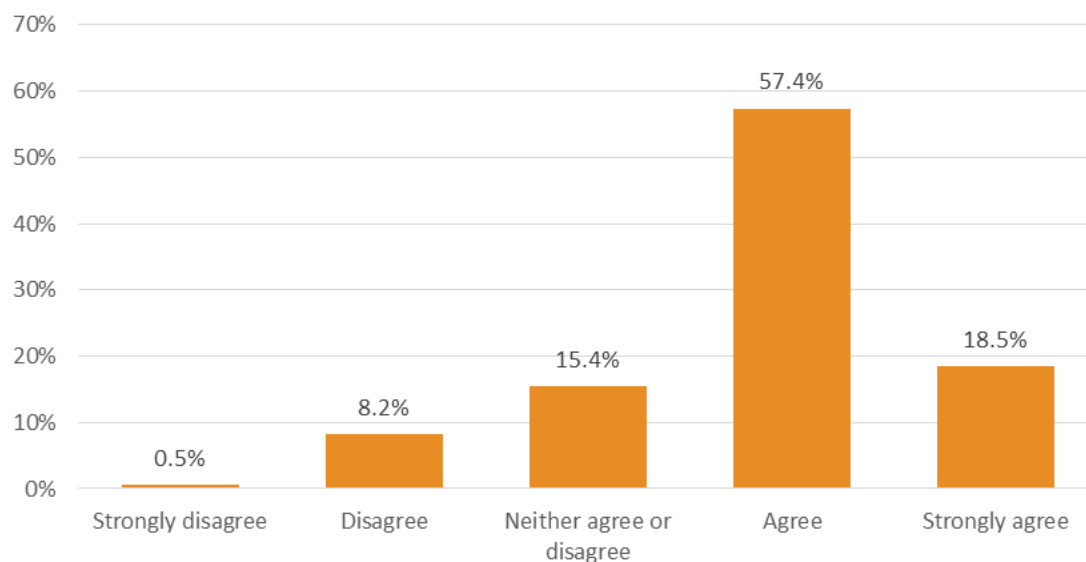


Figure 26. Some clients can be aggressive in how they communicate (n=195).

Some builders shared stories of clients who had communicated aggressively. Some explained that this was particularly evident in email communication, describing situations where clients tended to say things in harsher terms than they might in person or over the phone. Builders described how difficult clients impacted their entire team, not just themselves personally.

It's a funny thing. It's ... that bully mentality of I can have what I want if I scream loud enough or if I put as many question marks or exclamation marks in my email. It's that kind of harassment.

It was horrible but that was right from the start ... even just saying his name and thinking about it, I'm breaking a cold sweat. It stressed every area of our business from the guidance on site through to me, every team, business partner and architect. Everybody felt the pressure, the strain of this guy's experience who was just cutting us down ... We know he's a drunk. He's in the



middle of nowhere with nothing to do, has a few beers and gets on the wacky baccy then fires. Absolute emails of abuse and lies, a lot of lies as well. It's this story, that whole customer perspective. "When I'm at a restaurant ... My steak's well done. I wanted a medium. ... You call yourself chefs." That's what we were getting. "You call yourself builders. My mate's a builder, and he's been down here and had a look. Everything you've done is sh*t."

I've had other staff in my workplace that have been upset, cried or shake at the idea of having some clients come into the office. These clients were given trespass notices. We've said to them don't come into the office because they have upset, intimidated and scared some of the ladies in the office.

Builders often shared stories of clients who were aggressive and difficult to deal with. Builders were asked about what impact this kind of thing has on their stress levels and job satisfaction.

Stress and client issues

This part of the survey examined the different ways client relationship stress might impact builders and their work. In this section, only quantitative findings are presented. To avoid repetition, the qualitative results around mental health and client disagreements are presented in the next section of the report alongside those survey items.

Difficulty sleeping is a symptom of a variety of mental health issues including stress, depression and anxiety. Almost two-thirds (63.6%) of builders agreed that issues with clients were the main work-related reason for losing sleep at night (Figure 27). This finding highlights the idea that interpersonal problems on the job are distressing for many builders and may be as important as practical or technical building issues.

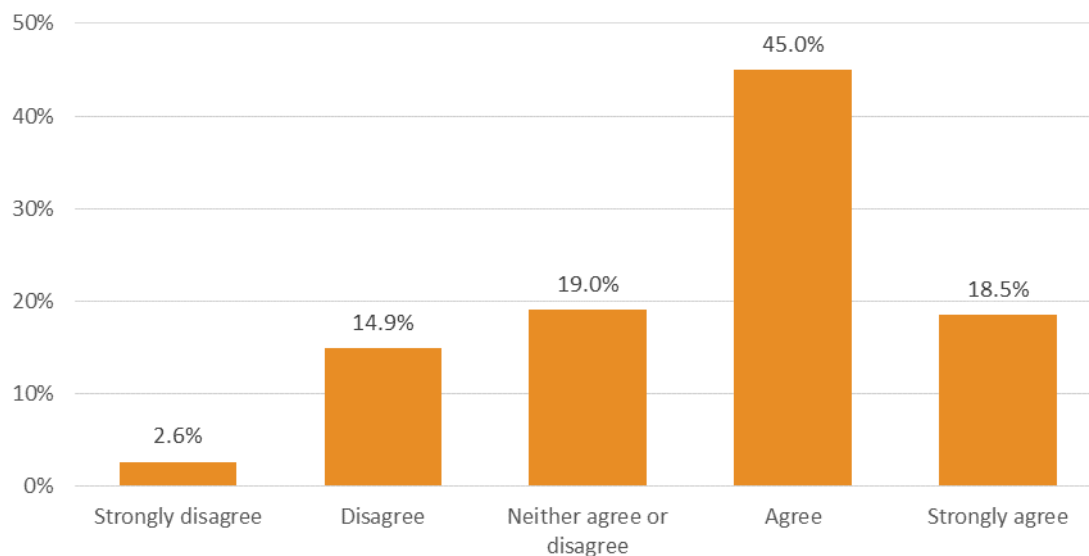


Figure 27. If I lose sleep at night over work, it's usually because of an issue with a client (n=195).

Builders were evenly divided in terms of whether stress over client issues caused a deterioration in their workmanship, with 40% of builders agreeing that the quality of their work was impacted by client stress while another 40% disagreed. The remaining 20% were neutral (Figure 28).

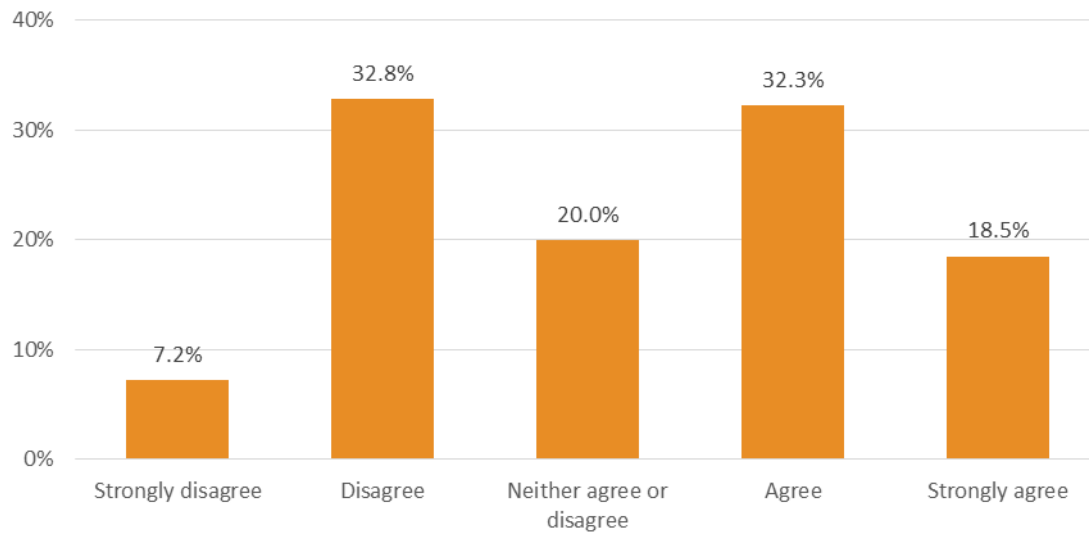


Figure 28. If I am stressed out about an issue with a client, it affects the quality of my work (n=195).

Around half the builders surveyed agreed that clients were the most stressful part of their job (Figure 29).

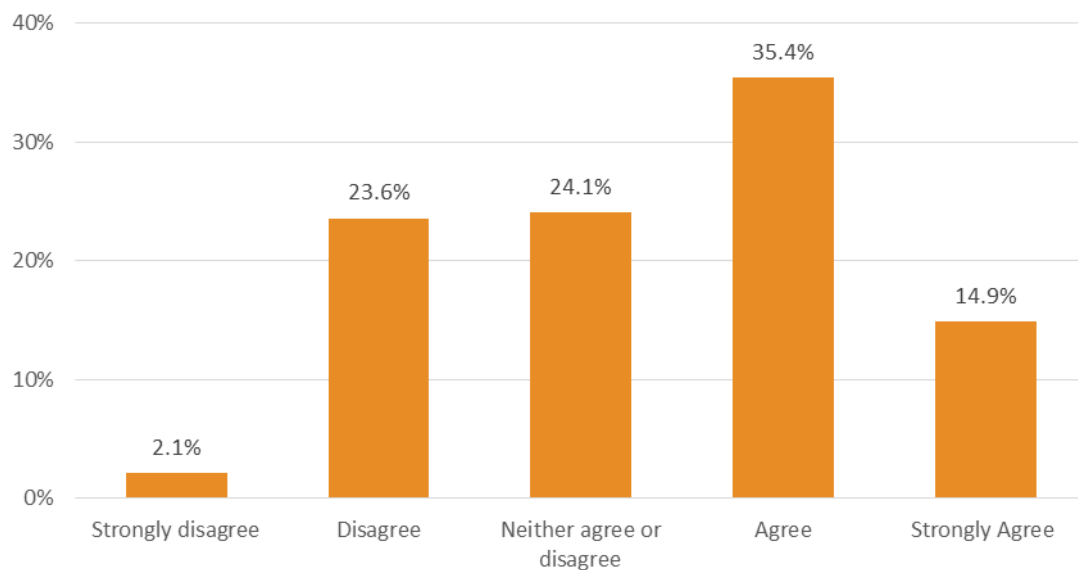


Figure 29. Dealing with clients is the most stressful part of my job (n=195).

The survey asked builders about whether they talked to other builders about stressful clients. This question was designed to test whether there was any evidence to support anecdotes about builders needing to vent to each other about troublesome clients. Anecdotally, there was a sense that other builders were the only people who would understand what it was like to deal with a stressful build client. Whether builders realise it or not, talking to each other about stressful clients can function as a social support strategy.

Just over half (51.8%) of builders in the survey agreed that they vented or complained about clients to other builders (Figure 30).

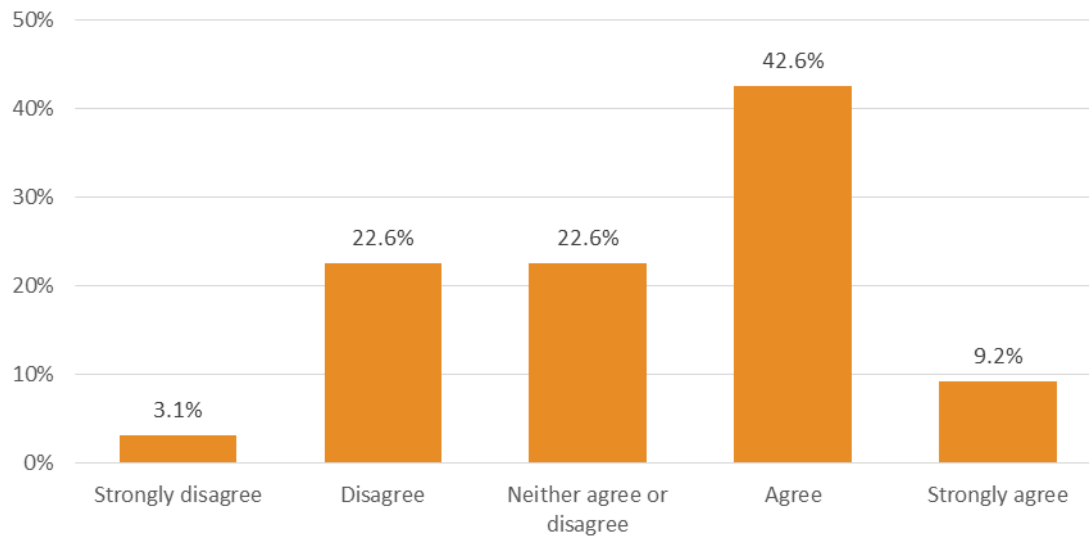


Figure 30. When I get together with other builders, we often find ourselves venting or complaining about our clients (n=195).

