Preventing and managing risks to work-related psychological health

Queensland
Government

Contents

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. These are also called psychological hazards, work-related stressors or organisational factors.

Work-related stress 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. Workers are likely to be exposed to a combination of psychosocial hazards and factors - some may always be present, while others only occasionally.

Psychosocial hazards and factors include:

- high and low job demands
- low job control
- poor support
- poor workplace relationships (includes work-related bullying)
- low role clarity
- poor organisational change management
- low reward and recognition
- poor organisational justice
- poor environmental conditions
- remote and isolated work
- violent or traumatic events.

Exposure to psychosocial hazards and factors can impact mental and physical health through stress, psychological strain, job burnout, anxiety, depression, muscular aches and pains, irritability, poor concentration and disturbed sleep.

Figure 1 highlights the relationship between psychosocial hazards/factors and poor individual health outcomes. For example, psychosocial hazards and factors are linked to a number of physical illnesses and injuries such as cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders (MSD), as well as poor health behaviours such as poor nutrition, inactivity and substance abuse. Psychological injury, physical illness and poor health behaviours are also related in a way that when one is present, the others are also likely to be impacted negatively.
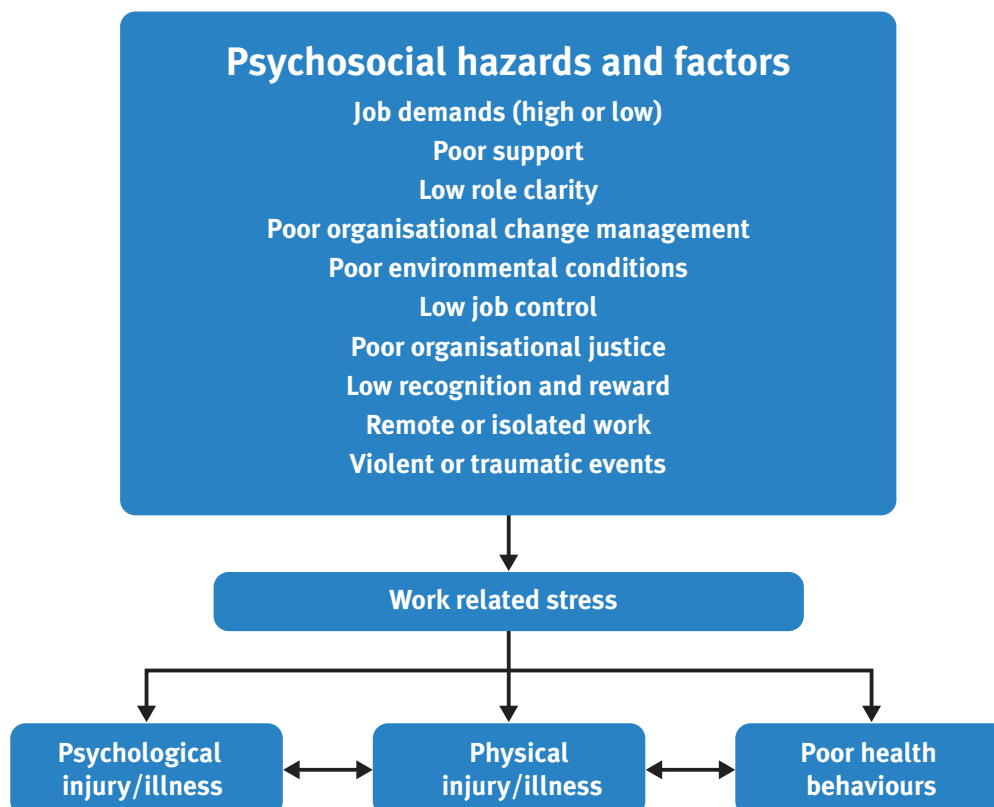

Psychosocial hazards and factors

Job demands (high or low)
Poor support
Low role clarity
Poor organisational change management
Poor environmental conditions
Low job control
Poor organisational justice
Low recognition and reward
Remote or isolated work
Violent or traumatic events

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Work related stress

Psychological injury/illness ↔ **Physical injury/illness** ↔ **Poor health behaviours**

Figure 1. Model of work-related stress

All of these consequences can affect organisational performance through lost productivity, poor performance, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, worker turnover, increased risk of incidents and disrupted relationships at work and/or home.

Your legal duties

Work-related stress can be caused by psychosocial hazards and factors in the workplace and be exacerbated by non-work factors. Persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) are not able to control workers' personal lives and the stressors they may encounter, however, they do have a legal obligation to eliminate or minimise exposure to work-related hazards and factors that can increase the risk of work-related stress or other psychological harm. Everyone in the workplace has a responsibility to look after their own health and safety as well as the health and safety of others.

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* imposes a duty on PCBUs to do what is reasonably practicable to eliminate or minimise risks to psychological health and safety. This duty extends to the risk of harm from psychosocial hazards and factors at work. This handbook will help you implement a risk management approach to identify, assess and control work-related psychosocial hazards and factors.

Identifying and managing psychosocial hazards

Psychosocial hazards and factors can be identified and managed using a risk management process - a four-step process for controlling exposure to health and safety risks associated with hazards in the workplace (see Figure 2).

The *How to manage work health and safety risks Code of Practice 2011* specifies that, to properly manage exposure to risks, a person must:

- identify hazards
- assess risks if necessary
- control risks
- review control measures to ensure they are working as planned.

Psychosocial risk management should be a proactive process. Often, psychosocial risk management only occurs after an individual suffers from psychological harm or distress. This approach is costly and can miss other important and related factors due to its narrow focus. It can also mean that the PCBU is not complying with their duty to eliminate or minimise risks to worker health and safety from being exposed to psychosocial hazards and factors at work. More comprehensive information can be found in the Safe Work Australia publication, *Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties*.

