



**Construction in Ontario**

- Approx 300,000 construction workers (Construction Safety Association of Ontario (CSAO), about 15,000 unionized electrical workers
- Itinerant and mobile workforce
- Highly competitive - labour costs are tightly controlled
- Long hours, high job demands
- Work can be physically and cognitively demanding
- Continuously changing work site - hazards can include weather, heavy lifting, repetitive strain, electrocution

# Buddies in Bad Times?

## The role of coworkers in the return to work process

### Research objectives

- To understand how the RTW process affects coworkers and how coworkers affect the RTW process.
- To explore some of the challenges and opportunities faced by coworkers during the RTW process.

### Methods:

- Qualitative study – 2 focus groups
- Focus group 1 – Injured electricians
- Focus groups 2 – Union Stewards
- 17 in-depth interviews with coworkers (including supervisors, safety reps, and foremen)
- Most participants were from the Industrial, Commercial and Institutional sector, had worked as an electrician for over 10 years and were male



## Preliminary findings

### Changing roles, co-workers and workplaces

Who coworker's are is complicated. Electricians can have different roles as they take on different jobs (for example, an electrician can work as a foreman on one job but not another)

Coworkers may change from job to job and during the return to work (RTW) process. Modified work may be at a different job site where the injured worker does not know his/her co-workers.

### Informal communication

Communication about an electrician's injury, RTW or modified work is often informal and haphazard. This can lead to gossip, suspicion and mistrust of the injured worker because coworkers often only know partial, "unofficial" information.

### A "no hand holding" culture

While officially most supervisors and foremen stressed that all injuries had to be reported, this was coupled with a culture that valued those who "worked through the pain", just get the job done and did not complain. As a result workers who reported seemingly minor injuries or unsafe work conditions were sometimes not supported and ridiculed as "babies".

### No suitable modified work

Many injured workers said that there was little appropriate suitable work in their industry. Often they were put in an office where they had new coworkers who did not appreciate how much they were getting paid (more than office workers) or their lack of skill (doing office work). Workers who came back to their pre-injury job site were sometimes put in the equipment room or in a truck with a supervisor. This was perceived as "cushy" work and could cause resentment among coworkers.

### Nature of industry and work context is important

When studying the role of coworkers in the RTW process it is important to take the nature of the industry and work context into consideration. This is an industry where there is intense competition, little job security and a culture that exalts "toughness". Injury is ubiquitous. As such, those workers who must go off work and can only return to modified jobs are sometimes viewed as a liability by their coworkers and can be alienated.



*"You get banged up, bruised, cut, sometimes you even hurt yourself without realizing it"*

- Anton

*"Injury is part of the job"*

- Frank

*"There's remarkable communication network, not just the job, but within the whole industry. Sometimes it's amazing how quickly...I don't even understand how it works but it works, you know, people phone each other and the word gets around right?"*

- Larry

*"I could walk in there tomorrow and they could hand me my layoff you know, and it doesn't matter if I have worked there 4 months, 4 years or 40 years, all they owe us is an hour's notice."*

- Darren

*"Other coworkers after that kind of alienated me, once it was confirmed that I had to go for surgery and I was on light duties, they definitely alienated me. [...] I thought you know what, I am the one that's injured, I am the one that is actually coming in every day hurting and they, no matter what I could do, I would never be able to impress them."*

- Carlo

*"An injured worker is a burden on the foreman because the expectation of production won't change."*

- Larry

## Next Steps

- Complete analysis of data
- Communicate results with union and industry representatives
- Formulate questions related to the role of coworkers that can be used in a large scale survey of electricians



**For correspondence contact:** Dr. Agnieszka Kosny (Agnieszka.Kosny@monash.edu or mlifshen@iwh.on.ca)

**Acknowledgements:** All study participants; Workplace Safety and Insurance Board RAC (funder); CRE-MSD, Guild Electric (Ed Ryan); IBEW L.U. 353 (Gary Majesky); Richard Wells, Carmine Tiano

