

# FIFO Village Life: improving health and wellbeing

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Abstract:

Health is defined by the World Health Organisation as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.

With more employees choosing a FIFO lifestyle over residing in traditional mining town locations it is clear that mining companies have an opportunity to positively impact the health and wellbeing of their employees.

A FIFO/DIDO lifestyle allows employees to secure employment without having to consider relocating their family from their existing home base.

Recent studies have shown that FIFO employees can be at risk of suffering a range of health issues; irregular and long hours, shift work, and extended absences from families and support structures can all contribute to the incidence of obesity, mental illness, cardiovascular illness and alcohol related problems. These can all have an impact on productivity, retention rates and increase the risk of workplace injuries.

This paper looks at strategies employed by mining businesses and their service providers to combat these health issues and instead affect positive change on the welfare of FIFO employees:

- Health and wellness programs
- Fatigue management
- Village construction
- Drug and alcohol management plans
- Understanding demographics

## Qld Mining Industry Safety and Health Conference 2014 :

The theme for the Conference is ***‘Improving health and safety in challenging times’***.

*The “challenges” we allude to include the pressures on site resources, the current downsizing in some areas of the industry, and being conscious of those distractions that take emphasis away from the business purpose of producing product. Equally, we don’t want to lose focus on workplace safety and health or have it undermined in any way because of these concerns. Our aim is that delegates should come away from the conference armed with practical advice on improving safety and health that takes into account these challenges.*

## Introduction:

While it is difficult to determine the number of people engaged in FIFO employment, it is estimated that these employees comprise approximately 52% of Australia's resource sector workforce. Projections indicate that FIFO employment is a sustainable workforce management practice and is expected to continue to grow across Australia.

The last ten years has seen a significant increase in resource workers in Queensland particularly in the coal, gas and oil sectors. This has placed pressure on the availability of residential accommodation.

Resource companies have supplemented this need with village (or FIFO) style accommodation.

In keeping with the conference theme, the purpose of this paper is to acknowledge the challenges involved with long distance commuting (LDC) or FIFO/DIDO work. The paper also aims to provide practical advice on strategies to minimise the negative impact on workers health and wellbeing sometimes associated with this lifestyle and to highlight examples of best practice in the industry.

To that end this paper will examine a number of issues faced by LDC workers and the strategies resource companies and their service providers are employing to enhance the accommodation experience.

It is important to firstly understand the motivation of not only the resource companies but the workers themselves in choosing village life over residential (township) options. *note: these options can occur independently or in conjunction and choice can be limited by availability.*

The Queensland Resources Council in their 'Guidance for Long-Distance Commuting Workers' details numerous benefits described by workers as positive attributes to a FIFO/DIDO village style accommodation solution:

- *Flexibility to live 'anywhere'(home town) while pursuing a career*
- *Extended home time (R&R) in one block to spend quality time with family*
- *Ability to pursue higher remuneration not always available in close proximity to home*
- *Ability to take advantage of job opportunities at various locations (improving career prospects)*

This sentiment was echoed in the publication 'A matter of choice - capturing FIFO opportunities in the Pilbara region' commissioned by a number of resource stakeholders in the region. This study highlighted workers desire for choice when it came to the type of accommodation. Again positive attributes were associated with FIFO/DIDO village style accommodation solution:

- The ability to choose the type of accommodation
- Flexibility with short term and construction work
- Flexibility in choice of community to live in

It is clear that workers want choice in accommodation solutions, and village style accommodation is a critical part of that choice.

This paper is not analysing the need for, or the fact that there are FIFO/DIDO accommodation solutions but rather what are the attributes that make these solutions a positive experience.

### **The challenges of FIFO/DIDO accommodation:**

The accommodation village is a microcosm of the wider community and many similar challenges are faced in both. This paper does not intend to address any authoritative medical solution but will look at contributing factors generally accepted as good practice within community:

These contributing factors include:

- Physical and mental health
- Community
- Physical environment

These aspects are expanded on below

#### ***Physical & Mental health:***

Lifestyle problems including; obesity, Cardio Vascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, Sleep disorders – associated with night shift, general fatigue, and sleep apnoea  
Mental health issues – including depression and anxiety

Contributing factors to lifestyle diseases include; smoking, poor diet, overindulgence of alcohol consumption, insufficient exercise, being overweight and sun exposure (associated with the risk of developing cancer)

#### ***Community:***

Feeling of social isolation; disconnection with family and friends  
Unable to contribute to a community (volunteering, coaching, participation in religious/community activities)  
Feeling of loneliness (at site/village); isolation due to gender, age, access to social events

#### ***Physical environment:***

Sleep disorders – associated with poor sleep (especially night shift, general fatigue, and sleep apnoea)  
Inconvenience factors – access to central facilities, car parks, retail options, all weather access  
Aesthetic ambiance – harsh environment,  
Dusty environments – respiratory health issues

These issues were highlighted in a number of studies available to the industry; Lifeline WA FIFO/DIDO Mental Health research report 2013, Much to consider in FIFO worker wellbeing Nicole Nott and Dr Denise Keenan.