Step 1: Identify the hazards

The first step in the risk management process is to identify all reasonably foreseeable work-related psychosocial hazards. This means looking for the workplace factors including workload, leadership and culture, social factors and how the work is organised.

Figure 2. The four-step risk management process.

Psychosocial hazards and factors can be identified by:

- having conversations with workers, supervisors and health and safety specialists
- inspecting the workplace to see how work is carried out, noting any rushing, delays or work backlogs
- observing how people interact with each other during work activities
- reviewing relevant information and records including incident reports, workers' compensation claims for both psychological injury and other disorders known to be linked to work-related stress such as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), productivity levels, staff surveys, absenteeism and staff turnover data and exit interviews
- using surveys to gather information from workers, supervisors and managers.

Download the **How to examine and interrogate workplace data guide** for further insight into potential hazards in your workplace.

Step 2: Assess and prioritise the risk

The likelihood and consequences of injury or illness that may result from exposure to psychosocial hazards should be assessed and prioritised.

The risk associated with exposure to work-related psychosocial hazards can be assessed by understanding worker complaints, observing interactions between workers, gaining feedback from workers, having one-on-one discussions with workers, and through the use of focus groups or a worker survey.

Findings from your psychosocial risk assessment will inform any decisions about the likelihood and consequences of injury or illness from exposure to psychosocial hazard(s).

The following tools will help you assess and prioritise your risks:

People at Work survey

This survey helps organisations to proactively identify and manage workplace risks using a psychosocial risk assessment tool completed by workers. All materials required to administer and report on the People at Work survey is provided, including a paper based survey, administration instructions, a spreadsheet for reporting and guidance materials.

Suited to: Medium or large businesses

Psychosocial risk assessment

This template helps you conduct a risk assessment on your workplace and identify and implement controls to respond to any identified risks.

Suited to: Small or medium business

Focus groups

Focus groups are small groups (typically 6-10 people) from across the organisation. A focus group provides a forum for assessing the risk of exposure to psychosocial hazards. Participants consider each of the psychosocial hazards and how they may or may not apply to the workplace.

Suited to: All business sizes

Step 3: Control risks

After assessing the risk and determining which hazard(s) have the greatest contribution to that risk, establish, implement and maintain the most appropriate control measure(s) that are reasonably practical in the circumstances. When selecting a control, it is important to consult with workers and justify why it was chosen over a different measure. For each of the psychosocial hazards, several controls are suggested in this handbook.

Step 4: Review control measures

The last step of the risk management process is to review the effectiveness of the implemented control measures to ensure they are working as planned or need modification. This will also assist in monitoring the extent to which legal obligations have been fulfilled.

Psychosocial risk management is a continuous exercise within the organisation. The dynamics and complexity of organisations can mean that changes such as a new supervisor, new workers or new processes or procedures can have marked, unexpected and unplanned effects on workers.

Critical success factors

There are a number of critical success factors when implementing controls for psychosocial hazards:

• visible organisational and management commitment to dealing with psychosocial hazards

• worker participation in all activities associated with the risk assessment process

• organisational communication and consultation regarding the risk management process.

Leadership commitment

Senior management commitment is critical to the success of any significant organisational initiatives resulting from the risk assessment process. The selected control measures/interventions may require an investment in resources including people, money and time. This investment has been shown to make considerable savings when effective, evidence based interventions have been implemented. As well as a legal duty, risk management of psychosocial hazards can be an organisational improvement strategy.

Gaining worker commitment through frequent and open communication is a necessary part of successfully changing worker attitudes and/or behaviour.

Participation, communication and consultation

Queensland work health and safety legislation has a strong focus on consultation in risk management, requiring PCBUs to seek advice or information from the people involved with the risks in the workplace. Consulting with workers at each stage of the risk management process will assist in achieving better health and safety outcomes.

Ways to facilitate participation and consultation

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* provides for consultation through workplace health and safety representatives and committees, where these are required in your workplace.

You can also set up a communication and project management structure to oversee and implement the risk management process. This structure might include a senior steering committee and/or a working group.

1. Senior steering committee

A senior steering committee is a group of individuals drawn from those in senior management positions and strategic areas of the organisation, such as human resources, work health and safety and organisational communication, who are responsible for general operating policy, procedures and related matters affecting the organisation as a whole. It includes a project champion, who heads the committee and gives the project momentum.

A senior steering committee provides:

• overall guidance and direction for a project and communicates with the organisation at a senior level about the project

• tangible evidence of management support.

Employers may want to consider establishing a steering committee to oversee the risk management process and to ensure that the recommendations for changes are implemented strategically.

2. Working group

The working group includes people who more actively facilitate the process on the ground. Working groups are an effective way of carrying out a potentially large-scale strategic process. They encourage full and active participation by the workers in the risk management process. A working group can also be important to ensure participative approaches are utilised. Specifically, seeking worker input into the design, implementation and evaluation of any control measures implemented during the risk assessment process for identifying hazards.

The working group can:

• encourage worker participation

• discuss perceptions and perspectives on work practices

• coordinate focus group discussions or the distribution of surveys

• review the results of surveys and other information provided to confirm or challenge the responses

• analyse and prioritise areas where action is needed

- use a collaborative approach involving workers and managers
- develop an action plan to address the identified psychosocial hazards
- report to the senior steering committee.

3. Feedback on risk assessment results

Providing feedback and seeking worker input on the risk assessment to members of the organisation is crucial. This step helps ensure information about the psychosocial hazards is used in designing, implementing and evaluating appropriate interventions for managing risks associated with psychosocial hazards.

Feedback may focus initially on the project champion and steering committee or working group, with discussions on how the results could be best positioned and presented. However this process should not be restricted to this group alone, with the promise of wider feedback an important factor in securing worker commitment to any interventions or risk reduction activities.

Job demands

Job demands are one of the most common sources of poor psychological health and safety. While workers need challenging tasks to maintain their interest and motivation, and to develop new skills, it is important that demands do not exceed their ability to cope. Workers can usually cope with demanding work if it is not excessive, if they are supported by supervisors and colleagues, and if they are given the right amount of job control.

