

Good Work Design: Addressing work demands



Australian Government
Comcare



Work demands are an important part of our work and help to give people meaning, purpose and a sense of achievement

All jobs are demanding from time to time, but work that is too demanding — or not demanding enough — can cause chronic stress and burnout when it is prolonged.

Why it matters

Matching the demands of the work to the capability and capacity of each team member is a key part of good work design.

Teams that get it right are more likely to be connected, resilient, engaged and high performing.

As a manager or supervisor, you play a key role in designing good work with your team to ensure work demands are sustainable and the right fit for each person.

'All work involves demands because there are goals to achieve, and effort must be put in to achieve these goals.'

Ensure Tolerable Job Demands Thrive at work

Types of work demands

There are many different types of work demands that can be harmful, including:

- time, for example, unrealistic timeframes
- cognitive, for example, sustained concentration
- emotional, for example, sustained emotional effort while interacting with clients or colleagues
- physical, for example, physically tiring tasks
- environmental, for example, lighting, temperature and noise
- cultural, for example, [cultural load](#) borne by indigenous staff members
- demands stemming from organisational change
- demands caused by a lack of organisational justice or sense of fairness
- work that is not demanding enough, which can impact mental health as people become disengaged and their morale declines.

Everyone responds to work demands differently and people can feel overwhelmed by different levels of demands.

The problem is made worse when people have little control over how they complete their work.

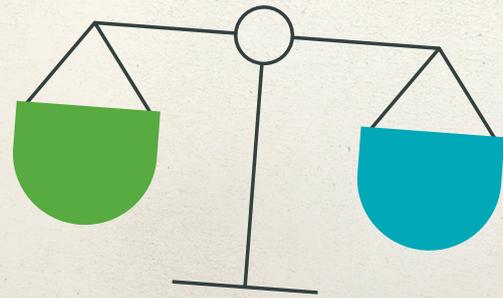
Comcare's [Work demands guidance](#) provides specific information on managing risks associated with work demands.



What great **managers** do



Designing good work is about finding the right balance



How it's done

Great managers take the time to ensure that work demands are manageable.

1 Design good work for your team

Know your team

- Get to know your team and their strengths, abilities and interests. When you understand their capacity and capability you can work with them to identify appropriate work.
- Remember, work demands will not be the same for everyone. What is too demanding for one person may be manageable for another. Capacity to manage work demands also changes depending on what is going on in someone's life.

You can't control the stress, pressures and personal issues that people have in their lives. For example, you have no control over the fact that your team member is about to lose his home because he made a bad investment. But you can help him feel supported at work by increasing supervisory support and providing role clarity. Designing manageable work demands will help him cope during a difficult time.



Put work demands on the agenda

- Talk openly with your team about the types of demands in your workplace and the need to ensure that they are sustainable. This will create a culture where it's acceptable for people to talk about work demands and raise issues.
- Plan ahead for periods of high demands. Think about what you can set up now to mitigate risk of harm when demands peak.

Match the demands of the work to the team

- Assess whether capacity and capabilities of individuals match the demands. Where there is a mismatch, look at how you can adjust the work to achieve a better fit. Assigning an equal workload to every team member is not always the right approach.
- Use the [SMART Work Design model](#) in one-on-one conversations with your team members to ensure you consider all relevant aspects of a person's role.

Encourage a positive and supportive team culture

- Create a culture where people have [psychological safety](#) and feel appreciated.
- Remember that supportive teams encourage people to ask for help and provide help to their colleagues. Supportive cultures are essential for developing high performing teams that are resilient when coping with all types of demands.



Identify unacceptable demands



Australian Government
Comcare

2 Identify when demands aren't right

Recognise and respond to early warning signs

- Look out for changes in behaviour, including:
 - unplanned absence
 - decreased engagement or performance
 - rapid increase in hours worked
 - appearing stressed or fatigued
 - low mood.
- Be more conscious and intentional about recognising signs when people are working remotely. For example, an employee who normally comes into virtual meetings with their camera on has turned it off for the last week. Tune in to how they sound and the language they use. Do they sound deflated? Are they talking much faster than usual? Are they using catastrophising language like 'If I don't get this done, I'll never be promoted.'

Talk about work demands

- Regularly talk with your people about their workload to identify when it is out of balance, or someone is feeling overwhelmed.
- Encourage people to speak up early if they feel their task demands are too high or too low. Treat what they say seriously and ask 'what would help?'

'Listen to the team – what's working, what's not'

Georgie Harman, CEO BeyondBlue, 2022

3 Address unacceptable demands

Help people to feel in control

- Help your team to have a level of control over their work, including choices about how, when and where they do their work.
- Remember that the amount of control one person needs may be different for the next and might be different for each piece of work. Someone may want lots of control over a task they are familiar with and more direction for a task that is new and challenging.
- Focus on goal setting and outcomes.
- Let your team set their own challenging and achievable timeframes, when possible.
- Empower your team to shape their work to align with their strengths, values and interests to build their engagement, for example, via [job crafting](#).

Provide support and resources

- Give clear direction and regular feedback.
- Guide your team on how to prioritise activities and best manage their time.
- Schedule time to debrief for emotionally demanding work (a qualified practitioner or psychologist may need to run sessions for high-risk work).
- Organise regular training opportunities.
- Have conversations designed to coach and mentor your team members.
- Provide tools, resources and materials that can help your team manage their work.
- Ask your team what resources and support they would find helpful.



Positive and supportive team culture

Job crafting practices include:

- increasing challenging demands by adding stimulating tasks to a job
- decreasing hindering demands that prevent an employee's ability to function optimally and achieve goals.

Enable role variety and rest breaks

- Encourage workers to take breaks when needed. For example, people performing emotionally demanding work are likely to need time away to avoid harm to their health.
- Design jobs with both challenging and less demanding tasks to provide variety and a break.
- Be a role model for your team by taking breaks and working reasonable hours. This will set expectations and avoid developing a workplace culture where people feel pressure to skip breaks and work excessive hours.

Report harmful work demands

Sometimes addressing the source of unsustainable work demands is beyond your control.

- Report excessive work demands to your manager and the health and safety team.
- Clearly identify and describe the type of demand, the source, risks arising and the impact on your team.
- Make practical suggestions for control measures.
- Keep your team informed of the actions you take and management's response.

When addressing work demands consider:

- What needs to be achieved and is this the best way to do it? Can demands be 'designed out' or reduced by removing low value activities or streamlining processes?
- Are the job requirements reasonable for the hours of work?
- Can equipment or technology be supplied to remove or ease demands?
- Are workstations ergonomically designed and set up to maximise comfort and minimise physical demands?
- Are people working in environments where temperature, lighting and noise levels are comfortable?
- Are workers adequately supported to cope with high levels of emotional demands? Are they trained and do they have access to support? For example, an employee assistance program.
- What extra supports or resources can be provided at times of high intensity demands? What's important right now and what can be deprioritised or paused? What work can be redistributed?
- Do people have enough work, or do they often feel bored or underutilised?
- What else is going on in people's lives?

4 Monitor and review work demands

Work demands often fluctuate over time, while change at work has the potential to increase demands.

- Regularly evaluate strategies to manage work demands to ensure that demands remain sustainable.