We asked builders whether they agreed with the statement that they feel anxious when they see a client is trying to get hold of them (Figure 31). The goal of this question was to assess whether the conflict builders might be experiencing with clients was causing them anxiety. Just over a quarter (27.2%) of builders agreed that it did. A greater number (34.9%) disagreed, indicating they did not experience anxiety as a result of client contact. While those who do report anxiety are in the minority, the impact of this experience should not be underestimated, especially considering the frequency of client contact for builders.

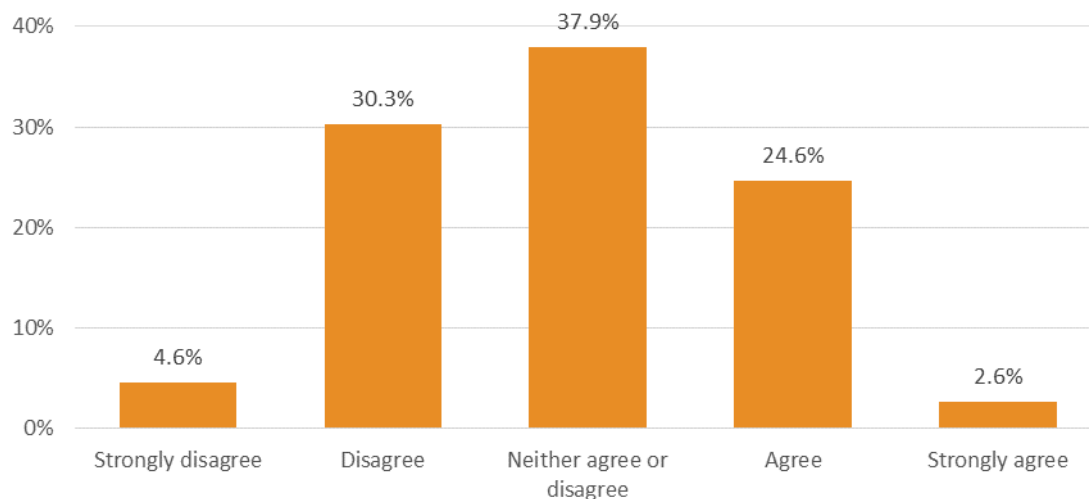


Figure 31. When I see a client is trying to get hold of me, I start to feel anxious (n=195).

We asked builders if they were open to learning new ways of dealing with “tricky” clients, and the vast majority (89.7%) agreed that they were (Figure 32). In the interviews, some builders acknowledged that they were great at building houses but had never received any training in how to work with people. Builders’ willingness to learn how to make the builder-client relationship function better demonstrates that there is an issue here that needs solving.

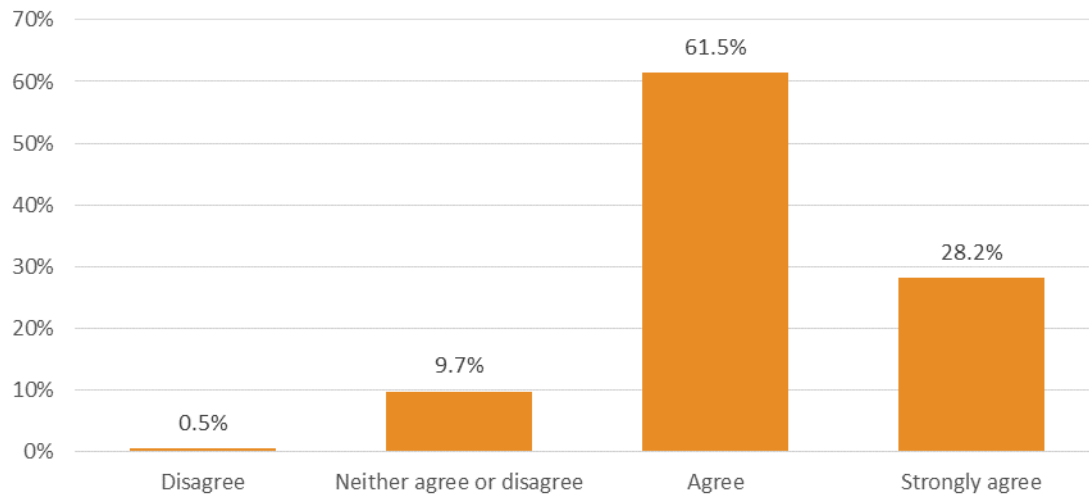


Figure 32. I am open to new ways of dealing with “tricky” clients (n=195).

3.4 Working with clients – the rewards

So far this report has described many of the tension points for builders in the builder-client relationship. While the relationship was a cause of stress at times for builders, it was clear that clients were also a great source of enjoyment and satisfaction in the job. This section of the report describes the survey responses and interviews where the rewards of working with clients are central. Understanding what is good about the builder-client relationship is just as important as understanding where the tension is. Leveraging what is already working for builders and clients will be key to resolving the tension points.

Almost all builders (96.9%) agreed that the relationship with the client impacts how enjoyable the job is, indicating that the client relationship is likely to be a fundamental component of job satisfaction for residential builders (Figure 32). This also indicates that there is likely to be a strong incentive to remedy the tension points and support builders to foster client relationships that run smoothly.

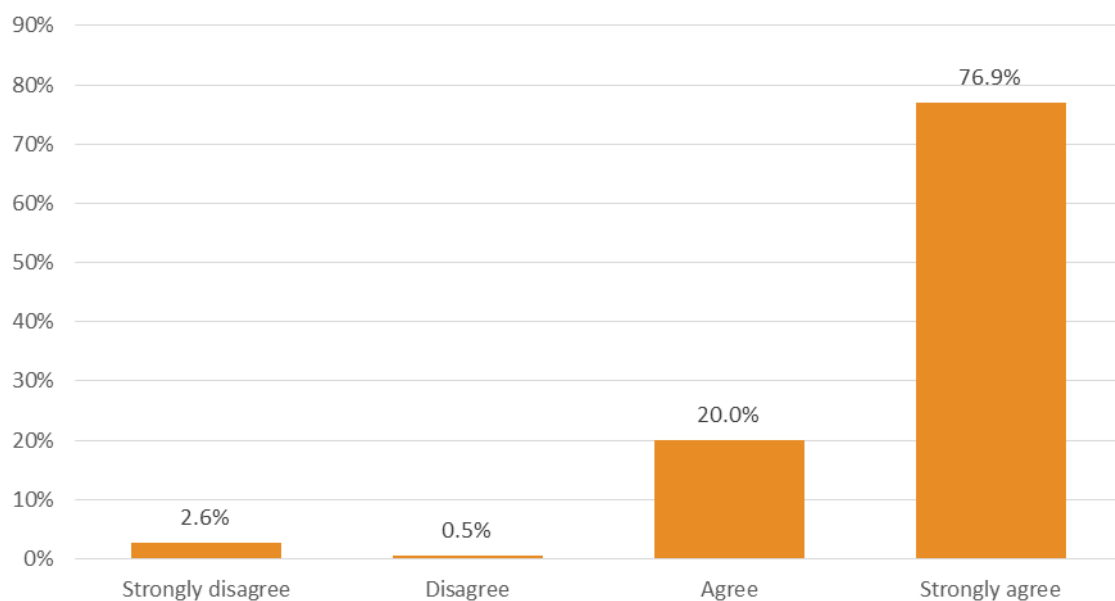


Figure 33. When the relationship with the client is good, the job is more enjoyable (n=195).



Some builders told us they believe making the client happy is the most important part of their job and take great satisfaction from seeing clients' excitement over their build progress.

I say that's the most important part. We have to give them what they want. Some of them have some quirky ideas. But it's not our house, it's their house. We just kind of make it a pleasant experience.

Seeing it come together and probably the visual progress for them and them getting excited about sometimes stuff that you're not too phased about. It doesn't seem too exciting for the builder, but seeing them get excited about something and go, "Oh wow, so you did all of that today?" and you're like yeah.

For more than half (57%) the builders surveyed, working with the client was considered one of the most rewarding parts of their job (Figure 34). Only 12.3% disagreed. This finding is important as it is evidence that, for many builders, working with the client is as valuable as the build itself when it comes to job satisfaction. This finding has implications when considering possible solutions to builder-client relationship problems. A strategy some builders might consider is hiring someone else to deal with clients on their behalf to avoid the unpleasant aspects of the relationship. This strategy would deprive the builder of the rewards offered by the builder-client relationship and might undermine job satisfaction overall.

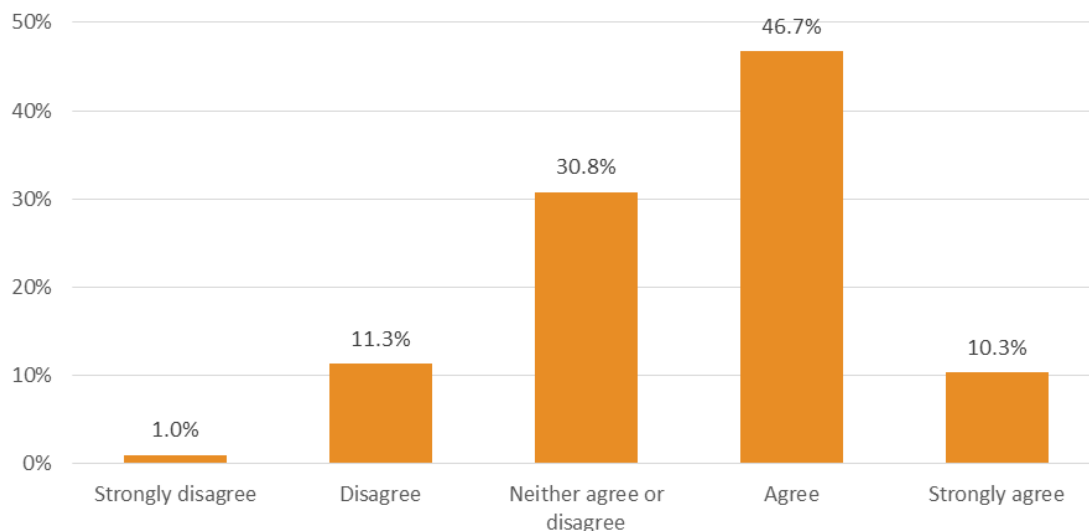


Figure 34. Working with clients is one of the most rewarding parts of the job (n= 195).

In the interviews, builders described the rewarding aspects of the builder-client relationship. The most common was the reactions of some clients at handover. Builders described what it meant to them to see their clients move in to their new home.

"We're able to get you in so you can move out of your mum's and dad's house." ... And we finally did it. So, we are over the moon happy. I ran into a supermarket last week, Wednesday. We had a social distancing chat in the supermarket. She was smiling, too stoked. So that's sort of a great, great reflection for us as a company because we shared it.

We asked builders whether they agreed with the statement 'The majority of my clients are great and I enjoy working with them'. The majority (89.8%) agreed (Figure 35).

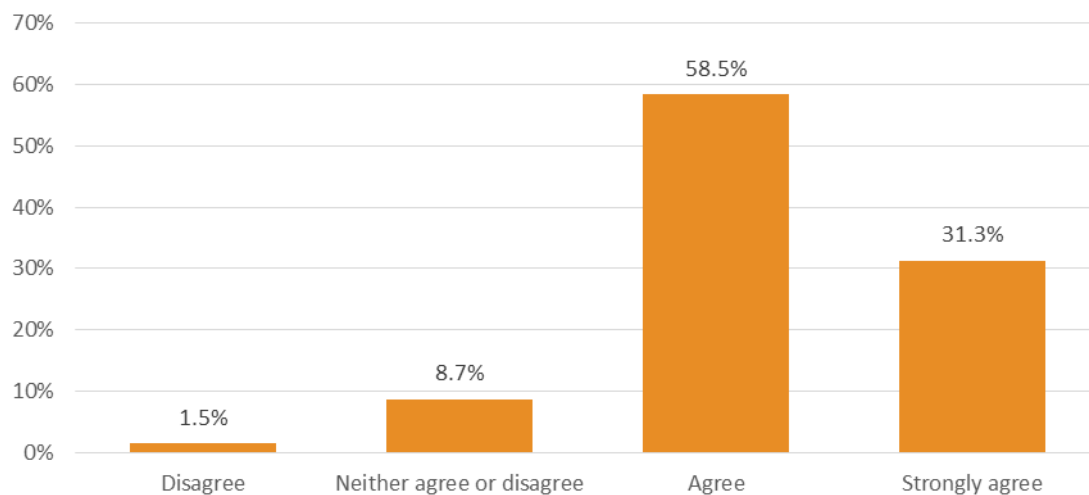


Figure 35. The majority of my clients are great, and I enjoy working with them (n=195).

