Psychological health
for small business

People
AT WORK

Your responsibilities

Every business, regardless of its size, has a responsibility under the model Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act to ensure the health and safety of their workers, so far as is reasonably practicable. Health is defined to include both physical and psychological. The model WHS laws have not been implemented in Victoria and Western Australia, although those jurisdictions have comparable duties and definitions of health[1].

A workplace can be any place where work is carried out for a business or undertaking and could include a work vehicle or a client's home. The law says that everyone working or coming into a workplace has a legal responsibility to look after their own health and safety, and health of others at the workplace. Workers must not deliberately put themselves or anyone else in danger and must obey any instructions that their employer gives them about health and safety. Psychosocial hazards and factors are a workplace health and safety issue as they can create a physical or psychological risk to worker health and safety.

Benefits of a risk management approach

It is good business practice to proactively manage risk by identifying, assessing and controlling psychosocial hazards and factors arising from your business or undertaking.

To properly manage risks, a person must:

1. identify hazards
2. assess risks
3. control risks
4. review control measures to ensure they are working as planned.

There are many benefits of a risk management approach such as assisting in eliminating or minimising the risk of exposure to workers so far as is reasonably practicable.

Benefits can include:

- a reduction in absenteeism, incidents, workers compensation claims, staff turnover, recruitment and training costs due to increased staff retention and reduction in customer complaints
- a positive working environment
- increased job satisfaction – good morale
- possible increases in productivity
- sound decision making
- improved communication
- loyalty to the workplace.

When left unmanaged, the result of exposure to unmanaged work-related stress can include:

- mental health conditions (e.g. anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder)
- physical injury or illness (e.g. musculoskeletal disorders, cardiovascular conditions)
- poor health behaviours (e.g. smoking, increased alcohol intake, reduced physical activity).

Small businesses that employ workers need to consider the risks inherent within the job and apply risk management principles to eliminate or minimise these risks.

Small business and the People at work survey

The People at work survey is designed for medium and large organisations and can only be used by workplaces with 20 or more workers. This is to ensure anonymity, meaningful results and to enable a report to be generated. There are additional resources beyond the People at work survey that can be utilised by small business to assist in preventing psychological harm as a result of poorly managed psychosocial hazards and factors. These resources can be found at **https://www.peopleatwork.gov.au/webcopy/resources**.

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1   For more information on legislation in your jurisdictions contact your local regulator
    https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/whs-authorities-contact-information

What are psychosocial hazards and factors?

Psychosocial hazards and factors are anything in the design or management of work that increases the risk of work-related stress. A stress response is the physical, mental and emotional reactions that occur when a worker perceives the demands of their work exceed their ability or resources to cope. Work-related stress, if prolonged and/or severe, can cause both psychological and physical harm.

1. Identifying psychosocial hazards and factors

You can identify psychosocial hazards and factors in your workplace through direct observation, discussions with workers and/or through review of workplace data such as sick leave or workers compensation claims. Below is a list of common psychosocial hazards and factors, however this is not an exhaustive list and there may be other factors that are relevant in your workplace.

High and low job demands

There are many different types of job demands in the workplace and these can vary depending on the nature of work, your industry and location of work. Job demand that is either too high or, in some cases, too low can contribute to work related stress.

Examples of the type of demands include:

- mental or cognitive demands
- repetitive or monotonous work (low job demands)
- time pressure or role overload
- emotional demands
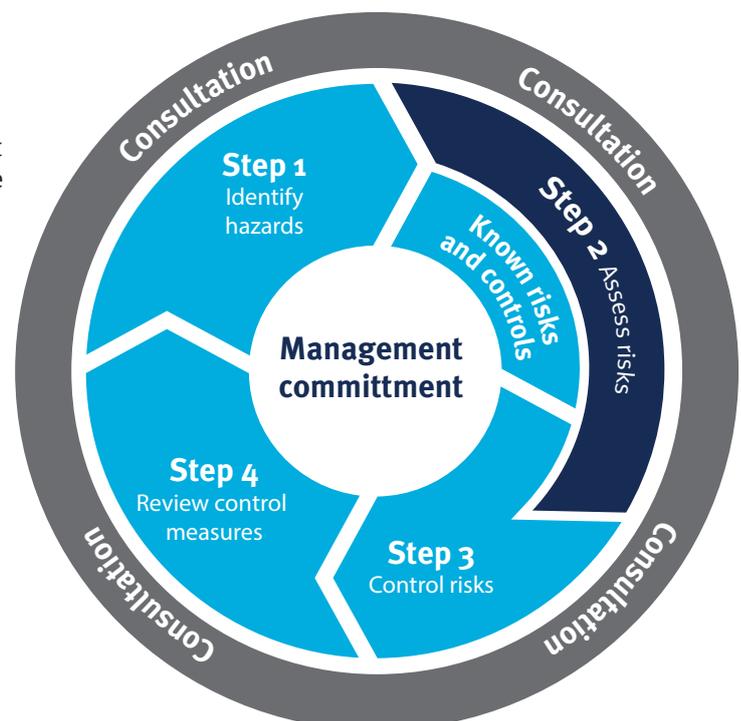- physical demands.

