

Creating a psychosocially safe workplace

A framework for assessing and
managing psychosocial risks

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Executive Summary

Workplace psychosocial risks are factors in the work environment that can cause harm to an employee’s health. There is increasing focus among Australian workplace regulatory bodies in ensuring that organisations provide a psychosocially safe work environment for their employees. When organisations manage these risks proactively, their efforts can yield employee, organisational and financial benefits; yet many organisations are uncertain about how to go about this risk assessment and management process. Fortunately, there are publicly available resources and professional services that can guide organisations in creating a psychosocially safe work environment. This white paper will identify common workplace psychosocial risk factors, the benefits of assessing and managing these risks, and outline a four-phase framework on how to assess and manage these risks.

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What are Psychosocial Risks?

Workplace psychosocial risks are the factors at work that are debilitating to employees' psychological and physical health. These factors usually relate to aspects of work design and management, and can apply to social and organisational aspects at work (Cox & Griffiths, 2005). As one of Australia's leading workplace regulatory bodies, Safe Work Australia has identified 13 psychosocial risk factors that organisations should prioritise to assess and manage. The risk factors are identified in Table 1.

Workplace Psychosocial Risk Factors	
1. High job demands	8. Low recognition and reward
2. Low job demands	9. Poor organisational justice
3. Low job control	10. Poor environmental conditions
4. Poor support	11. Remote work
5. Poor workplace relationships	12. Isolated work
6. Low role clarity	13. Violent or traumatic events
7. Poor organisational change management	

Table 1. List of workplace psychosocial risk factors

A review of the model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws in Australia (Boland, 2018) revealed widespread acknowledgement that psychological health is neglected in the model WHS regulations and codes. Furthermore, there is uncertainty among employers about how to address psychological health in the workplace. Smaller businesses also provided feedback that they wanted more prescriptive and practical guidance to help them identify and manage psychosocial risks and hazards.

The Importance of Assessing and Managing Psychosocial Risks

There are benefits to a psychosocially healthy workplace. Employees who work in a psychosocially safe work environment enjoy cognitive and physical benefits such as better concentration, improved decision making (Broadbent, Cooper, FitzGerald & Parkes, 1982), and are at lower risk of infectious and cardiovascular diseases (Schaubroeck, Jones & Xie, 2001; Steptoe & Kivimaki, 2012). These employees are also perform better at work, are more satisfied with their jobs, and less likely to leave their jobs (Jex, 1998; Khamisa, Peltzer, Ilic & Oldenburg, 2016).

Benefits of a psychosocially safe workplace:

- Employees experience enhanced concentration, improved decision making, and physical health.
- Organisations experience lower turnover and financial ROI of between \$1.50 to \$4.00.
- Compliance with WHS laws and regulations.

Organisations also reap financial benefits when they invest in a mentally healthy workplace. Industry research indicates a positive Return On Investment (ROI) of between \$1.50 to \$4.00 for every dollar invested in strategies to foster a mentally healthy workplace (PwC, 2014; SafeWork NSW, 2017). These ROI often take the form of increased productivity and lower number of compensation claims.

In addition, by proactively addressing psychosocial risks, organisations will be compliant with WHS regulations and successfully navigate workplace inspections by WHS regulatory bodies (such as Safe Work Australia). Obtaining satisfactory outcomes from these inspections will ensure business continuity, as well as stakeholder and employee assurance in the organisational WHS policies and procedures.

These factors provide evidence for a pressing need for organisations to address psychosocial risk within the workplace. Fortunately, there are a plethora of resources and organisational services that are available to help organisations create a psychosocially safe workplace.

How do Organisations Assess and Manage Psychosocial Risks?

Publicly available resources published by the Government of Western Australia Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety (DMIRS) and Safe Work Australia, provide practical guidance for organisations to safeguard their employees against psychosocial risk factors. The next section will utilise

these and other publicly available resources to outline a framework organisations can use to assess and manage psychosocial risks.

The assessment and management of psychosocial risks follows a four-phase process that are governed by four overarching principles. The framework is detailed in Figure 1.

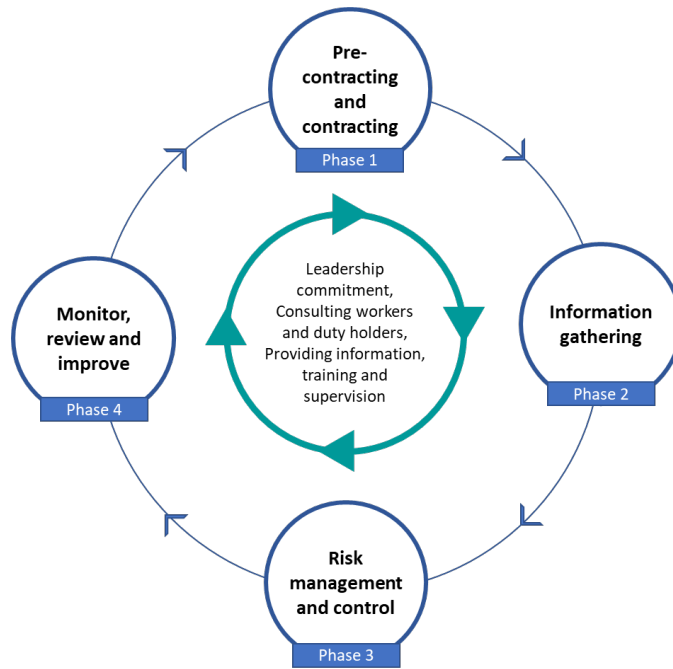


Fig 1. The framework to assess and manage workplace psychosocial risks.