Workers themselves have also been researched to ascertain what is important to them.

ESS Support Services Worldwide's parent company, Compass Group recently commissioned Edith Cowan University School of Psychology and Social Sciences to investigate worker perceptions and experiences at remote sites in the resources sector that rely on a non-residential workforce. Residents rated the following areas important in village service provision:

- Village built environment – quietness (82.7%)
- Village personal environment – village security (82.1%)
- Village food services – quality and freshness (97.6%)
- Sport & recreation services – medical and counselling (75.2%)

- Other village services – reliability of flight times (82.0%)

And again

*Key findings from the Queensland Resources sector study (conducted by URS) highlighted FIFO worker expectations for quality accommodation*

- Internet access including wifi in rooms
- Free-to-air and pay TV
- Recreational facilities e.g. swimming pool, gymnasium, sports facilities
- Own rooms rather than 'hot bed' or 'motel' arrangements\*

Source: Williams (2012).

\* Note: *Hot bedding* occurs when the room is shared between workers on back-to-back rosters. *Motelling* occurs when a worker is allocated a different room each swing.

The QRC (Qld Resources Council) in their Guidance for long distance workers (FIFO/DIDO) considers the following good practice in policy/conditions provided by companies offering village style accommodation.

- flexible rosters
- quality accommodation facilities with en-suite, air-conditioning, television and internet access. Accommodation should be well insulated for sound and temperature
- sporting and recreation facilities, e.g. pool, gym, tennis/basketball courts, as well as organised team sports
- mobile phone reception and free Wi-Fi
- 24 hour on-site medical facilities, with doctor on call
- initiatives to develop closer interaction between employees and inhabitants of nearby communities, such as sponsored sporting events
- the opportunity for site visits for partners and family so they can see where you work and gain a better understanding of your work life
- quality fresh food in the mess with lots of variation and healthy options available.

## **Current examples of good practice.**

***Physical environment*** –village layout & design, building materials, landscaping, overall quietness, outdoor facilities,

Village construction (buildings etc) is governed by Building codes and Australian standards relevant to the jurisdiction, however it is often the design and layout of these structures that enhance the Village experience. Areas being addressed include:

- proximity of the rooms to central facilities
  - covered walkways, concrete paths, signage, carparking
- quality of the accommodation room
  - good quality bedding, blackout screens, quiet air-conditioning, TV & internet (or wireless), en-suite, insulated (noise and temperature)
- quality of landscaping
  - green spaces, vegetation corridors, dust suppression,

**Physical & Mental health** – food services, indoor & outdoor exercise facilities, medical facilities, health monitoring, recreational facilities, campaigns RUOK, consumption of alcohol, fatigue issues

- Food services
  - Australian Dietary Guidelines, variety, allergen information, specific requirements (halal, kosher etc), healthy choice options and education
- Health and Wellness programs
  - Medical facilities, BP monitoring, cholesterol monitoring, QUIT, RUOK, mental health partnerships (Beyond Blue), Employee Assistance Programs, Mates in Construction, Industry Workshops (recent workshop Fatigue and Mental Health in Mining)
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- Drug and Alcohol Management
  - Alcohol availability, self testing (drug & alcohol), Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) trained personnel, alternative venues (i.e. recreational rooms),
- Exercise facilities
  - Personal trainers, gymnasiums, swimming pools, multi sports courts, walking tracks
- Fatigue management
  - Nightshift (sleeping arrangements, diet, communication) travel arrangements (FIFO/DIDO/BIBO),

**Community** – social engagement, contact with home (mobile/internet/wireless), understanding demographic differences (m/f, gen y, gen x)

- Understanding demographics
  - Changing community expectations, younger more mobile workforce, higher female participation rates
- Social Isolation/engagement
  - Contact with home, wireless/internet/mobile coverage, non alcohol related activities (social clubs, trivia nights, guest speakers)
- Creating communities
  - Internally promoting teams (sporting, games), externally integrating into local mining town life

### **Conclusion:**

The resource sector faces challenges associated with the provision of accommodation options for its workforce. The standard of workforce accommodation can affect the performance and retention of the workforce and should not be underestimated.

Village style accommodation can provide a solution for worker access to site for these companies that is viable (and available)

To enhance the accommodation experience for the worker an integrated approach between resource company, builders and service provider must be adopted. This will help to ensure the acceptable levels of safety and health standards and worker satisfaction are attained.

Defined standards and targets must be clearly evident in the physical environment and operations of the accommodation villages.

As demonstrated there are many good practises occurring within the resource sector in Queensland.

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*Factors linked to the well-being of Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO) workers* **Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (CSRMI)**  
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