Types of job demands

There are many different types of job demands in the workplace, these can vary depending on the nature of work, your industry and location of work.

Mental or cognitive demands (low or high levels)	Work that requires very high levels of concentration or sustained attention over an extended duration. Work which is not cognitively demanding can include tasks that are monotonous or don't require much attention or concentration. Both types of work can be fatiguing and stressful, with increased error rates and poor work quality.
Time pressure or role overload	Excessive time pressures or a demanding workload.
Emotional demands	Tasks or activities that require workers to show false displays of emotion such as happiness and enthusiasm, even in situations that are frustrating, stressful or provoke anger. Emotionally demanding work can also be those in which workers are exposed to emotionally distressing or sensitive situations.
Physical demands	Requires workers to use their body to generate, restrain or absorb forces and movements or expend high levels of energy. These might be considered a hazardous manual task and require a **risk assessment**. The risks arising from physical job demands increases when physical activity must be completed in a tight timeframe or in difficult environmental conditions.
Challenging work hours	Shift work or irregular working hours that can be difficult to predict. This type of work is associated with a greater risk of fatigue.

Mental or cognitive demands (low or high levels)

Identifying when cognitive job demands might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to high levels of cognitive demand include:

- analysing complex/detailed information
- making complex decisions in situations with no guidelines or procedures
- doing complex mathematical calculations, such as in finance management and budgeting or engineering
- needing to quickly evaluate complex situations, reach sound judgments and make effective decisions under pressure, such as in medical or policing work
- determining effective strategies/solutions to respond to complaints or issues, whether people-related in the workplace or from external customers and clients.

Situations that may lead to low levels of cognitive demand include those that:

- have little mental stimulation or problem solving
- require people to undertake repetitive tasks with little variety.

Implementing controls for cognitive job demands

- Implement engineering controls where there are safety critical monitoring tasks (e.g. signal detection, fail safe mechanisms).
- Make use of algorithms, clinical decision making guidelines or robotics where practical to assist workers.
- Redesign the work where possible through reducing time pressure or adjusting job requirements to reduce cognitive demands.
- Design the completion of work tasks in a way that complex tasks are undertaken by multiple team members, where appropriate, to share the load.
- Provide workers with sufficient time to perform the tasks assigned and provide suitable, appropriately maintained equipment.
- Schedule regular breaks throughout the day and ensure that workers are taking required breaks and getting adequate rest.
- Implement systems to support workers when they are required to make difficult decisions or when there are negative consequences to decisions they have made (e.g. child safety workers).
- Rotate tasks and activities so that workers aren't overexposed to cognitively demanding work or recurrent monotonous work.
- Ensure that tasks are matched to the skill and capability level of your workers.
- Give workers some control over the way they do their work including work pace and order of tasks.

Mitigate the impacts of cognitively demanding tasks

- Create an environment in which workers feel comfortable raising concerns and speaking up about difficulties coping with work tasks.
- Develop workers' cognitive skills through involvement in complex decision-making and problem-solving activities.
- Provide opportunities for knowledge and skill development to help workers better manage tasks and cognitive demand.
- Offer counselling support to workers who are experiencing high stress levels.
- Provide practical assistance when workers are doing challenging tasks.

Time pressure and role overload

Identifying when time pressure and role overload might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to high levels of role overload include:

- allocating tasks to workers that are beyond their level of competence or capacity
- placing excessive expectations on new or existing workers to learn new tasks quickly
- inequitable distribution of work tasks within a team or unit
- being given unreasonable deadlines
- poor job design
- lack of resources required to complete tasks and projects, be it people, financial or physical resources
- increased pressure due to absence of team members through illness and planned or unplanned leave.

Implementing controls for time pressure and role overload

- Ensure jobs are designed to ensure manageable workloads.
- Regularly review work policies and procedures to ensure they promote efficiency and effectiveness in work output.
- Monitor work flow for trends in workload and times of peak demand. Use this information to plan and ensure adequate resourcing.
- Monitor workloads during periods of peak demand (e.g. Christmas, school holidays or seasonal peaks) and provide additional support where required.
- Proactively discuss work priorities and demands and ensure there is agreement on what is required.
- Engage in regular conversations with workers about work expectations, workloads, deadlines and instructions.

Mitigate the impacts of time pressure tasks and role overload

- Encourage workers to discuss ways to minimise overload or implement improvements to reduce demands.
- Act immediately to prevent excessive workloads which are causing stress and strain.
- Encourage workers to take leave to recover from periods of high demands.
- Ensure sufficient breaks are taken over long shifts.
- Provide workers with training on time management, organisation and decision making skills.
- Encourage workers to manage stress and fatigue during periods of increased work demands.

Emotional demands

Identifying when emotionally demanding work might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to high levels of emotional demand include:

- engaging in conflict with customers, clients or co-workers
- dealing with customer/client complaints and aggressive behaviour
- delivering bad news to customers, clients or co-workers
- engaging in performance conversations with underperforming workers
- undertaking disciplinary processes
- providing support to customers, clients or co-workers that are emotionally distressed.

Implementing controls for emotionally demanding work

- Where emotional demands are an unavoidable part of a worker's role, ensure these are captured in a position description and that applicants are informed at the pre-selection stage (e.g. at interview) of the demanding nature of the role.
- Roster work activities to ensure workers are not required to approach difficult client situations on their own.
- Ensure work tasks and cases are matched with the worker's capability level.
- Ensure there is sufficient supervision available so workers can reach out for support to deal with challenging situations.
- Provide workers/managers with breaks and opportunities to get distance from and/or debrief about emotionally demanding situations.
- Rotate tasks and activities to ensure there isn't overexposure to emotionally demanding activities.
- Where possible, allow workers greater control over their jobs (e.g. empowering workers to make decisions that will reduce emotional demands such as giving a refund for a product).