Challenging work hours or shift work

Challenging work hours may arise from situations including:

- night shifts or long shifts (12 or more hours)
- shift patterns that are unpredictable
- regular or unplanned overtime
- rotating shifts where workers are required to work nights, afternoons and days in quick succession
- shifts that provide inadequate time for sleep and recovery.

Low job control

Job control involves a worker's ability to influence what happens in their work environment, as well as make decisions about how their work is done and the objectives they work towards. Low job control can occur when:

- work is machine or computer paced
- work is tightly managed and controlled (e.g. scripted call centres with set breaks and rostering)
- workers are overly directed
- workers are unable to refuse to deal with aggressive clients (e.g. police services)
- workers are not involved in decisions that affect them or their clients.

Consultation — Consultation — Consultation — Consultation

Step 1 — Identify hazards

Step 2 — Assess risks

Known risks and controls

Management committment

Step 3 — Control risks

Step 4 — Review control measures

Poor support

Support refers to the practical assistance and emotional support that team members or managers provide on a day-to-day basis. Poor support can occur when:

- workers do not work in a team or work in isolation
- team members or managers are geographically dispersed
- workers do not receive feedback on their work or do not have regular performance discussions with their supervisor
- there is a lack of guidance or information for workers.

Low role clarity

Role clarity is the degree of certainty regarding role requirements and responsibilities. Low role clarity can occur when:

- workers may have multiple reporting lines or supervisors and as such may have competing demands
- workers are asked to undertake a specific task with no instructions or detailed information about requirements
- there is a lack of clarity about what tasks need to be completed, what the deadlines are, and what the priorities for individuals, teams and work units are
- position descriptions and/or areas of responsibility are changed without consultation or discussion.

Poor workplace relationships

Relationships with managers, peers and subordinates can positively or negatively affect the way a worker feels. Poor workplace relationships can occur when:

- there is work-related bullying, aggression, harassment including sexual harassment, discrimination or other unreasonable behaviours by co-workers, supervisors or clients
- there is conflict between workers and their managers, supervisors or co-workers
- incivility in teams or departments is tolerated by management.

Poor organisational change management

Change is an inevitable aspect of life and in a workplace can be essential for future growth. However, poor management of the change process can lead to workers feeling anxious and uncertain about aspects of their work or employment status. Situations that may lead to poor organisational change management include:

- disorganisation and lack of planning
- implementing changes without sufficient consultation and stakeholder engagement
- failure to communicate key messages, updates and information about change, which may also lead to informal communication practices
- failure to announce changes in a timely fashion and explain the reasons for change
- inadequate support during transitional times.

Poor organisational justice

Organisational injustice refers to workers' perceptions of fairness at work. Poor organisational justice can occur when:

- there is a lack of, or inadequate, policies and procedures
- the people who will be affected by decisions are excluded from consultation and decision-making processes
- there is a failure to take appropriate action to address inappropriate behaviour, poor performance or misconduct
- there is a lack of communication and transparency regarding organisational direction, strategy, objectives and decisions
- there is bias, impartiality, favouritism and nepotism.

Low recognition and reward

Recognition and reward is the acknowledgement provided to a worker resulting in increased feelings of confidence, pride, and being valued for their work contributions. Low recognition and reward can occur when:

- there is an absence of appropriate mechanisms and practices for regular performance discussions, performance planning and goal setting
- the recognition or acknowledgement that is provided is vague, not meaningful or not attributed to specific situations
- inequitable reward and recognition practices.

2. Assessing psychosocial risks

Once the hazards have been identified the level of risk that the identified hazards present needs to be assessed. Methods of assessing the level of risk include evaluating levels of productivity, rates of absenteeism, gathering information from workers, evaluating morale, and gathering feedback from customers. This information can be captured using tools such as a worker survey, conducting a workplace audit, analysing incident reports, and holding focus groups and/or interviews.