The Four Principles for Assessing and Managing Workplace Psychosocial Risks

1. Leadership and Management Commitment

Commitment is needed from the leadership and management team in addressing psychosocial risks. This commitment may take the form of:

- Having clear and well communicated organisational workplace mental health policies.
- Exercising due diligence to ensure the organisation has met their WHS obligations. This includes the psychosocial risk assessment and management steps described in Phase 3.

2. Consulting Workers

The risk assessment and management process should be conducted in consultation with employees and their Health and Safety Representatives (where available). Consultation with workers can take the form

of pre-job start or toolbox discussions, focus groups, worker surveys, WHS committee meetings, team meetings and individual discussions. It is also important that the privacy and confidentiality of workers are respected during consultation.

Consultation may cover the following:

- Sharing information on hazards and risks
- Giving workers reasonable opportunity to express their views
- Raise issues
- Contribute to the decision-making process and taking those views into account.
- Advising workers of the outcomes

3. Consulting, Co-operating and Coordinating Activities with Other Duty Holders

Organisations have a legal obligation to consult, cooperate and coordinate activities with others who have a WHS duty in relation to the same matter. For example, an organisation sharing the same activity or workspace may contribute to any psychological health and safety risks. Consulting, cooperating and coordinating WHS efforts will allow for effective and efficient risk management.

4. Information, Training, Instruction and Supervision

Organisations have an obligation, as far as practicably possible, to provide employees with information, training, instruction and supervision to protect them from risks to their psychological health and safety while at work.

Assessing and Managing Workplace Psychosocial Risk Factors:

The Four-phase Process

Phase 1: Pre-contracting and Contracting

The pre-contracting and contracting phase involves obtaining buy-in from the senior leadership team in investing in a psychosocial risk assessment and management project. This phase also entails obtaining commitment from senior leadership to share organisational data that is crucial to the risk assessment process, considering the timeframe available for the project, as well as the organizational readiness to take on changes for a more psychosocially safe workplace.

Phase 2: Information Gathering

The information gathering phase entails data collection and analysis to identify risk factors, psychological signs and symptoms, and hazards.

Phase 2a: Identify risk factors

Risk factors can be considered through organisational and environmental risk factors highlighted in table 1. Consideration should also be given to individual risk factors such as being a new or young worker, or workers who have existing vulnerabilities to injury, trauma or have challenging personal circumstances.

Phase 2b: Identify psychological symptoms and signs

Psychological symptoms and signs are the adverse health effects that employees initially experience as a result of psychosocial risk factors. They include physical signs (e.g. increased heart rate and blood pressure), cognitive signs (e.g. forgetfulness and lack of concentration), emotional signs (e.g. irritability and depression) and behavioural signs (e.g. increased smoking and alcohol consumption).

Phase 2c: Identify hazards

Psychological hazards are the environmental conditions that harmful to the workers' psychological and physical health. Hazards at the workplace can be identified through signs of employee strain, organisational data, policies and procedures, and the level of workplace relationships and support. The information gathering phase should be multi-modal and include sources such as surveys, interviews, organisational data, and direct observations.

Phase 3: Risk Management and Control

The data gleaned from the information gathering phase will inform the risk management and control strategies. These strategies can take form of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. Primary interventions are implemented before hazards or injuries/incidents are present. They usually include both organisational and employee level strategies. Secondary interventions are implemented after hazards or injuries are present, but before harm to health develops. They are usually targeted at the employee level. Tertiary interventions are implemented after the hazards have caused harm to health, and are targeted at the employee level.

Phase 4: Monitor, Review and Improve

Once risk control measures have been implemented, they need to be continuously monitored, reviewed, and improved to ensure they remain effective. Firstly, there should be accountability to ensure that risk control measures can be implemented and maintained effectively. This may entail assigning managers and supervisor authority and resources to implement and maintain control measures effectively. Secondly, the process should include regular maintenance of facilities and

equipment, and repairs/replacements to damaged or worn equipment and facilities. Thirdly, there should be up-to-date training to ensure that workers and supervisors have the appropriate competencies to do their jobs safely. Next, there should be up-to-date information about workplace hazards so that controls remain relevant. Lastly, there should be regular reviews of work processes and consultation with workers to assess the effectiveness of existing control measures and the need for new control measures.

Who is PeopleSense by Altius?

PeopleSense by Altius are industry leaders in preventing and managing workplace injuries across all industries. We provide psychological services to over 250 organisations nationally and employ clinically and organisationally trained psychologists who are highly skilled in identifying and managing a wide range of mental health issues within the workplace.

PeopleSense by Altius has unique capability to assist organisations in assessing and managing psychosocial risk. Our consultants have industry expertise and experience in managing psychosocial risk projects. The range of services offered by Altius Group provide the possibility for end to end services to assess and manage psychosocial risks for your organisation. If you are interested in developing a psychosocially safe environment at your workplace, or finding out more about our services, please contact us at 1300 307 912 / reception@peoplesense.com.au, or visit peoplesense.com.au.

Conclusion

Psychosocial risks are prevalent in the workplace and can be debilitating if not managed appropriately and promptly. On the other hand, by managing psychosocial risks, organisations can stand to benefit from better employee outcomes, positive ROIs, and ensure legislative compliance. Organisations can refer to publicly available guides to help them address these risk factors, but can also seek professional consulting services with organisational development teams for comprehensive psychosocial assessment and management. By following the four-phase process outlined in this white paper, organisations have a framework by which they can assess and manage psychosocial risks.

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