Mitigate the impacts of emotionally demanding tasks

- Foster a culture of openness so workers feel comfortable speaking up about the situations they have found emotionally challenging.
- Escalate ongoing issues to someone more senior or experienced.
- Follow-up with workers who have experienced an emotionally demanding situation.
- Build capability of workers to manage conflict and deal with aggressive behaviour.

Physical demands

Identifying when physically demanding work might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to high levels of physically demanding work include:

- high force and sustained exertion (e.g. screeding concrete)
- repetitive movement or sustaining uncomfortable body positions.

Implementing controls for physically demanding work

- Ensure that physically demanding tasks are assessed using the **Manual task risk management worksheet**.
- Ensure the work area and layout are appropriate for risks that can arise from physically demanding work (considering positioning of benches, conveyors, furniture, fittings and equipment used).
- Make the physical environment as comfortable as possible and designed specifically for the tasks being undertaken.
- Ensure workers are well trained and capable of undertaking the required tasks.

Mitigate the impacts of physically demanding tasks

- Allow workers to take regular breaks away from physically demanding work and where practicable, rotate repetitive tasks between workers.
- Ensure tools used by workers in physically demanding tasks are appropriate considering the weight, balance, handle design, handle orientation, shock loading and impact, and prolonged use.
- Ensure shifts and rosters are scheduled to allow workers adequate time for rest and sleep. More information on **work-related fatigue management**.

Challenging work hours or shift work

Identifying when challenging work hours or shift work might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to challenging work hours or shift work include:

- night shifts or long shifts (12 or more hours)
- shifts 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.

Implementing controls for challenging work hours or shift work

- Ensure sufficient cover for workers who are on leave. If overtime is necessary, plan ahead so that workers can schedule their activities around it.
- Develop a system to notify workers of unplanned tight deadlines and any exceptional need to work long hours.
- Ensure adequate work breaks and where practicable, allow some flexibility in the timing of breaks.
- Ensure shift rosters are agreed to by workers and provide communication and consultation when designing or changing rosters.
- Minimise safety critical tasks during the early hours of the morning (2am to 6am).
- Ensure the roster provides for a continuous seven to eight hours sleep in each 24 hours.
- Limit overtime and do not allow workers to regularly exceed a 12 hour shift.

Mitigate the impact of challenging work hours or shift work

- Educate workers about the early warning signs of fatigue and encourage them to take breaks when they need to.
- Promote work-life balance and encourage workers to take annual leave or holidays when they are due.
- Provide clear guidelines and expectations on how to report fatigue-related hazards or concerns in the workplace.
- Encourage workers to report fitness for duty concerns related to fatigue.

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. Job control can include control over work tasks, the work environment, where work is done, how it is done, and freedom from supervision. Low job control occurs where workers have little control over aspects of the work including how or when a job is done.

Giving workers more control over their work is considered a key strategy for improving psychological health and safety. It is important to note, however, that job control is not a one size fits all process. With control comes responsibility and accountability, which can be stressful particularly when not enough support is provided to undertake these responsibilities.

Identifying when low job control might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to workers experiencing low levels of control include:

- being unable to refuse to deal with aggressive clients (e.g. police services)
- not being involved in decisions that affect them or their clients
- failing to involve the right people in decision making
- where workers have little say in the way they do their work, when they can take breaks or change tasks
- work that is machine or computer paced
- work that is tightly managed and controlled (e.g. scripted call centres with set breaks and rostering)
- being overly directed
- lack of opportunities to learn and develop new skills
- work that requires permission or sign-off before progressing with routine tasks
- not being provided with access to tools, resources or information needed to carry out the job.

Implementing controls for low job control

- Consult with workers about goals and objectives and facilitate discussion to agree on what needs to be achieved and how.
- Involve workers in decision making processes and encourage suggestions for continuously improving work practices.
- Establish an environment in which workers feel empowered to say no, negotiate work requirements and deadlines, and delegate/hand-over work.
- Implement processes to allow workers to have control over work flow, customer queues, task intake, internal and external service level agreements etc.
- Implement policies and practices for flexible working arrangements.
- Implement effective learning and development programs and systems to ensure workers have the skills required to achieve their goals. Where skills are lacking, discuss opportunities for development. Ensure there is also learning and development programs for managers on management styles that empower workers rather than micro-manage.
- Implement processes to allow opportunities for job rotation to enable skill development and job variation.
- Develop a system that enables workers to have input into broader workplace issues (e.g. a suggestion scheme/box, online forums or discussion boards etc.).
- Use performance reviews as a positive opportunity for workers to have input into the way they do their work, determining work objectives and timeframes, rather than focusing only on inadequate performance.
- Ensure all teams hold regular meetings where workers can have input into decision making.

Implementing controls for low job control

- Consult with workers about change, performance indicators, resources or other issues that will impact their work.
- Talk to workers about what could be done to ensure they feel they have autonomy at work and ownership of their job outputs.
- Increase the delegation of work tasks and provide workers with more input into how work is undertaken.
- Provide training, development and upskilling opportunities to increase workers' competence for the task.
- Avoid asking workers to regularly work additional hours without prior consultation.

Poor support

Support refers to the practical assistance and emotional support that managers or co-workers provide on a day-to-day basis, including:

- providing information and advice
- supporting task completion
- coaching and mentoring
- debriefing difficult situations
- listening while people vent frustrations
- being caring and empathetic
- helping to make decisions and solve problems
- sharing resources.

Poor levels of support can result in poor psychological health and safety of workers.

Identifying when poor support (supervisor or co-worker) might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to workers perceiving/experiencing poor support:

- workers who do not work in a team or work in isolation
- geographically dispersed team members or managers
- workers who do not receive feedback on their work or have regular performance discussions with their supervisor
- lack of guidance or information for workers
- workplaces where managers are required to manage large numbers of workers and it is difficult to provide adequate support to their team
- limited learning and development opportunities
- workers who do not have time within work hours to seek support from their colleagues or managers (e.g. highly regimented workplaces such as call centres, medical practices)
- workers are not provided with access to tools, resources or information needed to carry out the job.