Builders were also asked whether clients are usually grateful for work they do for them, and 86.1% agreed they were (Figure 36). These are important findings because they put the issues described in this report into perspective. While some builders experience tension when dealing with some clients, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. It is likely that a few dysfunctional builder-client relationships are causing a disproportionate amount of stress for builders. While it's important to understand what's going wrong in those cases, it should be remembered that in most cases the relationship is functional and builders are enjoying their client engagement. These functional healthy relationships will inform the development of strategies to support builders to create and maintain good relationships with all their clients.

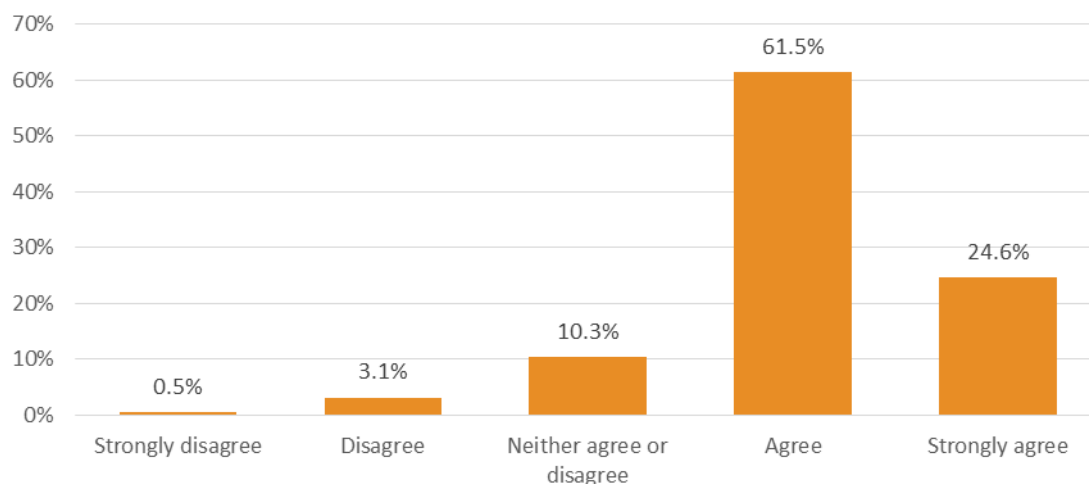


Figure 36. Clients are usually really grateful for the work I do for them (n=195).

In the interviews, builders were often very careful to tell us that most of their clients are great and that the times that the relationship has deteriorated stand out because they're less common. Builders shared stories of their great client relationships with enthusiasm, often revealing how they took each client's satisfaction with their homes very personally.



One of the things I have always prided myself on is my quality. I know I'm not the fastest, I never claim that. But quality is one of the things that I will stand by ... It was stressful for them during the build. I mean, he had his moments where he was difficult as well. But once we got through that stressful part of it, I've still a good relationship with them. I still see them so often.

Oh, just giving them a good job and they're happy. That's it. I want to do a good job, and you're doing a good job for them and you want to get rewarded for the job you've done. So yeah, it's just hopefully they've got what they've wanted and they feel they've paid a fair price and I feel that I've been paid a fair price.

You know, I'm receptive to the clients getting the house that they want. The best result for me is when I hand over the keys and the clients are all smiles with two thumbs up saying, "Wow, this is awesome!"

Communication has been a consistent theme throughout the builder side of this research. Builders know that communication is important in building and maintaining a good relationship with the client – 78.9% of builders agreed that the more they communicate with their clients, the happier they are with the build itself (Figure 37). This finding indicates that good communication and keeping clients informed can protect client satisfaction, even if there have been issues on site. For example, when defects are detected or an unforeseen delay pushes out the completion date, open communication about what is going on can keep a client happy with the build.

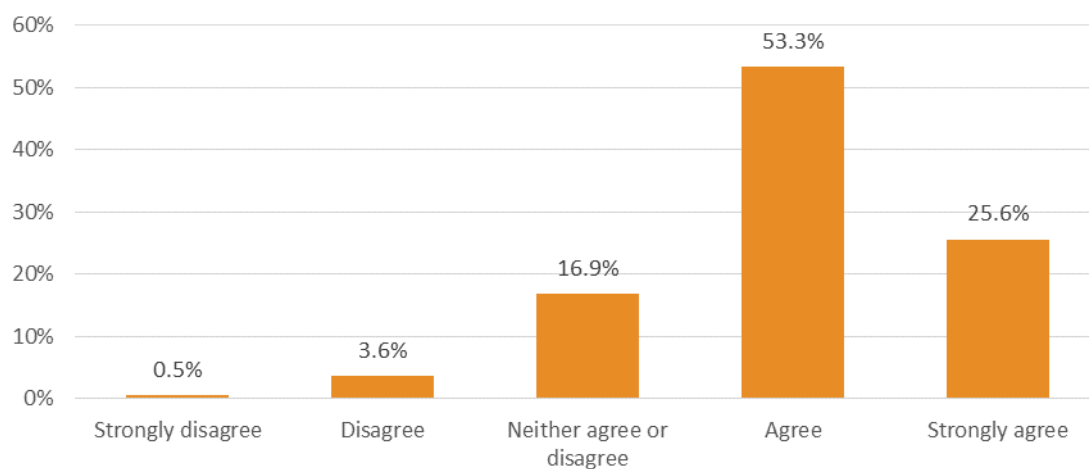


Figure 37. I find the more I communicate with my clients the happier they are with the build (n=195).

In the excerpt below, a builder told us their process for communicating with clients right from the contracting stage in order to set out expectations early and make for a smoother build project.

Every time I sign up a contract with a client, we use the Master Builders contract. ... Every time I sign one of those with a client, we sit in my office and go through it. I'll say, "Look, we've got a set of the plans here, you've signed off on those and we've got a full specification of your painters, carpenters and what your roofing is. You signed off on that. We'll take payment scheduled here." I show them the figures and when that will be due to be paid and that's all signed off and you understand that.



I do tell them this is going to be pretty straightforward and pretty easy. “You sit back and relax, and we’ll take care of the builder’s bit.” From the outset, we’re trying to promote to them that, hey, you’ve got everything on paper what we agreed on. We’ve agreed on the specification, pricing and the other things like that. There’s no need to get antsy or upset. I think most of them do understand that and most of them do sort of get it. So there’s peace of mind and it’s good to know that. You do get some that just forget that, and they just want to place a job on to us or they feel like they have to be in charge of the job themselves. We have to remind some people that, “Hey, we’re a project management company, we’re running the job and you can’t actually be on the building site.” Then you’ve got to be careful telling them that they’re not allowed in their own building site because then they get really pissy.

The contract was mentioned many times by builders as the document they relied upon to keep the builder-client relationship on track. Builders would refer back to the contract when conflict or disagreements arose as a way to point out to clients what they had agreed to. While the build contract helped with managing tension around practical building issues and specifications, it did not provide any guidance for how a builder and client should expect to engage with each other during the build process.

Two-thirds (68.2%) of builders agreed that they looked forward to updating clients on the progress of their build (Figure 38). This is another example of the enjoyment many builders get from engaging with their clients. It is further evidence that the builder-client relationship is important to builders, and this helps explain why builder-client conflict is experienced as so stressful for many builders.

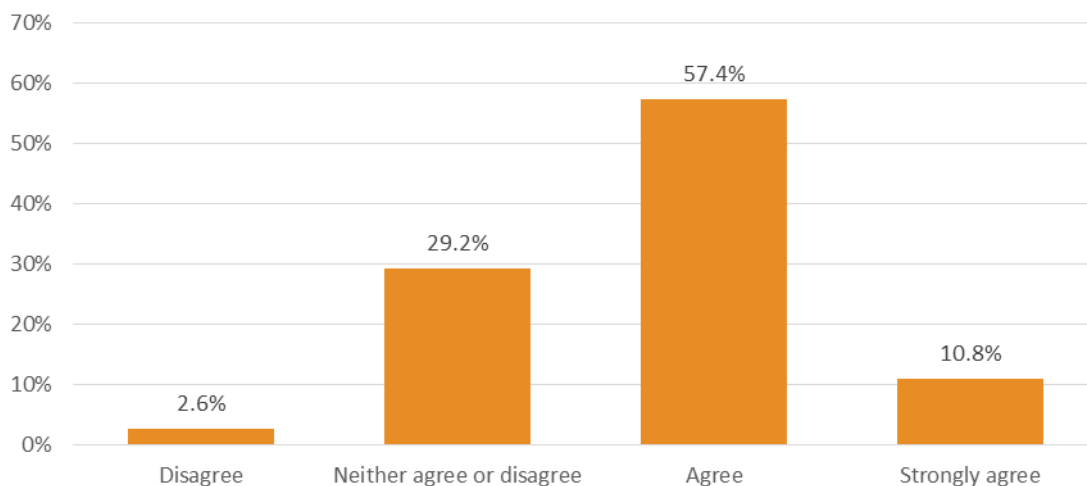


Figure 38. I look forward to giving clients updates about their build (n=195).

These results are a reminder that, for the majority of the time, builders and clients are working well together and there are many positives in the builder-client relationship. It also highlights how personally some builders take their client’s satisfaction and explains why some builders are personally affected when the relationship with a client turns sour.

The next section of this report focuses on those less-common occasions where the relationship deteriorates over a disagreement and the impact this has on the builder.



3.5 Disagreements with clients and their impact

In this section, the impact of disagreements with clients on builders is described. It explains how client disagreements affect builders' job satisfaction, safety on site and mental wellbeing. The results show how serious the issue of builder-client conflict is for builders and provide the impetus for developing solutions to improve the situation.

Three-quarters (74.4%) of builders reported that they had had a serious disagreement with a client before (Figure 39). Those builders (n=145) were then asked a series of questions about how that disagreement impacted them.

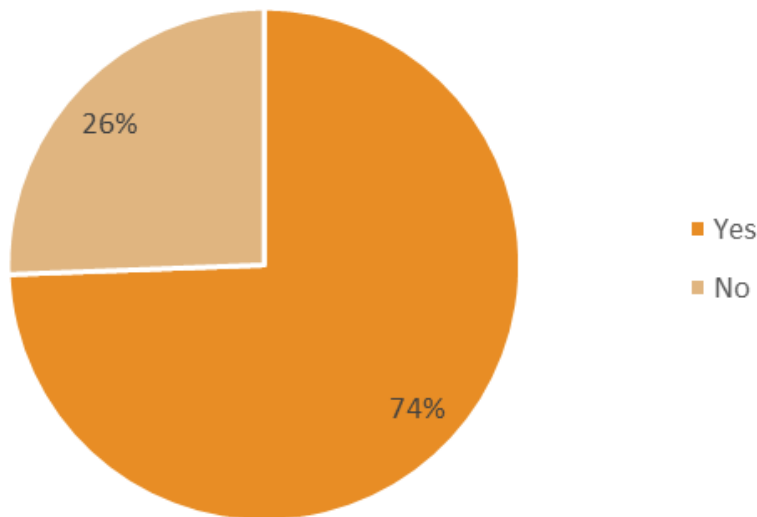


Figure 39. Have you ever had a serious disagreement with a client? (n=195).

Anecdotally, the research team had heard stories of builders feeling they could be driven out of the industry by the stress of client conflict. To test how prevalent this sentiment is, builders were asked if they agreed with the statement 'I have considered changing jobs due to the stress of a disagreement with a client'. Figure 39 shows that 45.2% of builders who'd had a serious disagreement agreed with the statement. The remainder responded neutrally or disagreed.

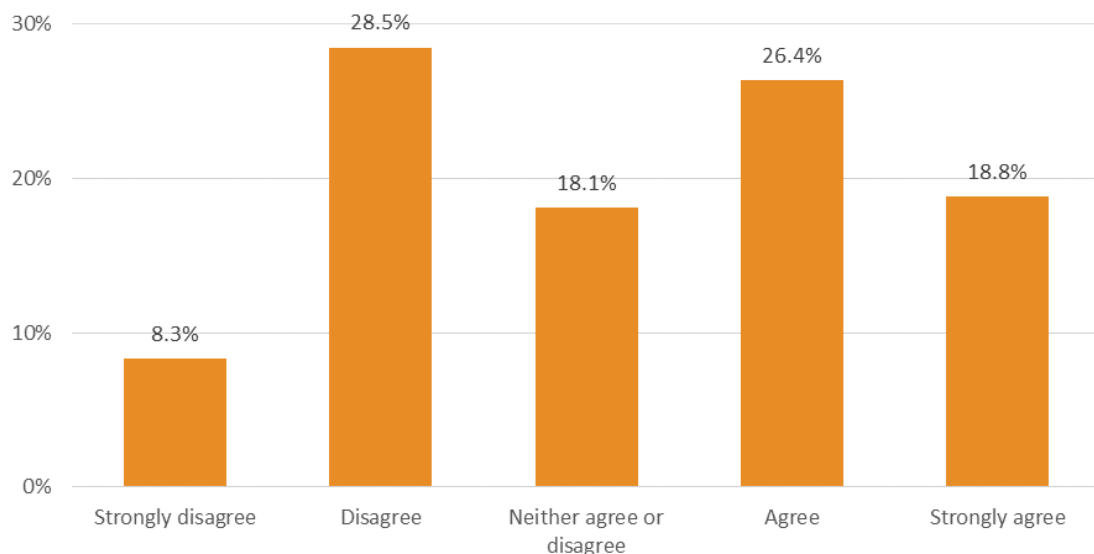


Figure 40. I have considered changing jobs due to the stress of a disagreement with a client (n=145).



In the interviews, some builders talked about wanting to quit their job or leave the industry due to the stress of dealing with clients. In an industry already grappling with a skills shortage, these results should be cause for concern. One builder described how they experienced the building industry becoming incrementally more stressful over time in such a way that they didn't notice it happening.

I was actually talking to another guy. He is a [building industry employee], and he said ... construction's funny. He said you get into a warm bath, and slowly the bath is heated up and heated up and heated up until it is absolutely boiling. But you stay in it. But if you actually put your hand in the boiling water straight in when it was boiling, you wouldn't put your hand in it. So everything is gradual, it's incremental. The thing happens very slowly, very incrementally. And before you know it ... you've committed yourself, but you've also committed all your subtrades without even knowing it. And you've actually represented those subtrades without even knowing it. You know what I mean?

Disagreements with clients affect builders' motivation to carry on with the build. Figure 41 shows that 51.4% of builders who had experienced a client disagreement agreed that they lacked motivation to finish the project once a disagreement had happened.

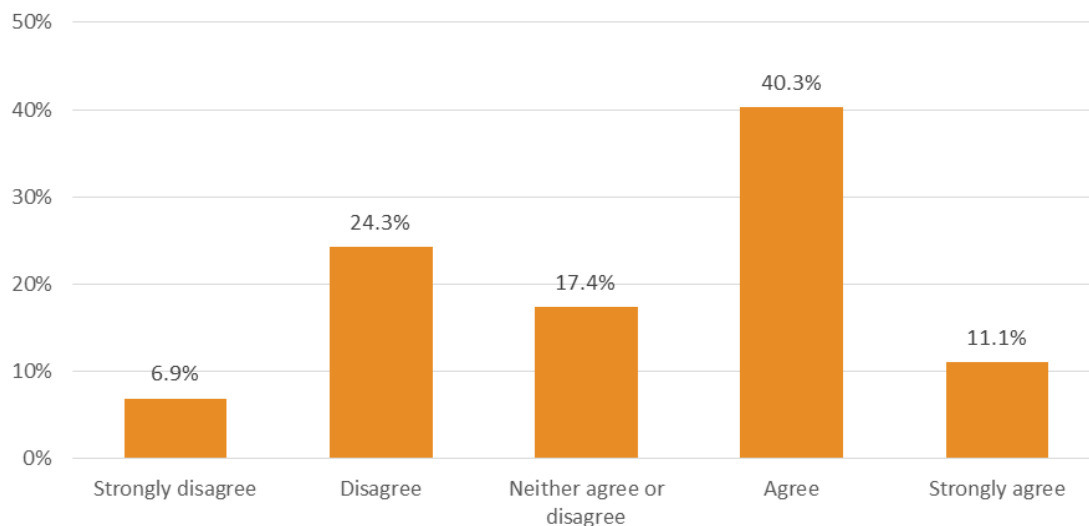


Figure 41. Following a disagreement with a client I have lacked the motivation to continue with the build (n=145).

In the interviews, builders described what it was like to keep building on a project in the midst of or after a client disagreement. The builder in this excerpt described how a negative relationship with a client takes the enjoyment out of the build itself.

You sort of get off 'dig in' and say ah, far out. We're doing a beautiful site with a beautiful view ... into the mountains, and then towards the end, I don't actually really want to be there.

It does take enjoyment because, you know, you're doing the best you could possibly can ... This guy ... makes no nod towards the effort you're putting in at all, and that does affect your enjoyment.

It does ... take your total enjoyment away from the job. You just want to be out of there. You don't want to answer your phone. It is bloody stressful. You try to build a wall and hide behind it. But the problem is, as we all knew the hard way in life, you can't hide behind a wall.



Chronic stress can cause distraction and fatigue, so builders were asked about their ability to work safely while dealing with a client disagreement. Just over a third (36.9%) of builders disagreed with the statement that client disagreements were distracting enough to affect their ability to work safely on site (Figure 42). Just under a third (31.9%) agreed with the statement with the remaining third responding neutrally.

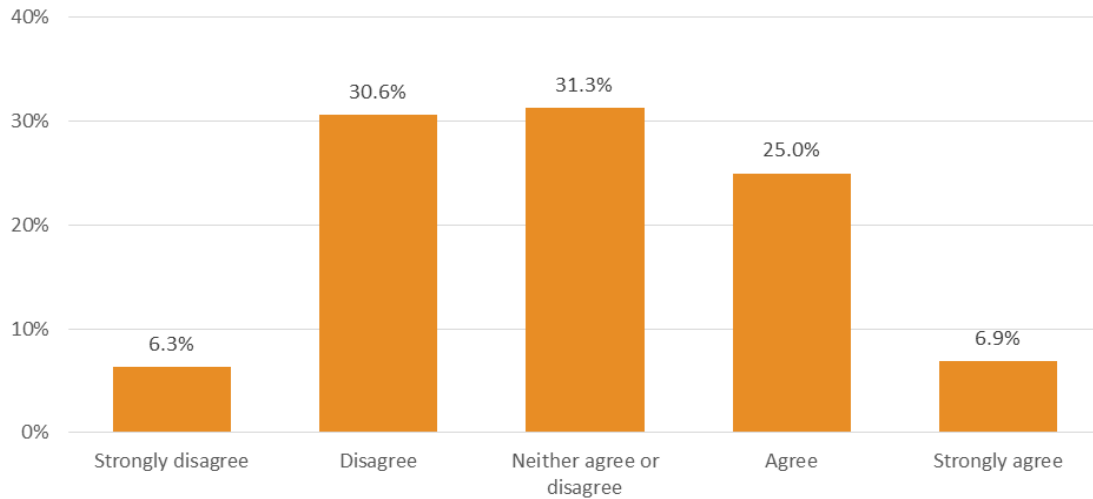


Figure 42. Client disagreements are so distracting that they affect my ability to work safely (n=145).

We followed up this question by asking whether builders had experienced any workplace accidents while distracted by a client disagreement. Three-quarters (77.8%) of builders responded that they found client disagreements distracting, but that they'd never had a workplace accident as a result (Figure 43). Only 4.2% of builders reported a near miss or accident due to the distraction of a client disagreement.

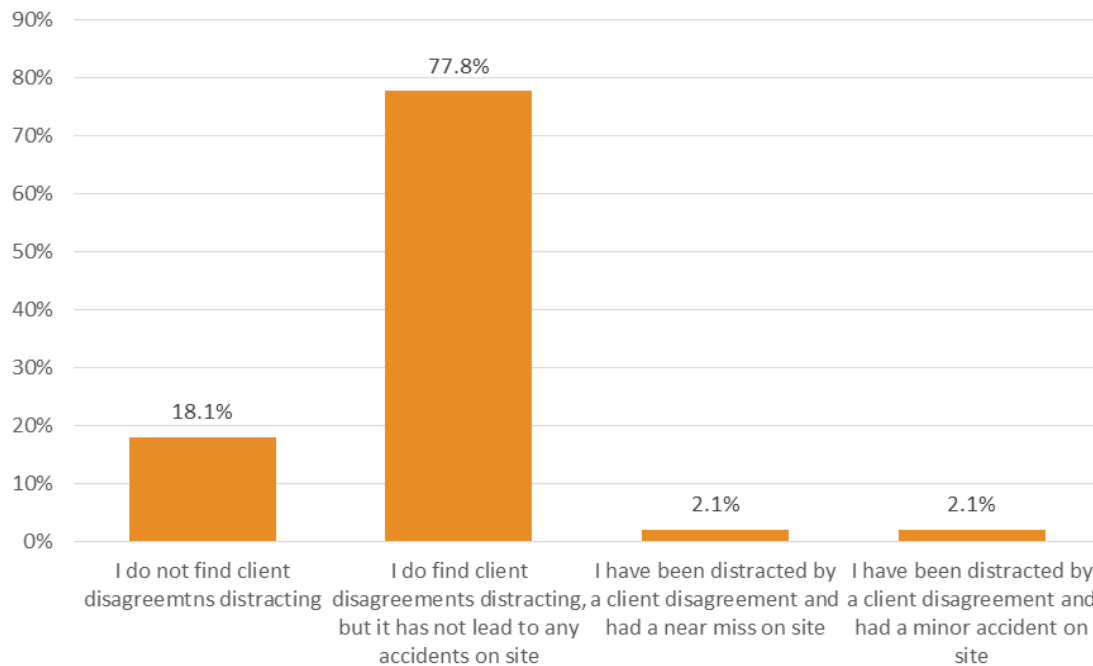


Figure 43. Have you ever found yourself so distracted by a client disagreement that you had an accident on site? (n=145).



Sometimes disagreements are unavoidable, so the ability to resolve them and preserve a good working relationship with the client is important. Builders were asked if they agreed they had been able to successfully resolve disagreements with clients in the past (Figure 44). Most (79.8%) agreed that they had – demonstrating that, while disagreements are common and stressful, most builders feel that they managed to resolve them.

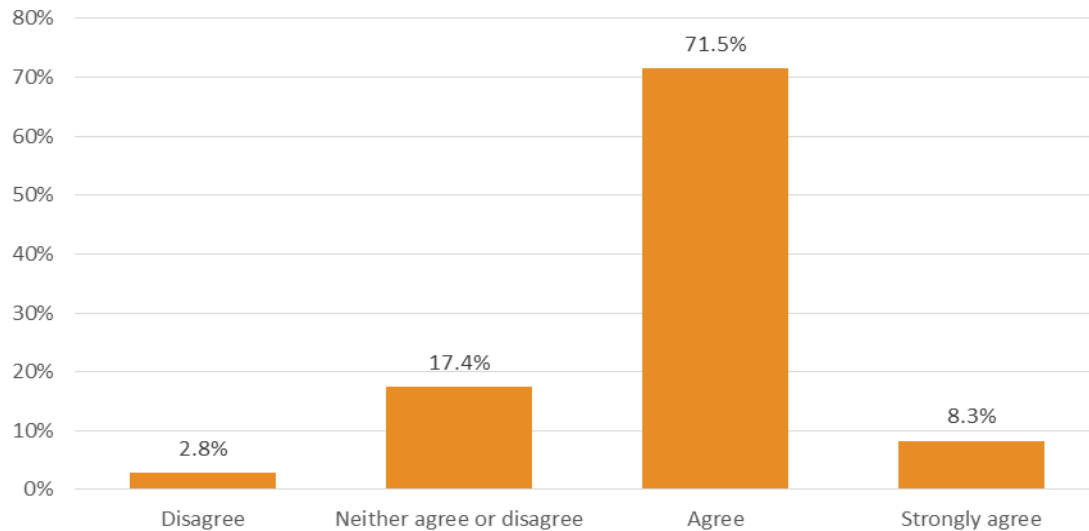


Figure 44. In the past I have been able to resolve disagreements with clients successfully (n=145).

In the interviews, builders described instances where they were able to maintain a good relationship with clients after a disagreement. Some builders said that admitting their own mistakes was an important part of the resolution process. Others described taking responsibility for something going wrong even though they didn't feel it was their fault but that this was the only way to preserve the relationship with the client. At times, this cost the builder financially. Some builders described taking responsibility for a misunderstanding or mistake. Again, good open communication is key to maintaining a functional relationship with the client, especially in the face of conflict.

