

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Introduction

Colmar Brunton was commissioned by the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA) to conduct quantitative research to provide a benchmark of awareness, attitudes and behaviours towards asbestos across its key primary and secondary audiences. This information was sought to inform future communication strategy development and to facilitate informed discussion among all stakeholder groups.

The following table summarises the audience groups, the survey methodology and the number of respondents for each group:

Target group	Methodology	Total respondents
General public	Online survey	N=1,015
Tradespeople	CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) survey	N=401
DIY home renovators	Online survey	N=824
Real estate agents and landlords	Online survey	N=122

Fieldwork was conducted between 22 May and 30 May 2014. This report presents the findings of this research.

1.2. Key Findings

Asbestos awareness and information needs

While knowledge levels are reasonable across key audiences, there is still significant demand for additional information about asbestos and its related dangers.

The research findings suggest most people understand the importance of being informed about asbestos and its potential dangers. Being knowledgeable about asbestos and its dangers was most likely to be found important or very important by tradespeople (94%) and to slightly lesser extents - however still at high levels - by DIY home renovators (87%), real estate agents and landlords (79%) and the general public (76%).

However, the actual self-reported level of being informed about asbestos and its dangers was generally lower. Tradespeople were most likely to feel informed about asbestos and its related dangers (82% felt informed or very informed). Real estate agents and landlords (63%), DIY home renovators (61%) and the general public (53%) were comparatively less informed, not doubt reflecting the fact they have a somewhat lower immediate need for such information.

Of some concern was the close to 20% of tradespeople who described their own knowledge of the dangers of asbestos at only moderate or below. For a group that could be expected to routinely be in environments where asbestos could be an issue, a lower level of knowledge for around 1 in 5 could result in riskier behaviours for themselves and those also on site.

Similarly, around one third of DIY home renovators and 40% of real estate agents and landlords reported moderate knowledge or below, suggesting scope for improvement in knowledge among these groups also.

Confidence in own ability to identify risky materials or situations is low

In line with this finding, the general level of confidence in self-assessed ability to identify asbestos containing materials was very low. Tradespeople were most confident, but among this group only 64% reported being confident in their ability to identify materials likely to contain asbestos. Confidence was especially low among the general public (17%), and quite low among DIY home renovators (29%) and real estate agents and landlords (39%).

Similarly, self-reported confidence in ability to identify situations where risk of exposure to asbestos could be an issue was also relatively low. While some 72% of tradespeople were confident in their ability to identify such situations, some 8% indicated they lacked such confidence. Among the general public (21%), DIY home renovators (35%) and real estate agents and landlords (40%) notably smaller proportions were confident about their ability to identify these potentially dangerous situations.

Asbestos is seen as an important issue

Agreement was high that those doing renovations should be very mindful of asbestos, with 94% (tradespeople) to 89% (real estate agents and landlords) agreeing with this. There was general consensus that a person should pay for specialist advice when being unsure about whether materials contain asbestos (with 87% of the general public, 88% of DIY home renovators and 84% of real estate agents and landlords agreeing with this). There was lower agreement among tradespeople (73%), which was to be expected with a relatively large proportion of tradespeople having received formal training in this area.

Exposure to asbestos was generally seen as something that can be very dangerous. Around four in five of all groups agreed with this statement. Around two thirds (64% general public, 72% tradespeople, 71% DIY home renovators and 68% real estate agents and landlords) agreed that asbestos is very common in Australian buildings. Similar levels agreed that asbestos only poses danger if disturbed, with most agreeing or agreeing strongly, with tradespeople again agreeing strongest with this statement (77%).

While most agree to a certain extent that asbestos is a major concern, around one in three overall still disagree it is a major concern to them. For tradespeople this was most likely to be a concern, for the general public least likely.

Internet seen as the most important information source

The internet would be the main source of information when looking for asbestos and its dangers, with a Google search dominating topping the list of information sources for all target groups. Tradespeople were more likely to also regularly mention other sources, such as asbestos specialists or Workplace Safety Authorities.

ASEA Awareness low

ASEA knew low levels of awareness among its target groups, however considering the organisation has only existed since 2013, the levels of awareness achieved among its target audiences could be considered as reasonable. The awareness was highest among real estate agents and landlords (21%) and tradespeople (14%), while it was lower among DIY home renovators (10%) and the general public (10%).

The ASEA website, Asbestossafety.gov.au was mentioned – unprompted - by 1% of the general public and of real estate agents and landlords as a source of information about asbestos.

Those aware of ASEA were likely to have visited its website, especially among tradespeople (86%) and real estate agents and landlords (77%). The website was received positively, and rated as useful by most who had accessed it.

Information that assists with identifying asbestos and management of risks was needed most

Between 10% and 20% thought they needed more information on asbestos and its related safety dangers (10% for the general public, 13% DIY home renovators, 18% tradespeople and 20% real estate agents and landlords). This could be a sign that many feel they do not currently need information, but do not feel informed enough on how to manage a possible future situation in which they are potentially at risk of being exposed to asbestos.