Implementing controls for poor supervisor support

- Ensure that management structures and reporting lines within teams are clear. This will help workers know who they are accountable to (either overall or for particular tasks) and where they can go for help with work problems.
- Provide leadership development opportunities that emphasise the importance of the relationships and dynamics between supervisors and workers.
- Ensure supervisors are trained in skills for people management.
- Foster a culture of collaboration and support, encouraging regular discussion between workers and supervisors.
- Ensure supervisors are provided with sufficient resources and support to undertake supervisory duties.
- Ensure that supervisors have a manageable workload through effective organisational design, and that their span of control isn't so great that it prevents effective supervision.
- Encourage workers to engage in open dialogue about their support needs.
- Hold regular team meetings to discuss pressures and challenges within the work unit.
- Assist workers to develop practical solutions for any task-related issues that arise.
- Promote a team culture in which workers assist each other and provide support when required.
- Ensure adequate backfilling of roles or redistribution of work when workers are out of the office or away on leave.

Mitigate the impact of poor supervisor support

- Support open communication and encourage workers to share their concerns about work-related stressors at an early stage.
- Demonstrate genuine care and consideration for workers.
- Ensure there are appropriate mechanisms to manage the performance of supervisors and provide feedback on the leadership aspects of their roles.
- Ensure that supervisors step in and help with work tasks during difficult or busy times.
- Ask workers for ideas and opinions about how the work environment and leadership practices can be improved.
- Check in with workers to see how their work tasks are going, how they feel about their work, and ensure they feel valued and supported.
- Provide the time to talk through problems with workers and promote an open door policy.
- Helping workers to set, monitor and achieve work goals.

Implementing controls for poor co-worker support

- Communicate organisational values and set clear expectations for workplace behaviour.
- Design work in such a way as to emphasise team collaboration rather than independent working.
- Structure reward and recognition programs around team achievements more so than individual achievements.
- Decrease factors within work roles that are likely to increase competition.
- Encourage and reward 'organisational citizenship behaviours', the extra-role behaviours and activities workers undertake that contribute to a positive work environment.
- Develop a peer support network and/or a mentoring/buddy program for new starters.

Mitigate the impacts of poor co-worker support

- Emphasise organisational goals and values, and what these look like in practice.
- Develop positive working relationships, investing in team planning and building activities and conflict resolution.
- Increase worker capacity to deal with and resolve conflict in a constructive manner.
- Improve communication practices.
- Work on developing greater team commitment.
- Build interpersonal capabilities, such as emotional intelligence, communication and feedback skills.

Poor workplace relationships

Relationships with managers, peers and subordinates can positively or negatively affect the way a worker feels. Wherever groups of people work together, it's likely that some conflict will arise from time to time. It is important that a workplace takes proactive steps towards preventing or minimising conflict as early as possible.

Prolonged and unresolved relationship conflict may result in more extreme forms of conflict known as work-related bullying. As work-related bullying may harm the health and safety of workers, all employers have an obligation to manage exposure to risks of work-related bullying under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*. For guidance on how to manage this risk, refer to the **Guide for preventing and responding to workplace bullying**.

Identifying when workplace relationships might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to poor workplace relationships:

- incivility in teams or departments that is tolerated by management

- experiences of abrupt, rude or inappropriate behaviour of workers or managers

- work-related bullying, aggression, harassment including sexual harassment, discrimination or other unreasonable behaviours by co-workers, supervisors or clients

- poor relationships between workers and their managers, supervisors, co-workers and clients or others the worker is required to interact with

- conflict between workers and their managers, supervisors or co-workers (this is made worse if managers are reluctant to deal with inappropriate behaviours)

- a lack of fairness and equity in dealing with workplace issues or where performance issues are poorly managed

- perceptions of inequity in the way team members are treated

- unresolved issues or concerns regarding work tasks, processes, customers, interpersonal issues etc.

- treating others differently based on gender, religion, cultural background, values, etc.

- inappropriate remarks or jokes of a personal nature

- perceptions of being excluded from work-related discussions, meetings and activities

- perceptions that co-workers are not pulling their weight or making fair or equal contributions to the team and the work being undertaken.

Implementing controls for poor workplace relationships

- Develop, implement and enforce a code of conduct so that everyone is aware of appropriate work behaviours. Ensure these standards are implemented to demonstrate that there are consequences for poor behaviour.

- Ensure all managers have the skills to identify and manage conflict.

- Monitor the work environment for potential disagreements, factors or situations that may result in group relationship conflict and address these promptly.

- Ensure systems are in place to enable workers to raise concerns about any conflicts they have within their role and responsibilities (e.g. hold regular team meetings to enable workers to discuss any potential task conflict).

- Identify design issues that may negatively affect team communication (e.g. minimise isolated work groups and if this is unavoidable, provide additional support to these groups).

- Create a culture where colleagues trust and encourage each other to perform at their best.

- Promote a team culture in which workers assist each other and provide support when required.

- Promote the concept that differences in workers' ideas and opinions is a positive.

- Ensure everyone has a current role or position description, which includes the role purpose, reporting relationships and the key duties expected of them.

Implementing controls for poor workplace relationships

- Implement a corporate induction for all new workers to ensure they are aware of their role in their immediate work team or unit, program area and the broader workplace.
- Provide sufficient opportunities for workers to get to know each other and build positive relationships.
- Clarifying team rules of engagement or develop a team charter.
- Implement reward and recognition systems that provide regular feedback on task performance and channels for praise.
- Give group rewards based on the performance of a team or unit rather than any one individual. This can be achieved by linking rewards to the performance of a group as a whole and will both enhance teamwork and avoid potential conflict between workers.
- Provide rewards that reinforce teamwork (e.g. a team dinner or outing). Ensure that the reward is equitable and accessible to all team members that contributed to the project or task.