We said, oh man, this is not what we're about. It's not what we would do. We'd never do it and I was disappointed. We just hadn't done our process of telling the client that something's come up and we're not going to be there today ... Long story short, I then said, leave it with me. I'll make some calls tonight. I'll call you back. Can we meet on site in the morning? We meet on site at 6.30, and she offloaded. You know, she offloaded, and I told her that I was getting told everything was going fine. If you're not happy. I need to know why you're not happy. Tell me why you're not happy. I can go away and I can fix it. And she did, and it turned out actually OK.

I guess mental resilience and don't take everything – like you got to wear some things. Also, just keeping those lines of communication going at all times, saying that things are a little bit shaky and just making sure you keep ... honest and staying on the same path that you normally would. Don't do something silly like try and cut corners or, you know, if there's a money dispute, try and not to throw your toys and pull off site. If it's a matter of, you know, sitting and talking to them and maybe wearing a little bit of it if you're wrong. Things like that, just treat people how I'd want to be treated in the same situation if it ever got to that.



Enjoyment and job satisfaction is impacted for builders who have experienced serious disagreements with clients. Some find the distraction of client relationship problems impacts their ability to work safely. Motivation to complete a build wanes for some builders after a client disagreement. These findings demonstrate that builders are personally affected by client conflict. Three-quarters of builders in this sample had experienced a serious client disagreement, and most said they'd been able to successfully find a resolution to conflicts in the past. However, the negative impact of disagreements with clients on builders is becoming clear, and finding ways to avoid them occurring in the first place could protect builders from these negative outcomes.

In the following section the mental health impacts of disagreements with clients are described. This will enable us to better understand the personal cost client conflict has on builder wellbeing.

3.6 Mental health impacts of builder-client conflict

Conflict in any context is usually experienced as unpleasant, so it is important to understand how builders cope with it at work. If client conflicts are eroding builder mental wellbeing, productivity and workmanship are possibly being affected.

In this section, the survey findings describing how common mental health issues are in response to client disagreements are reported. Only builders who reported experiencing a serious client disagreement were asked about their mental health impacts (n=145). The survey findings are reported first, with some examples of personal experiences from the interviews at the end of the section.

Three-quarters (77.8%) of builders who had experienced a serious disagreement with a client agreed that their mental health had been negatively impacted and that they felt anxious or depressed about what was happening (Figure 45). The high proportion of builders reporting mental health impacts is further evidence that builders are personally affected by their relationships with their clients. Client satisfaction with their builder appears to be a crucial aspect of a builder's job satisfaction and personal wellbeing.

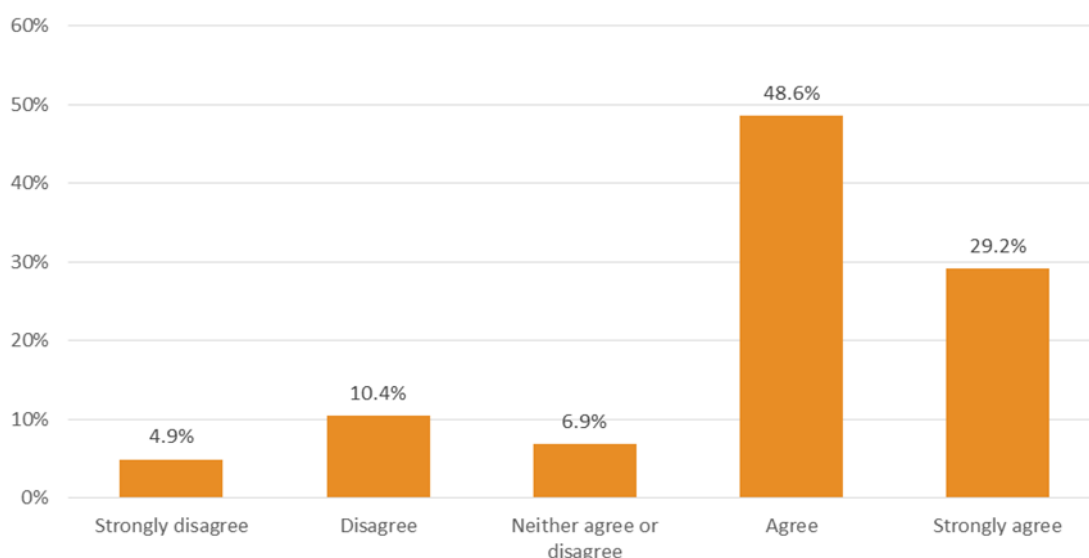


Figure 45. I have had a disagreement with a client that has negatively impacted my mental health. For example, I felt anxious or depressed about what was happening (n=145).



To understand client conflict mental health impacts in more detail, builders were asked a variety of questions about depression and anxiety symptoms during times of conflict. As described in section 2, existing measures of depression and anxiety symptoms (PHQ-9 and GAD-7) were adapted to measure the extent of symptoms for builders while dealing with a client disagreement. When responses to all five questions in each measure are collated and averaged, they give an indication of the overall level of depression and anxiety symptoms being experienced. We can also see what kinds of symptoms are more common for builders in these conflict situations.

It should be noted that these measures are not tools for diagnosis. The scores generated by these measures do not indicate whether someone was clinically depressed or anxious or not. Rather, they give an indication of the number and/or intensity of symptoms builders experienced in response to client disagreements. These measures are not designed for clinical diagnosis, and the scores reported should be interpreted as an indication of how much a builder’s wellbeing was impacted rather than a sign of mental illness.

Five common symptoms of depression were examined – sleep problems, changes in appetite, difficulty concentrating, feelings of depression and low energy. Having trouble sleeping was the most frequently reported symptom of depression for builders dealing with client disagreements.

To understand the levels of depression symptoms being experienced, a depression scale score was calculated for each builder. Their scores for each symptom (out of 5) were added and divided by the number of items in the scale (5), giving an overall score for depression symptoms. A score of 1 indicates very low or no depression symptoms, while a score of 5 indicates high levels of depression symptoms.

Figure 46 shows that 53.5% of builders scored 3 or more on the depression symptoms measure, indicating they were experiencing moderate to high levels of depression symptoms while dealing with a recent client disagreement. This result does not mean these builders were experiencing depression that would justify a diagnosis but does signal that client disagreements had significant impact on builder mental wellbeing.

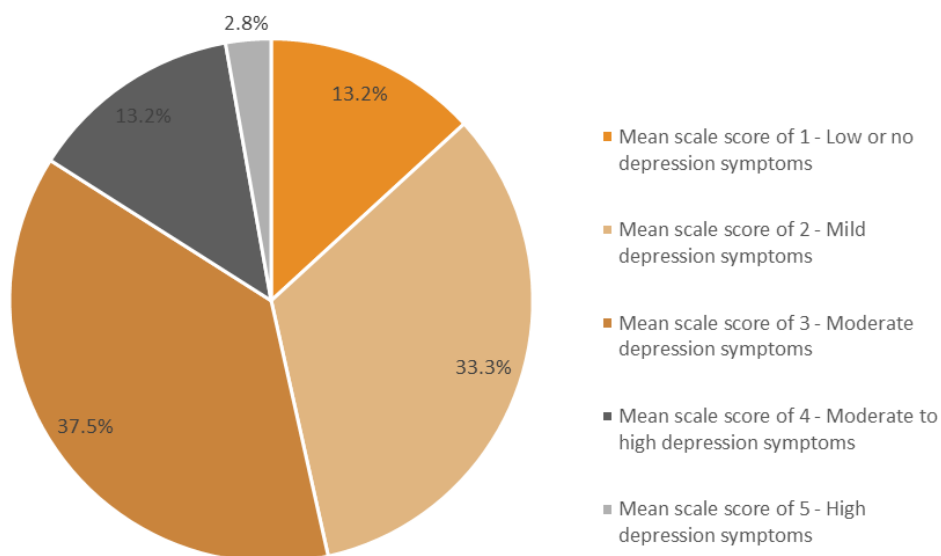


Figure 46. Proportion of builders at each depression mean scale score during client conflict situation (n=145).



The same calculations were done for anxiety symptoms. Five common symptoms of anxiety were examined – feelings of nervousness and anxiety, uncontrollable worrying, irritability, trouble relaxing and restlessness. Having trouble relaxing was the most frequently reported anxiety symptom for builders dealing with a client disagreement.

Figure 47 shows that 61.1% of builders scored 3 or more on the anxiety measures. This means that 61.1% of builders surveyed were experiencing moderate to high levels of anxiety symptoms while dealing with a recent client issue. Again, this does not necessarily mean that these builders were experiencing anxiety to a degree that would meet diagnostic criteria. It does indicate that a high proportion of builders experience anxiety symptoms in response to client conflict.

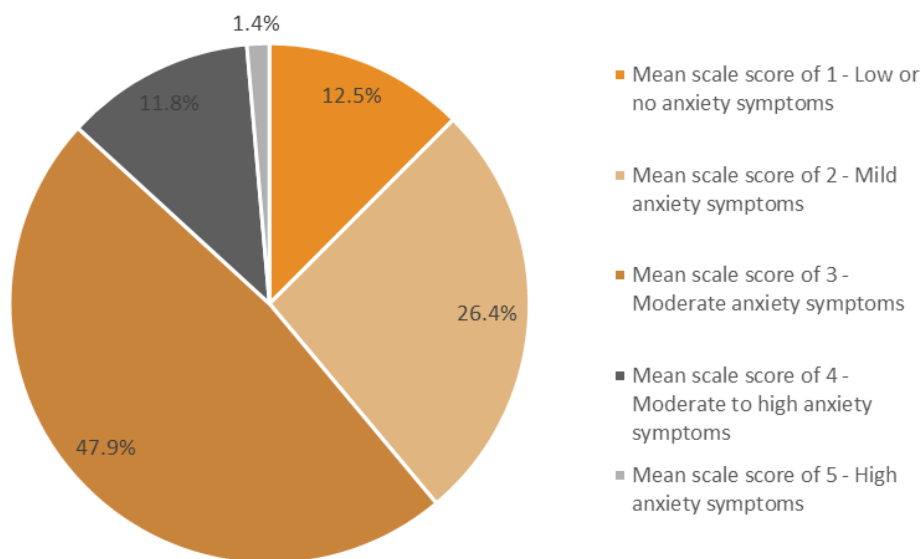


Figure 47. Proportion of builders at each anxiety mean scale during client conflict situation (n=145).

In the interviews, builders told us about some of the ways client conflict impacted their mental health and wellbeing. Builders preferred to discuss the more practical aspects of their job and the builder-client relationship. However, those who did open up about their mental wellbeing shared some insightful perspectives and experiences.

Super irritated. Super angry. All the time. I was definitely sleeping less and waking up in the middle of the night. That's all I could think about. That's what happens when you have a massive problem like that. It just consumes your life.

Some builders described the way the stress of client issues and other work pressures can impact their family lives. For some builders, the mental health impacts were serious enough to require medical help.

You tend to bottle it in or hold it in then, and you tend to let it out at home with the wife and the kids. That's not good. But, you know, you get stressed and you basically bring that tension out. It doesn't matter whether it's clients or stresses of timeline or whatever. There's always stresses on a building site you can't kind of get away from.



I wouldn't engage as a family as much. I'd be short. Yeah ... to the point where I know it affected my mental health. I ended up at the hospital from having an anxiety attack like, you know, sort of heart attack symptoms. It was not good at all. If you don't know how to deal with it, you don't know if you've never had it and you don't ask for help. It can really impact you. I mean, you don't think it's affecting you physically or mentally, your behaviour, although it's unknown to you, changes. My wife would just be absolutely sick and tired of me. "What the hell is wrong with you?" I'll say, "Nothing's wrong with me." They know. That was when it was constant. Not to say that we were doing a sh*t job. We could have done a better job, but you don't expect to be treated like that by anybody.

When builders talked about their mental health being negatively affected by client issues, they sometimes described an accumulation of problems that made the client issue increasingly stressful. Builders described pressures around finances, timeframe blow-outs, staffing problems and technical build issues as exacerbating the stress of client relationship conflict.

The builder below went on to describe the way the boom and bust nature of the industry is also a stressor for builders.

I'm pretty resilient. I don't get stressed. It's only during the process of getting to the difficult conversation, that's when I stress myself out a little bit. But no, the big one that I took head on, that was a struggle financially. I did have a wee bit of a mental health issue there as well, not depression or anything like that, but it was sort of like, holy crap. There's quite a bit of money to wear. Also, I had other things going on in the background with staff that I wanted to get rid of at the same time. Part of the causation of the cost blow-outs was the staff. So yeah, that was a bit of a low point, but I mean I think the construction industry just goes up and down all the time. You kind of got to get used to it. It's like, you'd be riding a wave one year, and then 6 months later, it sort of crashes into a heap. You know like, no work coming in, bad staff or something else.

Builders acknowledged that communication was key to maintaining a good relationship with the client. One builder described difficult conversations with clients as a stressful part of the relationship. While greater communication with clients is encouraged as part of the solution to builder-client tension, it should be remembered that many people are uncomfortable having difficult conversations, especially when things are tense.

There's times where, you know, jobs got behind or, you know, that something's gone terribly wrong and you've got to fix it. That definitely impacts your sleeping patterns, or you're trying to work out what on earth is going to fix that. Having to ring those people and have those conversations where you know they are going to be upset and angry. It is a hard position to be in.

Boundaries around when and how communication with clients should happen are also important for builder mental wellbeing. Too much communication with the client during times when a builder is trying to switch off from work is likely damaging to their mental health.

The phone rings in the evening. That's the thing, you know, like he calls, it was not his job. He did not understand that I needed to have evenings and



weekends as well. So, the phone pretty much went 24/7. Whenever I saw his number, I would get a tight chest. It totally did affect me as well.

In the following excerpt, a project manager shared their experiences of working with builders and explained why they think issues with clients emerge and why they take such a toll on builder wellbeing. They described their experiences of builders failing to communicate when things are uncomfortable and suggested that training in this area might be worthwhile.

I get why these builders get very stressed. There's a lot of pressure around, especially with timeframes. Clients are really expecting this stuff, and they don't understand or they don't get it. For instance, if we have a week of rain, it's not just 1 week delay. This could result in 2 weeks' delay by the time we get everyone back on board. They have very little patience. All they see is a delay in them getting in. Sometimes it's hard, and the builders take it on board and take it very personally that they're not delivering or the client's upset. I find a lot of the guys I'm dealing with actually take things to heart. They're very proud of what they're doing. They want to do a good job. They want everybody to be happy. Where we often say, "Hey look, not everything is going to be happy all the time. Don't worry about that, we'll come up with a solution and that'll be OK." But they chew on it and dwell on it. We even find some of our tradesmen or contractors who say they weren't happy with the amount they were paid in the last job or felt that we were being unrealistic about something. They won't say anything for another two or three jobs or I'll hear it through someone else. Then you ring them up and ask them if they are pissed off, and they will say, "Yeah, I am a bit." "You should have rung me up and said so. You should have just said, I'm a bit upset about this, can we talk about it?" It's stuff that's been sitting in the back of your head for a long time. I don't know, it's something we talked about a few times ... apprenticeship schemes or that kind of stuff where communication needs to be part of what they are taught.

The builder in the following excerpt talked about how issues with clients feel like they cumulatively erode their mental health. They described how it feels to deal with repeated issues over time. This excerpt is important as it demonstrates the way builders feel they are under repeated episodes of stress with clients. Each issue and each tense client relationship is experienced by this builder as taking something away. This is the most obvious difference between the stress experienced by builders and clients – clients typically know there is an end to the relationship and the tension when the build is complete, whereas builders are aware they are moving on to another build with the potential for another stressful client relationship.

Like it depends on who you are. Like if you're a person that likes high standards and likes things to go right and you don't want to disappoint people, then every time you get one of those, it just takes another bite of you. You know, it's like eating the apple ... but every time someone is pissed off at you, it's like they take another bite of the apple. Then there's another bite. At the end of the job, there's nothing left. You feel like no matter what you do, you're just ... doesn't matter. You can't get it back. Years ago, I don't know, people just didn't seem to get ... I mean building was a lot simpler.

One builder explained how their employer supported them to look after their mental wellbeing when dealing with clients. They described the way their employer was ready



to step in if things became challenging and that there were boundaries in place around when they were expected to respond to client enquiries.

I am very lucky in the business that I work in that they are very much on the side of the staff. Where you managed it yourself, they will help you fix that or if they really feel that a client is overstepping their boundaries. They'll have people to tell me to sign off after this time. You are not expected to be emailing this client at this time of the night or whatever they are doing ... I do answer the phone and answer emails because it is easier to get it over and done with then rather than thinking about it. But no, they are very forceful on what we should and shouldn't be doing. I know that, if they needed to step in at any point, they're there to do that. That's very important because I know that there's a lot of industries where you don't get that.

The survey results and the stories shared by builders in the interviews demonstrate the impact that tension in the builder-client relationship is having on builder mental wellbeing. These findings draw attention to a problem that has largely gone unacknowledged in the industry until now. Builders report that they often find themselves venting to other builders about their clients. While this is one strategy for coping and supporting each other, it is clear that preventing these relationship breakdowns from happening in the first place would reduce significant distress to builders and clients.

Finally, builders were asked to tell us about their general mental and physical health. A single item measure of each was used to get a self-reported assessment of builders' overall physical and mental wellbeing. They were asked to rate each as either 'excellent', 'very good', 'good', 'fair' or 'poor'.

- 87.6% of builders said their mental health was good, very good or excellent, 9.8% reported their mental health as fair, with 2.6% saying they were in poor mental health.
- 86.5% of builders reported good, very good or excellent physical health, 9.8% said their physical health was fair and 3.6% said it was poor.

Combined, these results tell us that the majority of builders feel that they are in good physical and mental health. This information is important as it suggests that, despite the stresses described by builders around client disagreements, builders are generally feeling well.

3.7 A comment about COVID-19

This study was undertaken during New Zealand's COVID-19 Alert Level 4 and 3 lockdown. The impact of this on recruitment and data collection was discussed in section 2. The timing of the interviews enabled us to ask builders about how they were coping and what impact the lockdown was having on them professionally and personally. It was anticipated that builders would report some distress about the situation and that not being able to work would be stressful for many reasons, especially financially.

Interestingly, our findings were that the majority of builders interviewed were enjoying the enforced break from work. Many acknowledged that there may be stressful times to come but were philosophical, with many choosing to use the time to be with family and to do work around their own homes.



4. Discussion and recommendations

The overarching theme identified in this research is communication. The success of the working relationship with clients hangs on the frequency and quality of builder communication. The primary goal of frequent and clear communication should be to build trust and manage client expectations around potential tension points such as budgets, access to site and delivery timeframes. Other tension points raised by clients could also be mitigated with better-quality communication.

There are significant impacts on builder wellbeing when the builder-client relationship is not functioning well, so there should be incentive to improve the way builders and clients are working together. The great majority of builders said that they would like to learn new ways of dealing with “tricky” clients. This section discusses the implications of the results and makes recommendations based on our findings.

It is important to remember that the goal of this research was to describe the builder’s perspective on the builder-client relationship, not to attribute blame to either party. This report should be read alongside the client perspectives report (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021) to understand both sides of the relationship. Together, these two reports will enable us to identify ways of supporting builders and clients to work together in a healthy way that supports their wellbeing and better building outcomes.

This section summarises the major themes reported in the results and describes how the findings inform the recommendations that are made. We deliberately focus on the themes where improvements and solutions are most accessible and avoid dwelling on the shortcomings of either side of the builder-client relationship. Recommendations are made based on the data about potential solutions and next steps to address the issues identified by this research.

There are two overarching recommendations from this research. The first focuses on helping builders to successfully manage the relationship with their clients. It centres around the idea that early and clear communication with clients appears to protect the relationship from the inevitable tension points that emerge during the build process. It is suggested that a resource be developed in partnership with builders and clients. It could be a document that provides a template and guidelines for the conversation with the client at the very beginning of the build process – ideally at the same time the build contract is signed. It could be in the form of a short workbook where builders and clients agree too and specify in writing the ways in which they will deal with the issues described in this research. For example, builders could stipulate the days and times that they are available to respond to client queries, and clients can specify how often they would like to visit the site. The workbook would provide space for builders and clients to document what they agree to. It would function as a kind of mutually agreed code of conduct for the builder-client relationship. A working title for the resource is Building Together until an appropriate name can be decided in collaboration with builders and clients if and when the resource is developed.

The second recommendation is around providing builders with advice on how to look after their mental wellbeing to limit the impact of builder-client conflict on their mental health. These recommendations include providing advice around creating professional boundaries to ensure they have time away from work (physically and mentally) and on self-care to build resilience and help with managing the mental health impacts that ongoing conflict and stress might have.



4.1 Communication demands

Before examining the tension points that trigger a deterioration in the builder-client relationship, the amount of client communication that builders are engaged in will be considered.

Builders reported that they use multiple communication channels to deal with clients and that an increasing amount of their time is dedicated to client communication. Dealing with clients outside normal business hours was accepted by the majority, with builders acknowledging that they had to work around the pressures of their client's busy lifestyles.

Builders reported that they preferred face-to-face communication, and some described the need to follow up any verbal communications with written records of what was agreed, usually by email. Ensuring verbal communication was subsequently recorded in writing was a strategy used by builders to protect themselves from future disagreements or misunderstandings with clients. Builders had learned through experience to make sure decisions were recorded so they could be referred back to if disputes arose. The building contract often functioned in the same way. It is clear that, for the builder-client relationship to function well, both face-to-face/verbal and written communication is necessary. This approach protects both builders and clients from miscommunication and helps to keep the relationship transparent and functional.

The communication demand on builders is high. Many reported working with clients outside business hours and on weekends, leaving little time to put work aside and focus on their personal interests or family. Clients are also in a better position to be able to question and involve themselves in the build process. More knowledgeable clients are not necessarily a negative, but it appears they are asking for more engagement with their builders and the building process than in the past. Builder wellbeing is negatively impacted by disagreements with clients, and it is possible that an inability to switch off from work and take time for themselves is making it more difficult to manage the mental health impacts of client conflict.

A recommendation to emerge from the findings around communication demands is that builders need to establish manageable boundaries around their communication with clients. Many are happy to dedicate some of their weekends and evenings to clients. However, the limits of this flexibility should be clearly defined for both the builder and the client at the outset of the build. We live in a time where we are constantly contactable and smartphones have increased our levels of responsiveness to communication. Some builders described replying to emails at night to get them out of the way and so that they don't think about them overnight. Resources that provide advice for builders around managing communication demands could be helpful. Suggestions like having a work phone that is turned off after hours or turning off email notifications in the evening could assist builders in avoiding the compulsion to reply straight away and have work intrude on their personal time.

4.2 Tension points

Several tension points were identified in this research. A tension point is a situation or event that happens from time to time during a build that has the potential to cause conflict in the builder-client relationship. Tension points almost always occurred when client expectations did not match what they perceived was being delivered. When builders described not being able to meet client expectations, the difference between it becoming a conflict or not was often how well the builder communicated with the



client. Builders who had a habit of communicating honestly and early about issues with the build were often able to maintain a functional and healthy relationship with their clients.

Builders who set realistic client expectations right from the start described more functional relationships with their clients. These builders would have explicit conversations with the client at the very beginning of the process about what they should expect and who is responsible for what. This set ground rules for the way the relationship would work. Builders who did this tended to have learned from experience that they needed to be clear with clients from very early on about how the build would work. This finding underpins the key recommendation to emerge from this study – the development of the Building Together resource to guide builders through an early conversation with clients about how the builder-client relationship will work. The Building Together resource will form the basis of a mutual written agreement between builders and clients that is signed off at the same time as the contract, setting expectations and establishing clear and open communication right from the start of the build.

Once the build is under way, honesty and trust become crucial aspects of communication. Many builders stressed the importance of being upfront with clients about delays or mistakes and had learned that transparency was key to building and maintaining a trusting relationship with clients. Once this trusting relationship is established, builders and clients appeared to be able to ride out the inevitable tension points that crop up during a build together. The Building Together resource should provide the opportunity for builders and clients to agree early on about what needs to be communicated and the timeframes for communicating issues as they arise.

A number of different tension points were identified in the surveys and interviews with builders. Site visits were described as something that caused strain on the relationship, and they were the issue that elicited some of the most extreme stories of poor conduct by clients. Site visits are also where a variety of other potential tension points can emerge – defects, build progress, variations and budget blow-outs. For this reason, site visits are a key component of managing the builder-client relationship. The Building Together resource should contain a section that enables builders and clients to negotiate how site visits will work from day one.

Builders often perceived site visits as an opportunity for things in the client relationship to go wrong. They told us about the measures they took to manage the risks of clients noticing mistakes or consuming too much of the builder's time while on site. Builders were aware that site visits needed to be well managed and that they must be cognisant of the fact that clients were not building experts. Tension would emerge when clients brought their own limited knowledge to site and misunderstandings ensued. Taking the time to supervise site visits and explain what the clients were seeing helped to mitigate tension.

Builders said that site visits sometimes provided an opportunity for clients to question their work based on knowledge they might have gained from the internet. Builders also spoke about clients who questioned their methods based on the advice of family or friends. This was a significant tension point, with builders feeling compelled to defend their workmanship. Some builders acknowledged that clients are also under stress when building their home, several noting the high cost of building in the current climate. Some builders could understand why clients were nervous and felt a need to inspect the site regularly when they were investing such large sums of money. The



client's experiences around site visits are described in detail in the client perspectives report (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021). Understanding where each side of this tension point is coming from is key to managing site visits so that they are a productive exercise for both the builder and the client.

The Building Together resource should include a detailed section on site visits to assist builders with managing this potential tension point. It would be appropriate for it to provide space for agreement around the issues that were commonly described in this study including:

- the frequency and duration of site visits
- supervision during site visits
- health and safety requirements
- interactions with subcontractors or other tradespeople on site
- defect identification processes.

Other factors identified by clients in client perspectives report should also be included, ensuring everyone can agree upfront on how site visits will work.

Defects were a significant trigger for builder-client tension from the client's perspective. This is described in some detail in the client perspectives report but is also worth highlighting here to draw attention to the importance of this issue. In the builder interviews, some builders complained that clients had a low tolerance for defects. While builders were not overly concerned about defects, they should be aware that they are taken seriously by clients. Even minor defects present a risk to the builder-client relationship if the builder fails to understand their impact on the client's level of trust. While a builder might see a minor defect as inconsequential and not in need of urgent attention, the ongoing presence of the defect signals to the client that they have not been heard. It might also send the message that they need to remain vigilant as the builder is not committed to identifying or fixing mistakes. Communication is again the key to managing tension over defects. The Building Together resource should provide guidance to both builders and clients on how to handle defects and allow both parties to agree on a process for fixing defects as they arise.

Variations and unexpected costs were another tension point. Builders often mentioned that clients did not appear to understand the implications of variations on costs, timeframes and consenting. This highlights a need for builders to explain variations and exclusions clearly at the contracting stage to set client expectations around cost at a realistic level. When discussing conflicts over costs, builders often described referring clients back to the contract to remind them about what had been agreed. Builders said they relied on the contract to protect them from disgruntled clients when disputes over costs arose. This reliance on the contract as a written record of the agreement between builders and clients inspired the recommendation to develop the Building Together resource. While the building contract offers a written record of the legal obligations around delivery, it does not cover many of the tension points revealed in this research. Further, the contract is a legal agreement tabled by one party in the builder-client relationship. Client perceptions of the contract are discussed in the client perspectives report, but it is worth mentioning here that it was often interpreted by clients to be a document designed to protect the builder. The Building Together resource would be a mutually agreed document that could be used to guide the conversation between builders and clients at the very beginning of the building process. It would ensure things like variations and exclusions are explained and



discussed before they come up during the build, avoiding potential opportunities for conflict.

In summary, tension points arise when client expectations are not met. The most effective way to avoid this is to manage client expectations by communicating clearly, honestly, early and throughout the build process. The Building Together resource would be one tool that could facilitate this kind of communication and expectation setting. It is further recommended that this idea be taken back to industry to get their feedback on whether a resource of this nature is something builders would be interested in using and what should be included in it. Facilitated workshops or focus groups with residential builders and build clients should be undertaken to collaboratively design the Building Together resource based on the evidence presented in this report. The resource could then be distributed through industry membership organisations such as the Registered Master Builders Association and New Zealand Certified Builders Association. Building franchises could also distribute the resource amongst their franchisees.

The efficacy of the Building Together resource should be tracked once in use to ensure it is helping to reduce builder-client conflict. This could be done by conducting a series of case studies. A variety of builds could be followed with data gathered on the use of the resource, builder-client communication, incidence of tension points and how they were managed and builder and client experiences using the resource. Development, distribution and evaluation of the Building Together resource should be collaborative and involve builders and clients.

One further recommendation is the inclusion of relationship management and communication skills training for apprentice builders. Some builders acknowledged that they were great at building houses but felt less confident at dealing with people. Embedding communication skills into apprentice training would ensure builders entered the industry with a basic understanding of how to communicate to manage client expectations. Encouraging apprentices to think about how they would explain aspects of the build process to a client as they learn them themselves will help new builders to appreciate the client perspective.

4.3 The impact of disagreements

Builders were negatively impacted by builder-client relationship breakdowns. Unsurprisingly, the client perspectives report (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021) also describes notable negative impacts of builder-client conflict on clients. It is worth noting here that, for clients, the build experience is finite – the builder-client relationship only lasts as long as the build process. For builders, the builder-client relationship is an ongoing and constantly changing phenomenon. Each client is different, and there will be more or less successful relationships with each one. Many builders will be managing multiple client relationships at different stages at the same time. This research project took a deeper interest in the mental health impacts for builders. We sought to understand how repeated and ongoing interpersonal stress might impact builder wellbeing and job satisfaction. This does not diminish the potential impacts builder-client conflict has on clients.

In this section, we discuss the impacts of disagreements on builders, but also reflect on the implications of both parties experiencing distress during the build process. Three-quarters of builders who had disagreements with clients said it affected their mental health. In the client perspectives report, significant proportions of clients also reported impacts on their mental wellbeing. When both the customer and the service



provider are reporting mental health impacts of their interactions with each other, something is very wrong.

The mental health impacts of disagreements were more marked for builders. This is likely due to the repeated nature of these stressors over multiple client relationships. Serious disagreements with clients had been experienced by three-quarters of builders in the survey. Nearly half said that they had considered changing jobs as a result of a client disagreement, and a similar number said they lacked the motivation to carry on with the build due to client conflict.

There are health and safety implications for builders working under stress, and nearly a third said that a client disagreement had impacted their ability to concentrate and work safely on site. The vast majority reported resolving the disagreement with clients successfully, but the cost of having the disagreement in the first place appears to be high.

Half of builders who experienced client disagreements reported moderate to high levels of depression symptoms. An even greater number reported symptoms of anxiety. In the interviews, builders told us that their family members noticed that they were not OK, and that the stress associated with client conflict sometimes affected their relationships. The personal toll of builder-client relationship conflict is high for builders, and this should be a significant incentive to generate solutions to improve the situation for both builders and clients.

Recommendations to improve builder wellbeing in response to these findings focus on self-care and work-life balance. Education should encourage builders to improve their work-life balance by putting clearer professional boundaries between work and home or personal time. The Building Together resource will assist with this. However, more direct education that provides explicit information on managing work-life balance is warranted. There are a number of simple but effective tips and tricks that could be shared with builders such as having a separate work phone that is switched off after the builder's work hours, turning off email notifications on phones outside work time and builders making explicit 'work hours' to allow for genuine breaks from their job. The way work-life balance information is delivered to builders will be important, and it is suggested that builders be consulted on how best to present this kind of information for maximum buy-in. This could be done during the workshops or focus groups with builders for the Building Together resource development.

Further recommendations build on work that is already under way in the industry. Builders participating in this research experienced mental distress, and we already know that the mental health of the industry is under strain with a high number of suicides (Bryson & Duncan, 2018; Bryson, Doblas, Stachowski & Walmsley, 2019). It is important to continue to draw builders' attention to the help that is already available within the industry (such as RMBA's free phone counselling for members and MATES in Construction) and outside of it (such as talking to their GP or using the 1737 Mental Health Helpline). Supporting and encouraging the development of mental health interventions that work in the residential building context should be a priority for residential building industry leadership.

4.4 Concluding comments

It is a unique industry that tolerates ongoing and repeated interpersonal conflict between the workforce and their customers, especially conflict that appears to be impacting the mental wellbeing of the workforce. There is evidence to suggest that



client mental wellbeing is likely impacted too. These findings should be concerning to the residential building industry. It might be useful to reflect on whether the situation described in this report would be tolerated by any other industry in New Zealand.

The results of this research describe more than just a handful of disgruntled customers causing headaches for a few builders. While builders were quick to remind us that most of their customers are a pleasure to work with and are the source of great job satisfaction, the impact of those relationships that do deteriorate into conflict should motivate the residential building industry to look for solutions.

This research has highlighted the need for greater training and resources for builders. Builders need to know more about how to look after their customers and themselves. Communication skills should be a key component of any solution developed as a result of this research, and self-care needs to become part of the conversation for builders working to satisfy customers 7 days a week. Clients need educating about the build process, and resources to help builders with this would be invaluable.

The Building Together resource recommended because of this research could assist in the reduction of builder-client conflict and flow on to improved builder wellbeing. When paired with the other recommendations around educating builders on work-life balance and improving access to mental health support, there is much room for optimism. The builder-client relationship should be a source of job satisfaction, not strain. The goal of this research is to motivate industry to make that shift happen.

4.5 Limitations of the research

There are some limitations to this research. The first is its timing. The quantitative data was collected in the lead-up to lockdown as New Zealanders confronted the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative data was collected during the COVID-19 lockdown. It is impossible to know whether this social context has impacted our findings in any way. However, we know that it has impacted our sample sizes. The research team made the decision to stop recruiting participants to the online surveys as soon as the lockdown was announced. We did not feel that it was ethical to continue with data collection when the industry and New Zealanders in general were coming to grips with the implications of COVID-19 and the lockdown. As a result, our sample sizes are significantly smaller than intended, and our quantitative analysis is descriptive only.

The second limitation is the self-selected nature of the sample. It is possible that this research attracted participants who have had particularly negative experiences. Builders or clients with negative experiences may have been attracted to this study as it presented an opportunity to air their grievances. We cannot say with certainty that the participants of this study are a fair representation of all residential builders or their clients.

Despite these potential limitations, the research team believes the findings to be robust and reliable. The data collected represented a wide variety of experiences across the spectrum from positive to negative. The smaller sample size for the quantitative portion of the research is made up for by the rich and detailed qualitative data from a large number of interviews.



4.6 Summary of recommendations

- The Building Together resource should be developed – a proposed workbook that would guide builders and clients through an early conversation about how they will work together throughout the building process. It is suggested it could provide space to record what has been agreed between the builder and client and should function as a mutually agreed code of conduct.
- We would suggest that the development of the Building Together resource should be done in consultation with residential builders and clients. This should be done via facilitated workshops or focus groups where these research findings are presented to builders and clients to provide further input on the format, structure, and content of the resource.
- As a starting point, the areas covered in this resource should include:
 - when and how a builder can be contacted
 - the frequency and duration of site visits
 - supervision during site visits
 - health and safety requirements at site visits
 - interactions with subcontractors or other tradespeople on site
 - defect identification processes
 - other tension points identified by clients in the client perspectives report (Lockyer & Bryson, 2021).
- Education should be made available for builders around managing their work-life balance to encourage better professional boundaries and greater investment in self-care. The ways in which this kind of information is delivered should be informed by builders. It is suggested that builders be consulted about this at the same workshops or focus groups convened for the Building Together resource.
- Existing mental health help options within and outside the industry should continue to be promoted and supported.
- Residential building leadership organisations should prioritise the development of mental health and wellbeing programmes that work well in a residential building context.



References

- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
- Bryson, K. & Duncan, A. (2018). *Mental health in the construction industry scoping study*. BRANZ Study Report SR411. Judgeford, New Zealand: BRANZ Ltd.
- Bryson, K., Doblas, J., Stachowski, C. & Walmsley, A. (2019). *Suicide in New Zealand's construction industry workforce: Factors identified in coronial reports*. BRANZ External Research Report ER40. Judgeford, New Zealand: BRANZ Ltd.
- Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L. & Williams, J. B. (2001). The PHQ-9: Validity of a brief depression severity measure. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 16*(9), 606-613.
- Lockyer, O. & Bryson, K. (2021). *Understanding the builder-client relationship – Part 2: Client perspectives*. BRANZ Study Report SR461/2. Judgeford, New Zealand: BRANZ Ltd.
- Lockyer, O. & Marston, G. (2020). *Knowing enough to ask*. BRANZ Study Report SR443. Judgeford, New Zealand: BRANZ Ltd.
- Spitzer, R. L., Kroenke, K., Williams, J. B. & Löwe, B. (2006). A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder: The GAD-7. *Archives of Internal Medicine, 166*(10), 1092-1097.



Appendix A: Builder survey

Informed consent/information page

Thank you for taking part in this research. Before you start the survey, we would like to tell you a bit about it.

