Australian Government

Comcare

Practical guidance for
EMPLOYERS

Work
DEMANDS
Set the standard.

Preventing
PSYCHOLOGICAL harm

Work demands are one of the most common sources of workplace stress and psychological harm. Workers who experience high work demands such as excessive workloads, resource constraints or time pressures can often feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. Those experiencing low work demands like, repetitive or monotonous tasks, can often feel disengaged or underutilised.

In either case, when work demand issues are not effectively managed workers are far more likely to experience work-related stress. Extreme or long-lasting stress is harmful and can lead to serious illness or injury to workers.

Poor health outcomes from work demands are far less likely in organisations with a supportive culture that rewards workers, promotes early reporting of issues and proactive risk management. Employers have an obligation to implement systems and processes that identify and effectively manage psychosocial risks to prevent harm to workers.

Work demands – definition

Work demands may include role overload, unrealistic time pressures, ambiguity or conflict, cognitive and emotional demands of the job, conflict arising from tasks, relationships, change management, a lack of organisational justice and a worker's sense of fairness at work.

Employer duties and obligations under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*

A Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU), who is usually the employer, has the primary duty of care under the **Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act** to ensure the health and safety of workers and others at the workplace, so far as is reasonably practicable. Health is defined under WHS Act to include both physical and psychological health, which can be impacted by psychosocial hazards, such as work demand. PCBUs should identify, assess, and manage psychosocial hazards which can be impacted by consulting workers, designing work, systems and workplaces to eliminate or minimise risks to psychological health and monitoring the health of workers and workplace conditions.

Work demands – impacts

Worker impacts

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Fatigue
- Burnout
- Anger and/or mood swings
- Problems sleeping
- Diminished performance
- Disengaged or withdrawn from work.

Organisational impacts

- Poor workplace culture
- Negative or strained work-team relations and team dynamics
- Increased worker injury and illness
- Reduced productivity
- Higher employee turnover
- Increased absenteeism
- Customer or client complaints.

Work demands - examples

Time

- Unrealistic timeframes or time pressures
- Long work hours or shift work

Cognitive – low and high

- Low: highly repetitive or monotonous tasks
- High: long periods of vigilance for infrequent events, complex or challenging decision making, or low role clarity

Workload

- Low - long periods of insufficient work
- High - Unrealistic or unachievable amounts of work

Emotional

- Responding to distressing situations or aggressive clients
- Exposure to traumatic events or work-related violence
- Poor workplace relationships

Physical

- Sitting or standing for long periods
- Unpleasant or hazardous conditions (e.g. hazardous chemicals, or dangerous equipment)

Environmental

- Remote and isolated work
- Poor environmental conditions (e.g. extreme temperatures or noise, air quality)

Organisational change (e.g. downsizing, site relocations or new processes)

- Insufficient consideration of potential impacts
- Inadequate stakeholder and worker consultation
- Not enough practical and emotional support for workers

Organisational justice or sense of fairness

- Inconsistent application of policies and procedures
- Bias in decision making
- Poor management of underperformance
- Low recognition and reward

Latest data shows:

24%

Work pressures accounted for 24% of all accepted psychological claims.

31%

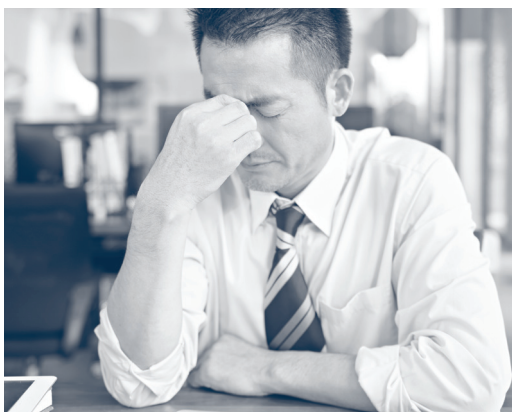Percentage of costs associated with psychological injury claims.

25

Average number of weeks off work (incapacity weeks) for psychological injury claims.

Source: Comcare claims data 2021-22

88%

Percentage of disease claims for mental health conditions in the public administration and safety industry (government, police, fire, emergency services).

Source: Safe Work Australia Workers Compensation Statistics 2019-20

Work demands – risk factors

Risk factors cover two categories:

Context (how the work is organised)

- Organisational function and culture
- Leadership
- Organisational change management
- Interpersonal relationships at work
- Role in organisation
- Career development
- Decision latitude and control
- Resource allocation.

Content (what the job involves)

- Work environment and equipment
- Task design
- Workload
- Work schedules
- Worker skills, capabilities and training.

Managing risks

Employers should take a systematic approach to managing psychosocial risks and promoting worker psychological health and safety, including preventing harm, intervening early and supporting recovery.