Mitigate the impacts of poor work relationships

- Address inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour with workers, providing empathetic, respectful and effective feedback.
- Respond in a timely and effective manner to worker complaints about workplace conflicts, interpersonal issues and work-related bullying.
- Confront people issues and manage their resolution.
- Coach workers to increase their awareness of other people's points of view and how to negotiate solutions to resolve task conflict.
- Encourage workers to have input into procedures and tasks. When possible, involve workers in the decision making processes which will impact on their job tasks.
- Build the capability of team members to communicate and work constructively through disagreements and interpersonal issues.
- Ensure workers feeling upset or harmed by workplace conflict are provided with appropriate support by a supervisor or manager they trust, this may include a referral to a health professional or employee assistance program if available.

Low role clarity or role conflict

Role clarity is the degree of certainty with regard to role requirements and responsibilities. Constantly changing requirements, objectives and responsibilities can also result in low role clarity. Low role clarity can lead to confusion about what work activities a worker should be undertaking and what they are required to deliver, which can become a significant source of stress. It can also lead to frustration and conflict between colleagues due to confusion about task allocation and responsibilities.

Role conflict occurs when a worker is required to perform a role that goes against their personal values or when their job demands are incompatible.

Identifying when low role clarity or role conflict might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to workers experiencing low role clarity or role conflict:

- where workers may have multiple reporting lines or supervisors and as such may have competing demands
- being asked to undertake a specific task with no instructions or detailed information about requirements
- requests to undertake tasks that are not typically part of the roles and responsibilities of the position
- lack of clarity about what tasks need to be completed, what the deadlines are, and the priorities for individuals, teams and work units
- changing position descriptions and/or areas of responsibility without consultation or discussion
- allocating the same task to two different workers, resulting in duplication of effort.

Implementing controls for low role clarity or role conflict

- Establish clear expectations for the team and ensure these are clearly understood.
- Provide all workers with a corporate induction and ensure they are aware of their role within their immediate work team or unit, program area and the broader workplace.
- Ensure that management structures and reporting lines within work teams are clear (this can be supported by an organisational chart).
- Ensure workers have a current role or position description, including role purpose, reporting relationships and key duties.
- Ensure jobs are designed effectively and position descriptions clearly outline all key tasks, responsibilities and role expectations.
- Encourage regular check-ins and open discussion amongst team members.
- Provide clear work instructions and explain why certain roles, responsibilities and tasks have been allocated.
- Communicate any changes to policies, procedures and practices and ensure that these are understood.
- Implement a performance feedback system.
- Avoid making workers accountable to more than one immediate supervisor to reduce potential conflict in work demands.
- Avoid placing inconsistent demands on workers and ensure that as far as possible the different requirements are compatible.
- Ensure systems are in place to enable workers to raise concerns about any conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities (e.g. team meetings).

Mitigate the impacts of low role clarity or role conflict

- Encourage workers to speak up if they don't understand roles and work tasks.
- Review position descriptions to look for opportunities to improve job design.
- Provide opportunities for continuous improvement through identification of issues such as duplication, insufficient work instructions, errors and missed deadlines, and dissatisfaction with work task allocation.

Low recognition and reward

Recognition and reward refers to the acknowledgement provided to workers resulting in increased feelings of confidence, pride, and being valued for work contributions. Recognition and reward from supervisors, managers and co-workers can involve encouragement, gratitude, compliments, and other gestures of appreciation, and doesn't need to involve financial reward.

Providing workers with recognition and reward can:

- increase engagement, loyalty and satisfaction
- reinforce expected behaviours
- promote positive emotions
- help to ensure that good performance is repeated and maintained.

Identifying when recognition and reward might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to workers experiencing low recognition and reward:

- the absence of appropriate mechanisms and practices for regular performance discussions, performance planning and goal setting
- providing recognition or acknowledgement that is not meaningful, vague, or not attributed to specific situations
- inequitable reward and recognition practices
- rewarding and recognising individuals that have not contributed to a particular outcome, including taking credit for the work of others.

Implementing controls for low recognition and reward

- Implement a performance review system that ensures workers are provided with positive and constructive advice for future performance, including opportunities for skill development. A general rule is to give two-thirds of positive feedback and one-third of constructive or developmental feedback. Where possible, avoid linking performance reviews with discussions about pay as this may distract from the process.

- Foster a culture where it is common practice to recognise workers not just for their hard work, but also for their ideas, behaviours and contributions over and above what is expected in their roles.

- Provide supervisors and workers with a range of strategies to recognise others, understanding that people like to be acknowledged in different ways.

- Ensure praise and recognition is built into leadership development opportunities, helping leaders to understand how they can best praise and recognise others.

- Implement formal recognition programs that provide all workers with equal opportunity to be recognised for their contributions.

  — When using an incentives-based scheme, ensure the objectives and intent of the program are clear to all workers.

  — Keep decision criteria for rewards simple and ensure that rewards under the scheme are achievable.

  — Research or consult about the type of rewards that workers would find meaningful and relevant.

  — Ensure the program is communicated to the entire workplace and that all workers have an opportunity to benefit from the program, not just the top performers.

  — Develop a formal training program for managers about the rewards program and its rationale.

  — Consider giving group rewards based on the performance of a team or unit rather than any one individual. This can be achieved by linking rewards to the performance of a group as a whole and will both enhance teamwork and avoid potential conflict between workers. Consider different reward systems for different teams for workplaces with diverse teams, a one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best solution.

  — Consider implementing a job rotation system or implementing a coaching or mentoring program to enrich workers' interest and motivation and enable them to broaden their skill set.

Mitigate the impacts of low praise and recognition

- Ensure that workers are being provided with feedback that is timely, specific, practical, and attributed back to the what, how and why of their performance.