Those identifying a need for further information were asked what specifically they need. Practical information about identifying asbestos and asbestos containing materials was needed by four in ten of general public and tradespeople, while 25% needed general information and guidelines. DIY home renovators also identified a need to get information about the disposal of asbestos (18%) and risk assessment (16%). Real estate agents and landlords were also likely to want information about symptoms of health risk (20%).

Tradespeople

Formal training present but not widespread

Formal asbestos awareness and safety training was not widespread among tradespeople, with 40% having undertaken this. The training was undertaken mostly through an external training organisation (47%), an industry peak body (16%), or one's employer (11%). Larger organisations were more likely to have undertaken training through external training organisations. The training was received well with the majority (89%) finding it useful.

About one in three tradespeople thought that future training could be useful to them. Similar to the undertaken training, it was thought that the future training should be provided by an external training organisation (32%) or a peak body (17%).

Asbestos is seen as an important issue, however there is scope among employers and staff for knowledge to be improved

While tradespeople were convinced that asbestos is a serious danger and that taking risks by staff is discouraged as much as possible, the survey results also indicate that there still is a need for them to be further educated about identifying asbestos and the risks related to asbestos removal and disposal.

Highest levels of agreement were observed with statements such as “All staff in this business are discouraged from taking any risks in relation to asbestos on a job site” (94% total agreement), “Our business / organisation takes asbestos and its dangers very seriously” (92%) and “I am happy to raise the costs of asbestos removal with clients if necessary” (91%). Lower levels of agreement were observed for the statements “I am concerned about potentially being exposed to asbestos” (57%) and “I have had sufficient training about how to identify and manage asbestos on the job site” (55%).

While most employers feel they have the needed understanding of their legal obligations towards keeping staff safe, 24% feel their knowledge about this could be improved. Similarly, while 70% rated their staff’s knowledge as good, the remaining 30% rated it as only moderate or lower.

A range of information sources were mentioned by tradespeople, with email being mentioned most often (28%), and a training, course or seminar also often (15%).

DIY home renovators

DIY home renovators regularly undertake significant work

DIY home renovators regularly undertake significant renovations or demolitions, with a quarter recently having renovated a bathroom or kitchen, 18% having knocked down walls and one in ten having undertaken demolition work. Close to those proportions were planning future work, with 18% planning a bathroom renovation, down to 6% planning a demolition.

Most DIY home renovators (58%) prefer to usually undertake all the work themselves, while a quarter involves professionals as well. The remaining 18% were not involved in recent work.

DIY work undertaken in a potentially dangerous manner

About half of the recent work undertaken did not involve any risk assessment of asbestos materials being present. Those who had the work undertaken completely by professionals were significantly more likely than the other groups to be unsure about a risk assessment being undertaken (21% versus 6% and nil). Assuming that professionals would be likely to undertake risks assessments, it indicates that there is an opportunity for tradespeople to communicate more with their clients about this assessment.

In one in five cases of recent work, asbestos needed to be removed. For 41% this was done by a professional; whereas a worrying 36% reported undertaking the removal of asbestos themselves.

DIY home renovators agree asbestos is dangerous, but lack knowledge about identifying asbestos and protecting themselves against its risks

A battery of statements presented to DIY home renovators suggest that while the dangers of asbestos in general are noted, there is a gap between these attitudes and the knowledge needed to make informed decisions.

High levels of agreement were observed with the statement “Asbestos removal must be undertaken by licensed specialists in this field” (90% total agreement), and “I take asbestos and its dangers very seriously” (92%). Lower levels of agreement were observed with knowledge related statements, namely “I know how to protect myself from exposure to asbestos” (50% total agreement), “I have enough information about asbestos to make informed decisions when doing any renovation work” (50% total agreement) and “I have sufficient knowledge about how to identify and manage asbestos on the job site” (39% total agreement).

Internet and television most effective media for DIY home renovators

The ASEA website, DIY internet sites, TV advertising and DIY shows on TV were mentioned by at least half of DIY home renovators as the best communication channels for the Australian Government to reach them.

Real estate agents and private landlords

Asbestos not always top of mind, but still highly relevant issue for those in property management

A quarter of real estate agents and private landlords had recently received queries about asbestos. Of these, 61% thought themselves well placed to answer the questions. While the issue of asbestos is apparently not of constant relevance to real estate agents and private landlords, 85% agreed were convinced it is important they have a good understanding of it.

A minority have received training, and there is strong interest in additional training

Only one in five had received formal training about asbestos and how to manage it, mostly through their company (and a smaller proportion through a peak body). The training was seen as useful by the majority of attendees.

Some 50% of participants indicated interest in participating in formal training on asbestos matters. Peak bodies were thought to be most suited to deliver training to real estate agents and private landlords, with 43% indicating this as their preference.

Similar to other groups, real estate agents and private landlords seem to be aware of the issue of asbestos but lack practical knowledge of how to deal with the issue. They have most need for information about identification of asbestos and the risks involved, but also about their legal obligations and the risks of potential exposure of tenants.

Internet and television thought to be most efficient information sources

Real estate agents and landlords preferred to receive information through the ASEA website (44%), television advertising (31%) or online news coverage (31%).