You may like to look at the following **resources** to help you in this process:

- How to examine and interrogate workplace data
- Focus group guide.

3. Controlling psychosocial risks

After assessing the risk, the most appropriate control measure(s) that are reasonably practicable in the circumstances need to be selected and implemented. When selecting a control measure, it is important to be able to justify why it was chosen over a different measure. It is also important in this step of the risk management process that you are consulting with workers. The following information provides some guidance about types of control measures; however you will need to consider the various hazards and factors unique to your workplace and consult with your workers when implementing control measures.

High and low job demands

Do	Don't
- Hold regular team meetings to discuss projected workload for the following week and address anticipated absences. - Meet with individuals to discuss workload and identify challenges encountered or anticipated. - Develop personal work plans to ensure workers are aware of their job responsibilities. - Identify peaks and troughs for workload and incorporate into staffing rosters. - Allocate resources such as time and equipment to ensure workers can undertake their jobs properly. - Ensure utilisation of skills within everyday work. - Ensure workers have adequate time management skills and provide training where needed. - Give realistic deadlines - Rotate job tasks for repetitive or highly demanding tasks or reduce exposure time for workers' dealing with aggressive clients. - Minimise environmental stressors (e.g. noise, heat, vibration).	- Ask people to undertake tasks they are not trained or skilled to do. - Expect people to work longer hours than rostered to complete tasks. - Increase an individual's workload without appropriate resources for the task. - Under-utilise skills. - Limit workers to repetitive and monotonous tasks.

Low job control

Do	Don't
• Engage workers in making decisions about the way they do their work. • Allow workers to participate in the decisions making processes about issues that affect their work. • View performance review processes as an opportunity for workers to have input into the way they do their work. • Provide opportunities for skill development.	• Expect workers to stay after hours without prior consultation. • Dictate how workers are to carry out all duties involved in their role – provide some autonomy in decision making wherever possible.

Poor support

Do	Don't
• Provide a workplace culture that supports open communication, so workers feel comfortable discussing issues. • Provide training, skill development and employee assistance service to workers. • Promote work-life balance by allowing for flexibility. • Utilise regular performance reviews as a time to provide support and constructive advice for future performance. • Provide opportunities for career and professional development (e.g. acting in managerial roles during the manager's absence).	• Use performance tools as a disciplinary measure. • Discriminate against people or use bullying as a tactic to elicit performance.

Low role clarity

Do	Don't
• Provide up-to-date position descriptions. • Provide an organisational chart—enables clear view of structure and communication channels. • Provide an induction to all new workers. • Develop personal work plans. • Discuss roles and work plans at team meetings. • Ensure workers have clear goals and performance standards.	• Change job functions or position descriptions without consultation and discussion.

Poor workplace relationships

Do	Don't
• Provide education on work-related bullying, violence and conflict resolution. • Define what is acceptable behaviour within the workplace (e.g. code of conduct). • Promote communication within and between teams. • Provide information on support services available and how to access them such as an employee assistance program. • Put processes in place which address action to be taken in the event behaviour is unacceptable (e.g. complaints handling and investigations, potential disciplinary actions). • Treat each case individually and ensure that it is addressed in a fair and just manner.	• Allow unacceptable behaviour to continue. • Leave conflict unresolved.

Poor organisational change management

Do	Don't
• Involve workers in the change process via communication and consultation. • Identify the key issues of the change and provide information to workers. • Ensure workers are informed of the implications of the change on their respective positions and roles. • Identify methods of communication to meet the needs of workers in advising of the change process e.g. meetings, emails.	• Disregard the impact it may have on individuals or teams, as even minor changes can affect individuals. • Keep workers in the dark about changes that affect them.

Poor organisational justice

Do	Don't
• Ensure that workplace rules are applied fairly, consistently and in an unbiased manner. • Ensure there is a transparent grievance and appeal process. • Promote and encourage a positive and fair work environment.	• Ignore unfair work practices. The experience of perceived injustice at work can be harmful to both the individual and the workplace.

Low recognition and reward

Do	Don't
• Recognise individual and team contributions and achievements within the workplace. • Ensure recognition and rewards are appropriate and relevant for the worker or team.	• Show overt favouritism to a worker or group of workers.

4. Reviewing control measures

The last step of the risk management process is to review the effectiveness of the control measures that have been implemented to ensure they are working as planned. It is important to weigh up whether the chosen controls are effective and adequately control the identified risk or whether modification or additional controls are required.

More information

To obtain more information on how to effectively manage the risks to psychological health, refer to **Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties**