



Builder wellbeing during tension in the builder-client relationship

The impact of tension in builder-client relationships on the wellbeing of builders was investigated. Online surveys and telephone interviews with builders revealed that builder-client disagreements can have a detrimental effect on the mental health of builders. The issues largely related to communication. BRANZ recommends developing a resource to help builders and clients agree at an early stage on how to work together.

Anecdotal stories from builders and their clients suggest that the builder-client relationship can be a cause of significant distress for both parties during residential house builds. BRANZ and Axon Consulting investigated whether there was any evidence to support these anecdotes and, if so, what the impact is on builders. The research examined both sides of the relationship during the construction of new homes. This Research Now focuses on the builder's perspective.

Approach

A combination of quantitative and qualitative data was collected to describe the tension points that lead to builder-client conflict and to measure their prevalence. 195 builders responded to an online survey, and 19 took part in semi-structured telephone interviews. BRANZ also investigated whether disagreements with clients had any impact on builder mental health.

BRANZ identified two potential limitations to this research:

- The data was collected in the lead-up to and during New Zealand's COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.
- The participants were self-selected and may have been influenced by their own negative experiences, so it is not possible to say whether the participants in this study are a fair representation of all residential builders.

However, BRANZ believes that findings are robust and reliable because the data collected represents a wide variety of positive and negative

experiences in detail from the large number of interviews.

About the builders

Demographic information about the builders was collected during the survey and interviews along with questions about their time and role in the industry. Builders from across the country participated. They tended to have worked in residential building for a long time (Figure 1a). 85% of the participants were male, and the majority were aged 35–54 years (Figure 1b)

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

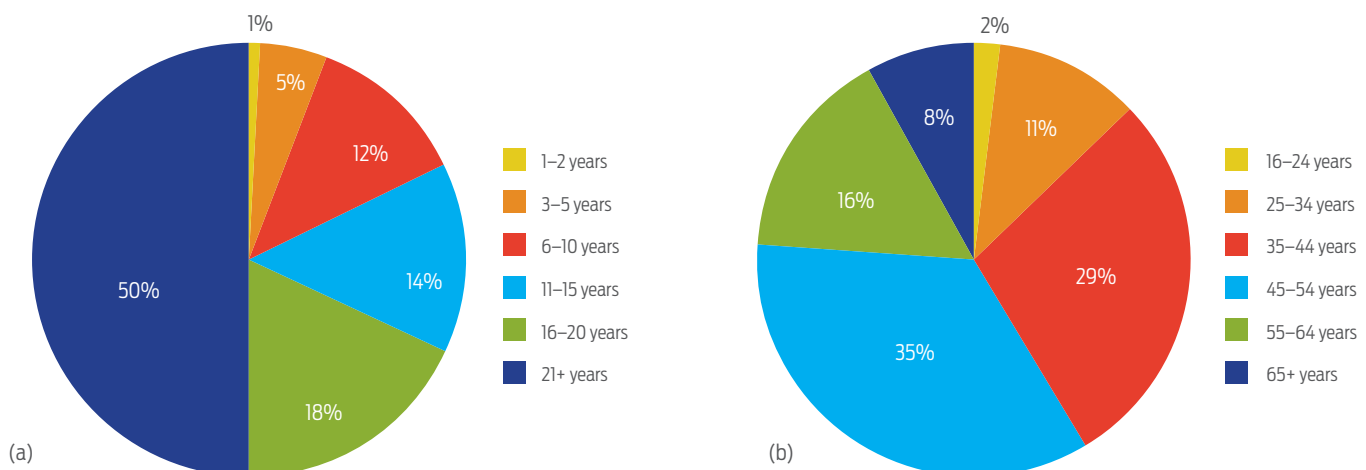


Figure 1. Demographic information collected from the 195 builders who responded to the online survey. (a) Years worked in residential building. (b) Age of participants.

