

Psychosocial Hazards- Guidance Material for Managers



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Introduction to Psychosocial Hazards

Psychosocial hazards in the workplace can significantly impact the well-being of workers and the overall functioning of an organisation. These hazards can include factors such as excessive job demands, bullying, harassment, and violence. If left unaddressed, psychosocial hazards can lead to decreased job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, and negative impacts on workers' mental and physical health.

As a manager, it is important to understand the potential impact of psychosocial hazards on your team and to take proactive steps to manage and prevent them. This guidance material aims to provide practical tips and advice on identifying and managing psychosocial hazards in the workplace.

By following the guidance in this material, you can help create a safe and healthy workplace for your workers, improve their job satisfaction, and enhance the overall performance of your team and organisation.

What are psychosocial hazards?

Psychosocial hazards are workplace factors that can impact workers' psychological and social well-being. These hazards can include both organisational and interpersonal factors and can significantly impact the health of workers and the organisation's functioning.

Examples of psychosocial hazards in the workplace include:

- **Workplace Bullying** can include repeatedly criticising a worker, belittling or humiliating them, or deliberately excluding them from work-related activities.
- **Harassment** can include any unwanted behaviour, such as sexual harassment or discrimination, that creates a hostile or intimidating work environment for workers.
- **Job demands:** This can be caused by excessive workload, poor control over work, or poor relationships with co-workers or supervisors.

The impact of psychosocial hazards on workers can be significant, leading to negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. These hazards can also reduce productivity, increase absenteeism and staff turnover, and create a negative work culture.

As a manager, it is essential to be aware of the potential for psychosocial workplace hazards and take steps to identify and address them. By understanding the potential hazards, you can take steps to prevent or address them before they lead to negative impacts on your workers and team.

Legal framework for psychosocial hazards

The *Workplace Health and Safety Act* (2011) outlines the legal framework for managing workplace health and safety, including psychosocial hazards. The Act requires that all employers, including managers, take reasonable steps to ensure the health and safety of their workers and others affected by their work.

The Queensland Government has introduced the [Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022](#) ("the Code") which came into effect from **1 April 2023**. The Code underpins the regulations and provide practical guidance on how to achieve the standards of health, safety and wellbeing under the

Act and Regulation. **The Code does not create new work health and safety duties or expand existing duties** but provides clarity and certainty to duty holders, through practical guidance about their existing obligations, and gives examples of how to meet these requirements.

The duties of managers to manage psychosocial hazards

As a manager, you are responsible for managing psychosocial hazards in the workplace. This includes:

- **Identifying and assessing psychosocial hazards:** Managers must identify potential psychosocial hazards in the workplace and assess their risk to worker health and safety.
- **Developing and implementing controls:** Once identified, managers must take steps to implement controls to manage psychosocial hazards in the workplace. This may include reviewing how work is designed, managing workplace interactions, providing training and support, fostering a positive workplace environment, and monitoring worker well-being.
- **Reviewing and updating controls:** Managers must regularly review and update controls to ensure they remain effective in managing psychosocial hazards.

Potential consequences of not managing psychosocial hazards

Failing to manage psychosocial hazards in the workplace can have serious consequences for both workers and organisations. Potential consequences can include:

- **Increased risk of work-related injury or illness:** Psychosocial hazards can lead to physical and mental health problems for workers, including stress, anxiety, and depression.
- **Decreased productivity and performance:** Workers experiencing psychosocial hazards in the workplace may be less productive and perform poorly.
- **Legal and financial consequences:** If a manager fails to manage psychosocial hazards in the workplace, they may breach their legal obligations under the WHS Act. This can lead to legal action and financial penalties.
- **Damage to reputation:** Failing to manage psychosocial hazards can damage an organisation's reputation and lead to negative publicity.

