

The Work Ability Index

Gerard Tiernan
Stewart Bell
Trudy Tilbury

The 2007 Cliff and Parker Review of the Queensland Mines and Quarries Annual Safety Performance and Health Report recommended the use of a modified version of the Work Ability Index (WAI) for the Queensland mining industry.

The Work Ability Index provides a measure of health status, using factors such as the number of medical conditions. Though it is used in conjunction with medical examinations it does not go into the medical detail of conditions. It measures the worker's own perception of work ability and this qualitative measure has been shown to be well correlated with more objective measures derived from medical examinations. It is therefore reliant on people being comfortable enough to provide the information honestly and in the surety that it will not be used to penalise them. The Work Ability Index measures are of value in designing the most appropriate interventions to maintain work ability and to provide useful information on changes in work ability over time at the individual and group level.

Data from a Work Ability Index survey can be used to evaluate the efficacy of interventions at the work organisational, work environment and individual worker level.

The Mines Inspectorate would like to see the Work Ability Index used in the Queensland mining industry. Used properly it is a tool that will allow people to work longer and to stay healthy well into retirement. What we do not want is an industry where people are forced to retire early through injury or illness or an industry that, when it is finished with its workers, leaves them sick and debilitated throughout retirement. The Work Ability Index has the potential to ensure we do not do this and that we have an industry where workers stay healthy during their working lives and well into retirement.

This paper will detail how the Work Ability Index could be applied in the Queensland mining industry and the potential benefits.