- Recognise and reward workers for their ingenuity or effort, not just for their contribution or productivity.

- Increase awareness of reward and recognition within the workplace.

- Encourage workers to recognise the contributions of others, rather than expecting this to always come from supervisors/managers.

- Be clear about who is doing what and ensure that the right people are being praised and recognised for their work.

- Listen to workers' needs, concerns and ideas and be responsive to them as a meaningful form of recognition.

Poor organisational justice

Organisational injustice refers to workers' perceptions of fairness at work and includes procedural and relational fairness. Procedural fairness relates to how procedures are implemented and relational fairness relates to the degree of dignity and respect given to workers.

Perceptions of organisational justice generally result in higher levels of satisfaction, loyalty, trust, commitment, flexibility and cooperation. Working in a fair and transparent environment can help workers to cope with the day-to-day challenges of their roles.

Identifying when organisational justice might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to workers experiencing poor organisational justice:

- lack of, or inadequate, policies and procedures
- excluding people who will be affected by decisions from consultation and decision-making processes
- failing to take appropriate action to address inappropriate behaviour, poor performance or misconduct
- lack of communication and transparency regarding organisational direction, strategy, objectives and decisions
- bias, impartiality, favouritism and nepotism
- discrimination, harassment and inequitable treatment of workers
- workers or managers believing that rules do not apply to them and failing to follow policies, guidelines and procedures.

Implementing controls for poor organisational justice

- Foster a culture of transparency, openness, respect, fairness and equity.
- Implement appropriate communication and information systems to communicate key organisational decisions and messages in a timely manner.
- Ensure policies and procedures are contemporary and appropriately address the scope of activities and expectations in the workplace.
- Design and implement procedures consistently across all workers and work groups (e.g. a structured performance review process so all workers are reviewed using consistent criteria).
- Encourage worker involvement and ownership of procedures by engaging workers at all levels of the workplace during their development.
- Regularly review the effectiveness of procedures.
- Communicate the reason for a change in policy or procedure to workers. They are more likely to accept a decision, even if unfavourable, if they are given a clear explanation of its background and aims. Successful strategies for communication include:
  - internal newsletters
  - direct email
  - website
  - team meetings
  - noticeboards.
- Implement appropriate performance monitoring and management systems.
- Set clear expectations and ensure all individuals are held accountable by addressing performance issues as they arise.
- Provide workers with a mechanism to appeal the result of a procedure. Where a worker may perceive unfair work practices, encourage them to access the appeal process.

- Ensure that management structures across the workplace and reporting lines within work teams are clear. This will help workers know who they are accountable to and where they can go for help with work problems.
- Ensure workers have a current role or position description, which includes the role purpose, reporting relationships and key duties.
- Train managers in how to have difficult conversations with their workers.
- Develop a system that enables workers to have input into broader workplace issues (e.g. a suggestion scheme/box).
- Implement appropriate complaints handling procedures.

Mitigate the impacts of poor organisational justice

- Promote equality and fairness.
- Explain the process for managing complaints and what outcomes workers should expect.
- Improve communication.
- Clearly explain decision making.
- Provide workers with opportunities to participate in consultation and decision making processes.
- Review decisions to ensure that they are fair and free of bias.
- Behave and interact with others consistently.
- Provide and promote an employee assistance program that responds to both work and non-work related individual issues or concerns.
- Provide practical or emotional support from a supervisor and/or co-worker.

Poor organisational change management

Change is an inevitable aspect of organisational life and 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.

Identifying when change management might be hazardous

Situations that may lead to poor organisational change management:

- failure to consider the potential work health and safety and performance impacts during downsizing or relocations
- 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
- not ensuring adequate understanding of information communicated about change
- using inappropriate communication channels to share information about change
- inadequate support during transition times.

Implementing controls for poor change management

- Ensure the workplace has sufficient frameworks for change management, with systematic approaches for conceiving, planning, developing, implementing and evaluating changes.
- Implement robust consultation and engagement practices as part of change projects and strategic decision making.
- Establish good communication systems to keep stakeholders informed about change.
- Give workers the background and reasons behind the change.
- Ensure the person communicating the change has the skills and authority to do so. If necessary, train managers or supervisors to support workers through periods of change.
- Review team and individual work plans after the change to ensure roles, objectives and accountabilities are clear.
- Change job descriptions to match the new duties and tasks of the role, preventing ambiguity and role conflict. Workers should participate in this review process where possible.
- Encourage workers to develop their skills to help them undertake new and challenging work produced by the change.
- Provide group information and/or feedback sessions to give workers the opportunity to raise any concerns about the change in a group setting. For example, hold regular meetings or focus groups. Workers may feel more comfortable raising issues in a group rather than individually.
- Where a change in structure or roles occurs, or retraining is required, use the performance review process as a positive opportunity for workers to have renewed input in the way they complete their work.
- Ensure workers feel confident in undertaking their tasks and make sure they receive enough training for them to be competent in their roles.
- Provide mechanisms to guide workers and managers through the change process, with sufficient support for task and people-related impacts.

Mitigate the impacts of poor change management

- Respect individual differences and recognise that workers will respond to change in a range of ways and will have different needs regarding consultation and engagement.

- Ensure workers are supported throughout the change process and are aware of any potential impacts on their roles.

- Provide emotional support to help workers deal with frustrations experienced as a result of change and uncertainty.

- Encourage workers to speak up and get involved with change.

- Include the change initiative to the agenda for team meetings.

- Check for understanding when communicating about change.

Remote or isolated work

Remote or isolated work is work that is isolated from the assistance of other people because of the location, time or nature of the work being done. Assistance from other people includes rescue, medical assistance and emergency services.

A worker may be isolated even if other people may be close by, for example, a cleaner working by themselves at night in a city office building. In other cases, a worker may be far away from populated areas, for example, on a farm.