Strategies for identifying psychosocial hazards in the workplace

- **Apply a psychosocial hazard identification checklist to your work area.** The [*Psychosocial Risk Assessment Supporting tool*](#) can be useful for identifying potential workplace hazards that may be impacting workers, teams or the business area. This review can help you identify factors such as excessive workload, poor communication, and lack of control over work that could lead to stress, bullying, or other psychosocial hazards.
- **Monitor worker well-being.** Keep an eye on worker satisfaction and well-being by reviewing survey outcomes, such as the PULSE, holding regular check-ins with staff, and providing opportunities for

feedback. Look out for signs of stress, low morale, or other indicators that suggest psychosocial hazards may be present in the workplace.

- **Review incident reports or other available workplace data.** Review any reports related to workplace harassment, bullying, or other psychosocial hazards. Does your work area have a lot of employee turnover or unplanned absences? Look for patterns or trends in the reports that could indicate the presence of hazards that need to be addressed.
- **Observe workplace interactions.** Pay attention to how workers interact with each other and with management. Look for signs of conflict, tension, or poor communication that could lead to psychosocial hazards.

By using these strategies, you can identify potential psychosocial hazards in the workplace and take proactive steps to address them. Remember, preventing psychosocial hazards is beneficial for the health and well-being of our workers and can also improve UQ's productivity and functioning.

Psychosocial risk assessments

Conducting risk assessments is an important step in managing psychosocial hazards in the workplace. By identifying potential hazards and assessing the risks they pose to worker health and safety, we can develop and implement effective controls to prevent harm.

The [Psychosocial Risk Assessment Supporting tool](#) provided is a useful resource to help identify potential psychosocial hazards in the workplace. A brief example of a psychosocial risk assessment is provided in Appendix A to demonstrate consideration of how psychosocial hazards can interact to increase the risk of harm. Psychosocial risk assessments should be entered into UQSafe.

In addition to using the tool, involving workers in the risk assessment process is also important to ensure that potential hazards are identified, and that controls are appropriate and effective. Workers are often the best source of information about the hazards they face and can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of controls.

It can be helpful to look at the psychosocial hazards that may be present in activities, tasks, processes or work roles. Psychosocial factors should also be considered in project or event based risk assessments.

The process of identifying and assessing psychosocial hazards in the workplace involves a systematic approach to identifying potential hazards, assessing the risk they pose to worker health and safety, and developing and implementing controls to manage these risks. Here is a step-by-step guide to conducting a risk assessment:

Step 1: Identify psychosocial hazards.

Identify potential psychosocial hazards in the workplace using the [UQ Psychosocial Risk Assessment Supporting Tool](#).

Step 2: Determine who is at risk.

Identify which workers are at risk of exposure to the identified psychosocial hazards and consider the impact on their health and well-being.

Step 3: Assess the risk.

Assess the likelihood and severity of harm resulting from the identified psychosocial hazard/s using a risk matrix (i.e. within UQSafe-Risk or [Enterprise Governance and Risk Matrix](#)). Consider the *frequency, duration and severity of exposure*, as well as the interactions between psychosocial hazards.

Step 4: Develop controls.

Develop and implement controls to manage the identified psychosocial hazard/s. The hierarchy of controls must be applied. Controls aimed at addressing the hazard at the primary prevention level, e.g. systems, processes etc to eliminate the risk is best practice.

Step 5: Review and update.

We need to regularly review and update the risk assessment and controls to ensure they remain effective in managing psychosocial hazards in the workplace.

For more support on undertaking psychosocial risk assessments, see the [UQ Psychosocial Risk Assessment tip sheet](#).

Responding to reports of psychosocial hazards or incidents

Psychosocial hazards may be reported in a number of different ways, including, but not limited to:

- Direct, verbal or written report to supervisor
- Logged in UQSafe as a hazard or incident report
- Logged in the UQ Complaints Management System
- Reported to Human Resources
- Reported to a Safety representative

A hazard may be able to be resolved by a supervisor immediately or at an informal level without additional specialist support, such as workload management or implementing other adjustments to work processes or interactions. Supervisors should document the discussion and steps taken to control the hazard appropriately (for example in UQSafe). Should additional support be required to resolve the hazards raised, such as through Human Resources or the Integrity Unit, ensure that you respect privacy and obtain consent from the person making the report before seeking advice, unless there is an immediate threat to safety.