We are interested in what it's like for builders working with residential house build clients these days. The survey takes about 10 minutes to complete. It will ask you about your experiences of dealing with clients in the residential building sector and how you've managed your relationships with them. For the purposes of this research, when we use the term 'client', we mean the customer who has engaged your services to build them a home to live in, or as an investment, not a developer building the home to on-sell.

The survey will ask you questions about:

- how stressful or rewarding you find client interactions to be
- communicating with clients
- client expectations and behaviour
- disagreements with clients
- the impact of client disagreements on your mental health
- your work-related stress levels

There are no right or wrong answers to this survey, we are interested in your personal experiences as a builder. Please answer the questions as honestly as you can.

If at the end of the survey you would like to tell us more about your experiences of working with residential building clients, we would love to interview you on the phone. We will send you a \$40 trade voucher to thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.

This survey is **CONFIDENTIAL**. That means none of your answers will be shared with anyone outside the research team. Your survey responses form part of a large data set, and only trends and statistics across the whole study will be reported.

This survey is **VOLUNTARY**. You are under no obligation to do this survey and you can stop doing it at any time.

The results of this study will be written up into a report. It will inform industry about how builders and clients are working together, and the impact disagreements are having on mental health. If areas of improvement are identified, initiatives to improve these will be developed in partnership with industry.

If you are happy to proceed with the survey, press the start button to begin.

Survey questions

First, we'd like to know a bit about you and your work. Remember, this is all confidential.

1. Age [drop down list]
2. Gender [text box]
3. What region are the majority of your home builds in? [Select one]
 - Northland
 - Auckland



Waikato
Bay of Plenty
Gisborne
Hawke's Bay
Taranaki
Manawatu-Whanganui
Wellington
Tasman
Nelson
Marlborough
West Coast
Canterbury
Otago
Southland

4. How many years have you worked in the residential building sector? [Drop down box]
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - 11-15 years
 - 16-20 years
 - 21+ years

5. What is your MAIN role in residential building? [Select one]
Builder, Project Manager, Business Owner, Supervisor, Salesperson, Other (please specify)

6. Do you own the business you are working for? Yes/No

7. In the last 2 years, have you been mostly: [Select one]
 - On the tools
 - Off the tools
 - Evenly split between being on and off the tools

8. In your job, how often are you dealing directly with clients? [Select one]
 - Multiple times a day
 - About once a day
 - Every couple of days or so
 - About once a week
 - Only at project milestones or prearranged meetings during the build
 - Only at the beginning and end of the build
 - I don't deal with clients directly [Skip to work stress measure]

9. Which methods of communication do you usually use with clients: [Select all that apply]
 - Speaking on the telephone
 - Texting or other messaging app
 - Email
 - Face-to-face
 - Via an app or software specifically for communicating with build clients
 - Via social media



Other (Please specify)

10. Do you deal with clients outside of normal business hours? Yes/No
IF NO SKIP TO QUESTION 14

11. IF YES TO NUMBER 10:

How often do you find yourself dealing with clients after normal business hours?

[Select one]

Multiple times a week

About weekly

Every couple of weeks

Once a month or so

12. Do you ever deal with clients in the weekends? Yes/No
IF NO SKIP TO QUESTION 14

13. IF YES TO QUESTION 12:

How often do you find yourself dealing with clients in the weekends: [Select one]

Every weekend

Most weekends

The occasional weekend

Very rarely

This section of the survey will ask you about your experiences with clients. All your answers are confidential, please answer as honestly as you can. [Response options: Likert scale, 1 – 5, Strongly disagree to Strongly agree]

14. When the relationship with the client is good, the job is more enjoyable

15. Clients often have unrealistic expectations of their builder

16. Working with the client is one of the most rewarding parts of the job

17. There is very little trust in the builder-client relationship

18. If I lose sleep at night over work, it's usually because of an issue with a client

19. If I'm stressed out about an issue with a client, it affects the quality of my work

20. Dealing with clients is the most stressful part of my job

21. Builders have to communicate with clients so much that it's slowing down the build process

22. The majority of my clients are great and I enjoy working with them

23. Clients want to know about everything that happens on-site

24. I personally have not found dealing with clients to be a stressful part of the job



25. When I get together with other builders, we often find ourselves venting or complaining about our clients
26. Clients seem to be asking increasingly complex and technical questions about their builds
27. At times I don't feel able to answer client's complex questions
28. There are other things about my job that are far more stressful than dealing with clients
29. I find the more I communicate with my clients the happier they are with the build
30. Clients don't trust builders to get the job done
31. The leaky building crisis has made clients more anxious about the build process
32. Clients are usually really grateful for the work I do for them
33. Builders are having to manage client frustrations about the consenting process
34. Clients hold all the power in the builder-client relationship
35. A client will only be dissatisfied if the builder isn't doing their job properly
36. When I see a client is trying to get hold of me, I start to feel anxious
37. I look forward to giving clients updates about their build
38. There are some clients that are never satisfied
39. Some clients can be aggressive in how they communicate
40. I am open to learning new ways of dealing with 'tricky' clients
41. Have you ever had a serious disagreement with a client? Yes/No

IF NO TO QUESTION 38, SKIP TO WORK RELATED STRESS MEASURE. IF YES TO QUESTION 38 ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

42. I have had a disagreement with a client that has negatively impacted my mental health. For example, I felt anxious or depressed about what was happening
43. I have considered changing jobs due to the stress of a disagreement with a client
44. In the past I have been able to resolve disagreements with clients successfully
45. Client disagreements are so distracting they affect my ability to work safely
46. Following a disagreement with a client I have lacked the motivation to continue with the build



47. Thinking about the last time you had a disagreement with a client, did you find yourself so distracted by it that you had an accident on site?
[Response options: 1 I did not find it distracting and I did not have any accidents, 2 I did find it distracting, but I didn't have any accidents, 3 I was distracted and I had a near miss, 4 I was distracted and I had a minor accident, 5 I was distracted and I had serious accident]
48. We would like to know how disagreements and issues with clients impact your mental health. To answer this question, we would like you to **think about the last time you had a disagreement with a client**. While you were dealing with that situation, did you experience any of the following?
[Response options: 1 Never, 2 Rarely, 3 Sometimes, 4 Often, 5 Always]
I had trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much
I lost my appetite or I ate more than usual
I found it hard to concentrate on things
I felt down, depressed or hopeless
I felt tired or had little energy
I felt nervous, anxious or on edge
I couldn't stop or control my worrying
I was easily annoyed or irritable
I had trouble relaxing
I got so restless it was hard to sit still

The purpose of the next set of questions is to examine how stressed you are at work. When answering these questions **think about all aspects of your work**, not just your interactions with clients.

49. Please respond to the questions by selecting the number that best indicates your answer. [Response options: 1 Never, 2 Rarely, 3 Sometimes, 4 Often, 5 Always]
Does work make you so stressed that you wish you had a different job?
Do you get so stressed at work that you want to quit?
Do you worry about having to wake up and go to work in the morning?
Do you find it difficult to sleep at night because you worry about your work?
Do you get so stressed at work that you forget to do important tasks?
Does work make you so stressed that you find it hard to concentrate on your tasks?
Do you spend a lot of time worrying about your work?
Do you feel like you cannot cope with your work anymore?
Does work make you so stressed that you lose your temper?
50. In general, would you say your mental health is
Excellent
Very good
Good
Fair
Poor
51. In general, would you say your physical health is
Excellent
Very good
Good
Fair



Poor

We are interested to learn more about what it's like for builders working with clients. Would you like to be interviewed over the phone to tell us more about your experiences, both good and bad? You will receive a \$40 trade voucher to thank you for your time.

[Tick boxes YES/NO]

If tick yes: Please provide your contact details here so we can arrange an interview

First name:

Email address:

Phone number:

If you would like to go in the draw to win a \$300 trade voucher, please leave your email or phone number here:

[text box]

Thank you for taking part in this study. Without people like you sharing your experiences with us, this research would not be possible. Your survey responses will help us to better understand what it's like to be a residential builder in New Zealand in 2020, and to help the industry to make changes to make your job more enjoyable.

If answering the survey questions has raised any issues for you about your mental health, you can reach out to any of the following options for help and advice:

- Visit your GP
- Mental health helpline – Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor
- Lifeline – 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP)
- Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
- Healthline – 0800 611 116
- Samaritans – 0800 726 666



Appendix B: Builder interview schedule

Introduction and consent statement

“Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for volunteering to be interviewed. My name is XXXX and I’m a researcher for Axon Consulting. As you know, we are conducting a study that’s investigating the builder-client relationship and it’s possible impact on builder mental health. We have also added a couple of questions at the end about the COVID-19 situation and the lockdown. You can choose whether you’d like to answer these questions or not. Are you happy to go ahead with the interview now?

[VERBAL AGREEMENT REQUIRED HERE]

I am going to activate the recording app now. Please bear with me while I set that up.

[TURN ON RECORDING]

Before we get started I need to read you a short consent statement to make sure you understand what the interview involves. At the end I’ll ask you if you’ve understood this and if you agree to be interviewed. Please feel free to ask any questions if anything is unclear.

1. This interview is being recorded. We are using an app that records the telephone call so we can transcribe our conversation and analyse what we talk about during the interview. Once the interview has been transcribed and the study is complete, the recording will be deleted.

Do you understand that the interview is being recorded? [VERBAL AGREEMENT REQUIRED]

2. Our conversation today is confidential. This means that we will not attribute any of your comments to you, or identify you in any of our reports. When we transcribe the interview we will delete any identifying information. This could be mention of names, businesses, or places. Once transcribed we will analyse the content of the interviews for themes and our reports will not discuss individual, companies, or any other specific details that might be identifiable. We may use quotes from the interview, but we will never say who said them.

Do you understand that what you say in the interview is confidential [VERBAL AGREEMENT REQUIRED]

3. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This means that you are under no obligation to go through with this interview, and you may stop at any time if you change your mind. You may also ask for your interview to be removed from the study up until the end of your interview.

Do you understand that this interview is voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time? [VERBAL AGREEMENT REQUIRED]

4. Finally, are you happy to proceed with the interview? [VERBAL AGREEMENT REQUIRED]



Interview questions

Okay, we are ready to get started.

1. First of all, can you briefly describe what your role is in the building industry and what your contact with residential building clients involves?
2. I'm going to start by asking you about what happens when the relationship with a client breaks down. Have you ever had a relationship with a client turn bad?

[IF YES CONTINUE WITH QUESTION 2. IF NO SKIP TO QUESTION 5]

Feel free to talk about specific examples if it would help you answer some of these questions:

Tell me what tends to happen when your relationship with a client becomes difficult.

Follow-up questions:

Is there a particular stage of the build when things usually turn sour with clients?

Which stage seems to be the most problematic?

What seems to be happening right before the client relationship goes bad?

How do you know the relationship had deteriorated? What usually happens that tells you that you and the client are no longer on good terms?

What happens after the relationship breaks down?

3. In the past, have you managed to repair a client relationship that had previously broken down?
How did you do that?
What was it about that client that made it possible to repair the relationship?
4. When you experience a bad relationship with a client, how does it make you feel about your work or job?
How does it make you feel about that build project?
How does it make you feel about yourself?
How does it make you feel about your business? [business owners only]
What impact does it have on your mental health?

Prompts:

Tell me more about that...

That's interesting, can you explain in more detail...

5. In your time dealing with clients, have you identified any strategies for preventing the relationship from breaking down or for keeping it working well?

COVID-19 QUESTIONS

As we mentioned when we contacted you to arrange this interview, we have added some questions about the impact of COVID-19. Your answers will be collated and reported back to industry organisations so they can support you through this.

Are you still comfortable answering a couple of questions about how COVID-19 and the lockdown are impacting you and your work?

[VERBAL AGREEMENT REQUIRED]



1. Okay, great. We would like to know the top three challenges you are facing as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown?

What is the biggest challenge for you at the moment?

[Ask interviewee to describe each challenge one at a time]

2. Are you already receiving any support to help you deal with these challenges?
And, what support do you still need to help you deal with each of these challenges?
[Refer back to each challenge to identify support options for each]

That is all we need to ask you about. Thank you for your time and sharing your thoughts and ideas with us.

Support information – keep this conversational.

We have put together a short factsheet with ideas on things that might help you get through being at home during this lockdown period and some support options. Would you like us to email it to you?

I'd also like to let you know about a help line specifically for construction workers who are going through a tough time. It's run by MATES in Construction, and it operates 24/7. If you or one of your builder mates needs to talk to someone about how you're coping, you can call 0800 111 315 or text 5353. These numbers are also on our factsheet.

Finally, what address would you like us to post your voucher too?

Thank you again, goodbye.



Appendix C: Themes identified from builder and client interviews