Remote or isolated work includes:

- all-night convenience store and service station attendants

- sales representatives, including real estate agents

- long distance freight transport drivers

- scientists, park rangers and others carrying out field work alone

- health and community workers working in isolation with members of the public.

Identifying when remote or isolated work might be hazardous

Hazardous considerations for remote or isolated work include:

- limited access to communication devices

- no regular contact with other workers or supervisors

- lengthy periods of time away from others or working in isolation

- work in locations where there is difficulty in immediate rescue or attendance of emergency services

- failure to consider the potential work health and safety and performance impacts during downsizing or relocations

- where high risk activities are involved

- where risk of attack by an animal is possible

- where violence or aggression from customers or clients is possible.

Implementing controls for remote or isolated work

- Ensure there is a buddy system, particularly where there is a risk of violence.

- Design workplace layouts to include physical barriers, monitored CCTV and enhance visibility.

- Ensure there is appropriate supervision/monitoring systems in place such as:

  — procedures to schedule periodic visits by supervisors to visually observe workers and provide appropriate support and assistance

  — procedures to maintain regular contact between workers and supervisors using a telephone, or other suitable communication devices

  — automatic warning devices that raise the alarm in an emergency and are activated by absence of activity from the worker

  — a 'check-in' at the beginning and 'sign-off' at the end of the working period

  — satellite tracking systems or devices

  — escorts to vehicles (if working alone after hours).

- Ensure communication systems in place are suitable for the location.

- Any accommodation should be lockable, with safe entry and exit, meet all relevant structural and stability requirements, meet electrical and fire safety standards, have a supply of drinking water, have appropriate toilets, washing and laundry facilities, be regularly cleaned and have rubbish removed, be provided with suitable sleeping quarters shielded from noise and vibration, have crockery, utensils and dining facilities, have adequate lighting, heating, cooling and ventilation, have storage cupboards and other suitable furniture, be provided with refrigerator or cool room, and have all fittings, appliances and equipment in good condition.

Mitigate the impacts of remote or isolated work

- Provide training to workers to help prepare them for working alone or in remote locations. For example, training in dealing with potentially aggressive clients, using communication systems, administering first aid, obtaining emergency assistance diving off-road vehicles or bush survival.
- Consult with emergency services about possible rescue scenarios and what would be involved.
- Avoid work at risky times of day (such as when the circadian rhythm wants the body to sleep).

Violent or traumatic events

A workplace incident involving exposure to abuse, the threat of, or actual harm that causes fear and distress and can lead to stress and/or a physical injury. This is common amongst groups such as first responders, disaster and emergency services, customer service and defence personnel. Examples include:

- robbery
- assault
- being bitten, spat at, scratched or kicked
- being threatened with a weapon
- stressful events – death, grief, suicide, accident or injury
- ongoing bullying
- severe weather events
- workplace accidents, injuries or deaths
- downsizing or mass redundancies
- terrorism.

Secondary or vicarious trauma: There are also risks associated with witnessing a fatality, or investigating a serious injury or fatality. Some workers such as child protection workers, lawyers, police officers, forensic scientists, journalists and custom officers may as part of their work need to repeatedly listen to detailed descriptions of very painful and traumatic events experienced by others.

Identifying when violent or traumatic events at work might be hazardous

Typical work practices that can give rise to work-related violence or traumatic events include:

- handling cash, drugs or valuables
- working alone, working in isolation, working in the community and working at night
- providing services to distressed, angry or incarcerated people
- enforcement activities
- responding to emergencies (emergency service workers)
- working in areas where you or others may be exposed to distressing or traumatic events (health care, community work, counselling, funeral services, protective services, legal services, high risk work where injuries may occur).

Implementing controls for violent or traumatic events

Traumatic events

- Implement processes for workers who are exposed to potentially distressing situations or content:
  — peer support program
  — reporting system where workers can report exposure to distressing circumstances and where managers or others can check in following
  — working in pairs or teams of others
  — rotating work or activities to have adequate breaks from roles which are likely to involve exposure to distressing events
  — implement file flagging processes on potentially distressing files or cases to avoid inadvertent exposure to distressing content
  — ensure there are guidelines and processes in place following a traumatic event in the workplace.

Implementing controls for violent or traumatic events

Violent events

- Ensure the physical work environment and security are well designed:
    — the building is secure, maintained and fit for purpose
    — use security measures such as CCTV, timer safes, anti-jump screen
    — separate workers from the public where possible
    — increase visibility of who is coming into the premises through access, lighting,
    — fit communication and alarm systems.
    — implement strategies to reduce frustration levels of clients (e.g. readily available directions and assistance, alternative strategies to queues (buzzers), waiting areas with entertainment) and a culture of low tolerance of aggression towards workers.
- Provide training:
    — violence prevention measures
    — situational risk assessment
    — positive behaviour strategies
    — de-escalation and emotional regulation training.
- Work systems and procedures:
    — procedures for working in isolation
    — procedures for opening and closing the business
    — monitoring staff working in the community or away from the workplace
    — processes to assess client needs and provide appropriately skilled workers
    — management plans for clients known to have a history of aggression
    — identification systems such that workers and authorised visitors are clearly identified
    — systems to map and record areas of concern for safe access and egress.

Mitigate the impacts of violent or traumatic events

- Ensure there are procedures in place to respond to critical incidents.
- Ensure managers are trained in appropriate response to violence and trauma.
- Ensure workers are trained in normal responses following a traumatic incident.
- Ensure recruitment and selection practices incorporate a realistic job preview of potential trauma exposure to applicants to ensure they are aware this could occur in the role.
- Ensure there is counselling and support services available to workers and supervisors following a violent or traumatic event.
- Implement professional supervision among peers and supervisors.

Further information can be found in the guide on **Preventing and responding to work-related violence**.

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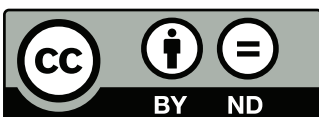Comcare (2013). **Comcare's guide to remote or isolated work**

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