Hazards or Incident logged in UQSafe

For hazards or incidents logged in UQSafe, the supervisor may be assigned as the 'person' responsible' for assessing the risk and creating an action plan to resolve the matter. It is important to document controls that seek to eliminate the risk in the first instance. If the risk cannot be eliminated detail actions taken to minimise the risk. Relevant actions may also include inviting, with consent, specialist supports into the UQSafe report (e.g. HR representative) and referring the matter as relevant.

Ensure that relevant supports are offered to the person making the report, including counselling and rehabilitation supports as required.

Trauma Informed Approach

Applying a trauma-informed approach is best-practice when responding to a report of a psychosocial hazard or incident. The concept of a trauma-informed approach means that workplace systems recognise and acknowledge that workplace responses or investigations of reports about psychosocial hazards can escalate or de-escalate distress. A trauma-informed approach also considers how to avoid re-traumatising people in the course of workplace interactions and investigations.

Essentially, the goal of a trauma-informed approach is to obtain the maximum amount of information without causing the person unnecessary stress and minimising the amount of times a person has to tell and re-tell their experience.

Being trauma-informed also includes responding promptly, ensuring safety (physical and emotional), maintaining confidentiality, transparent communication and engaging in a respectful and inclusive manner.

Review

When there are reports of a psychosocial hazard or incident it can be important to review the matter to determine any contributing factors that may determine how to prevent similar issues or incidents arising in the future. Undertaking a risk assessment or incident investigation may assist in identifying root causes and the presence of other psychosocial hazards that need to be addressed. Your local safety representative may be able to provide assistance or advice in undertaking a review.

Appendix A: Example Risk Assessment

This is a **brief example** only to highlight the importance of taking into consideration of how psychosocial hazards can interact to increase the risk of harm. All relevant psychosocial hazards should be recorded in the risk assessment. Psychosocial risk assessments should be entered into UQSafe-Risk.

1.0	Risk Title	Reviewing student grievance reports	Risk Category	Health, Safety & Wellness	Risk Owner	A risk owner is a person or persons who has been given the authority, and is therefore accountable for managing a particular risk.
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Hazard Description- what could cause harm	Consequences	Existing Controls/ Treatments	Effectiveness of Controls
Exposure to traumatic materials and high job demands. During peak periods the number of applications to be reviewed significantly increases resulting in increased time pressures, working to deadlines, and potential increase in exposure to traumatic materials. High workload and time pressure can impact on the development of vicarious trauma and/or psychological injury. Detail more information on duration, frequency and severity as relevant	- Development of Vicarious trauma or other psychological injury - Burnout - Reduced productivity and output - Poor work/life balance - Low morale	- Forward workload planning for peak periods - Employment of casual staff during peak periods to undertake assessment of application duties. - Debriefing and support options via Employee Assistance Program - Task/file reallocation in consultation with supervisor - Training in Vicarious trauma	Current controls aim to reduce or eliminate workload pressures during peak periods. Other treatments for exposure to traumatic materials are aimed primarily at supporting staff at the secondary or tertiary intervention levels. Further interventions targeted at the systems or organisational level would improve risk management outcomes.

	Consequence	Likelihood	Risk Level		Consequence	Likelihood	Risk Level
Inherent Risk Level (IRL)	Major	High	High	Managed Risk Level (MRL)	Moderate	Medium	Medium

Target Risk Level Short Term (TRL - ST)	Minor	Medium	Low	Target Risk Level – Risk Appetite Statement (TRL - RAS)	Minor	Very Low	Low
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Proposed Risk Treatments to Align MRL to TRL	Relevant manager responsible for implementing proposed treatment/s	Date/s for full implementation
Update all role position descriptions to explicitly include tasks involving potentially distressing content.	Example	Example
Introduce a file flagging system to reduce unnecessary exposure to traumatic content		
Remove process to provide a case file summary with each application.		
Provide annual proactive wellbeing checks through the EAP to all staff exposed to traumatic materials.		

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