Just over 89% owned the business they were working in. Around a third of builders were off the tools (in roles in which they are not actively constructing homes), 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.

Results

The results of the research fell into three main areas, all of which are related to communication:

- Communication demands on the builder from the client.
- Tension points during the building process.
- The impact of disagreements with the client on builder wellbeing.

Communication demands from clients.

The success of the working relationship with clients depends on the frequency and quality

of builder communication. The main 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.

BRANZ investigated the amount of client communication that builders are engaged in. Builders use multiple communication channels (Figure 2) and report that an increasing amount of their time is dedicated to communication with clients. The majority deal with clients outside of business hours and acknowledge they had to work around the pressures of their client's busy lifestyles.

Builders reported that they prefer face-to-face communication. Some described the need to follow verbal agreements with written records, usually by email, and this was a strategy used by builders to protect themselves

from disagreements or misunderstandings with clients. The building contract was used in the same way. For the builder-client relationship to work well, verbal and written communication is necessary.

The communication demand on builders is high. Many (83%) 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.

Builders need to establish manageable boundaries around their communication with clients. Many are happy to dedicate some of their weekends and evenings to clients, but boundaries around this should be agreed at the beginning of the build. 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.

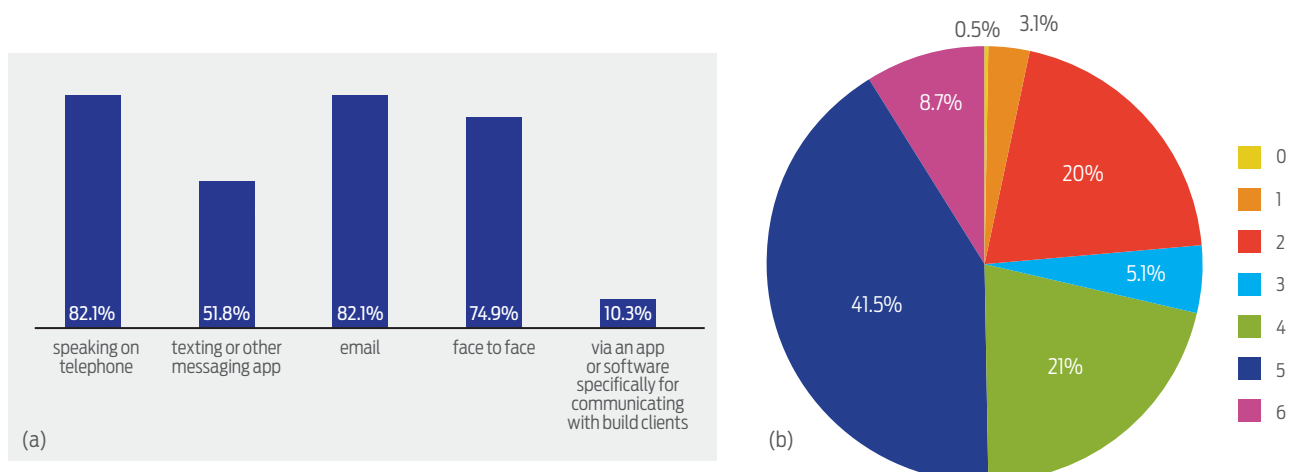


Figure 2. (a) Builders communicate with their clients through multiple channels. (b) Number of communication channels used by builders.

Some builders described replying to emails at night to get them out of the way and so that they do not think about them overnight. Resources that provide advice for builders around managing communication demands could be helpful.

Tension points during the building process

Several tension points were identified during the research. A tension point is a situation or event 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.

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

The impact of disagreements

Builders were negatively impacted by builder-client relationship breakdowns. For builders, the builder-client relationship is ongoing and constantly changing. Each client is different, and many builders will be managing multiple client relationships at different stages at the same time.

BRANZ therefore sought to understand how repeated and ongoing interpersonal stress might impact builder wellbeing and job satisfaction.