Preventing harm

- Identify work-related hazards and risks.
- Consult with workers and their representatives and encourage feedback.
- Assess risks and implement effective control measures.
- Ensure there is good work design and safe systems of work.
- Provide workers with the training, information and supervision they need to do their job safely and well.
- Maintain, monitor and review control measures and revise if necessary.

Intervening early

- If a review shows control measures are not effective, take action to identify and implement additional controls. (**See next page**).
- Support workers showing signs of work-related stress by modifying their work and giving them access to counselling and extra workplace support.
- Provide early assistance for those with an increased risk of injury.

Support recovery

- Provide early assistance and support to access treatment and rehabilitation services, generally from the time a claim is lodged.
- Support timely and sustainable recovery at work (RAW) or return to work (RTW) through effective consultation, addressing any remaining work-related hazards and risks that may exacerbate the existing work-related psychological injury or cause a new injury.

Supportive leadership = supportive workplace culture

Poor health outcomes are much less likely to result from work demands in a workplace with supportive leaders that are approachable and responsive to dealing with worker concerns and demonstrate an understanding of the issues faced by their teams. Supportive leadership helps create a supportive workplace culture that promotes early reporting of issues and proactive risk management.

Implementing effective control measures

Time demands

- Ensure staffing levels align with expected outputs and workers have enough time to complete tasks.
- Give workers the opportunity to provide input into work pace and timing.
- Set realistic and achievable targets.
- Monitor workloads during peak periods, such as Christmas holiday season.
- Regularly review workloads to ensure workers have sufficient support.
- Encourage workers to speak up at an early stage if they feel their workload is excessive.

Cognitive or emotional demands

- Rotate tasks and schedules where possible to provide job variety, and to lessen the impact of repetitive and monotonous tasks.
- Provide training to leaders to ensure they are competent and confident to have conversations about mental health and wellbeing, and work-related risks.
- Give workers some control over the way they do their work, including work pace and order of tasks.
- Have support systems in place for workers that make complex or difficult decisions, e.g. a second person to assist.
- Provide training and ongoing support to workers on how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations.

Physical demands

- Allow regular breaks and rotate repetitive manual tasks between employees where possible.
- Make the physical environment as comfortable as possible, such as changes to the workstation, equipment, or the way the job is done.
- Substitute heavy manual tasks with machinery to reduce physical workloads where practicable.
- Ensure workers are well trained and physically capable of doing the work.

Organisational change demands

- Reassess workload during change and reallocate or reprioritise as needed.
- Consult workers about potential impacts and listen to their views.
- Engage workers through regular consultation and communication during changes, including supports available.

Organisational justice demands

- Inform workers about dispute escalation and resolution mechanisms that are available via the organisation's WHS unit or Human Resources.
- Encourage feedback from workers on organisational processes and procedures, and performance management.
- Provide ongoing training in issues management and dispute resolution.

Consulting workers

Consultation is a key element of providing a psychologically healthy and safe work environment. Methods for consulting workers can vary according to the size of the workplace and the distribution of workers across sites and shifts. Remember, workplaces where employers and workers regularly discuss and act upon safety issues are safer workplaces. Consultation with workers and their Health and Safety Representative (HSR) is also a legal requirement at each step of the risk management process, so far as reasonably practicable.

For more information

Comcare

Preventing harm

- Working Well – An organisational approach to preventing psychological injury
- Psychosocial hazards

For employers

- Prevention Strategy 2022-2025
- Office Safety Tool - Senior managers and executives
- How managers can support worker mental health
- Comcare Regulatory Guides
- People at Work - free psychosocial risk assessment tool for workplace leaders.

Mental health

- Your mental health responsibilities at work
- Comcare mental health initiatives
- Mental health stigma in the workplace

Safe Work Australia

- Work related psychological health and safety – A systematic approach to meeting your duties
- Safe Work Australia Model Code of Practice -

Managing psychosocial hazards at work

Codes of Practice

- How to Manage Work Health and Safety Risks Code of Practice 2015
- Managing the Work Environment and Facilities Code of Practice 2015

Additional resources

- Working Together: Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing at Work – **Australian Public Service Commission and Comcare.**
- Management Standards on Stress – **UK Government Health Safety Executive.**
- Workload Management: An Environmental Scan of current and emerging practices – **Victorian Public Sector.**
- Psychological health and safety in the workplace – Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation – **National Standard of Canada.**

Comcare's role

As the national work health safety and workers' compensation authority, Comcare's legislated functions include securing the health and safety of workers and workplaces through responding to incidents, educating employers, and encouraging leaders to foster a positive workplace culture. We recognise work demands and other psychosocial hazards can cause workers psychological or physical harm and we are committed to supporting our jurisdiction of more than 400,000 workers and 200 employers.

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