(This does not diminish the potential impacts that builder-client conflict has on clients.)

Three-quarters of builders who had disagreements with clients said it affected their mental health. Of those, more than half experienced moderate to high symptoms of depression and anxiety (Figure 3). The mental health impacts of disagreements were more marked for builders than clients. This is likely due to the repeated nature of these stressors over multiple client relationships.

Recommendations

- Developing and creating a workbook to guide clients through an early conversation with their builder about working together and communicating throughout the building process could help. This workbook could include space to record a written agreement between client and builder about:
 - when and how a builder can be contacted
 - site visits and their frequency and duration
 - supervision and health and safety during site visits
 - interacting with subcontractors and other tradespeople on site
 - the process for identifying and reporting defects.
- Include relationship management communication skills training for apprentice builders to ensure that builders enter the

industry with a basic understanding of how to communicate to manage client expectations.

- Make education available for builders to manage their work-life balance to encourage better professional boundaries and greater investment in self-care.
- Continue promoting and supporting existing options for mental health help within and outside of the industry.
- Residential building leadership organisations should prioritise the development of mental health and wellbeing programmes that would work well in a residential building context.
- New resources should be developed in consultation with residential builders and clients.

Further reading

BRANZ Study Report SR461/1
Understanding the builder-client relationship - part 1: builder perspectives

BRANZ Study Report SR461/2
Understanding the builder-client relationship - part 2: client perspectives

Tension points identified during the research

Site visits: Client access to site was a source of conflict and site visits were also described as providing an opportunity for disagreements over other issues 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.

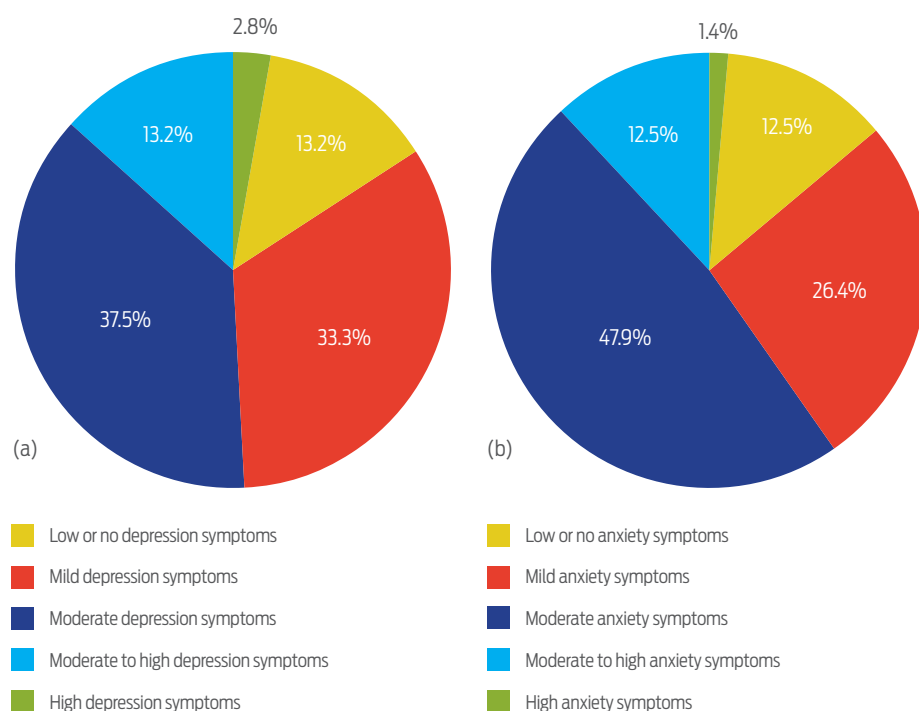


Figure 3. Severity of symptoms in three-quarters of builders reporting that disagreement with their clients affected their mental health: (a) Depression. (b) Anxiety.