



**Corporate Mental Health
Alliance** AUSTRALIA



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Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace:

Planning your Assessment

Early considerations

Organisations are all at different stages in relation to conducting psychosocial risk assessments. Some may have already implemented assessments that include some psychosocial risks (e.g., as part of engagement surveys), while others may only be familiar with more traditional health and safety risk assessments. Implementing a process that suits your maturity and needs is important, and it may be necessary to plan to start small, and increase efforts over the short and medium term. Examples may include starting the assessment at one site or work group, using what is learned to improve the approach before rolling it out across the organisation. Ideally, psychosocial risk assessment will become an embedded part of BAU, and an important part of how you manage safety, health and wellbeing.



Important early considerations when planning your approach to psychosocial risk assessment include:



- **Understanding your needs and scope.** *What information does your organisation actually need from this process.* For example, are you wanting to hear from workers what risks they might be exposed to, or the impact these have had on them? Are you focused on knowing about risks due to a major organisational change, such as a merger or move – this may change the timeframe of your risk assessment due to additional factors to consider, and enable you to contrast responses from different time periods. Do you think this will be a regular (yearly) exercise, or how might the process change over time as you manage new risks and deal with new work arrangements? It's important to consider which areas of the business might be prioritised for roll-out, especially if you're piloting the approach in anticipation of wider administration later.
- **Existing knowledge.** *What do you already know about the risks in your organisation?* You already have information from the outcomes of risks (such as formal and informal incident reports and injuries), from absenteeism records, from informal feedback, as well as information from your industry and wider trends in your business partners and networks. You also know lots about what has been found in similar industries from regulators, research reports, industry publications and conferences. This existing knowledge can help you focus on particular categories of hazards (e.g., Exposure to vicarious trauma), particular work sites or groups, and it might also help strengthen the argument to senior management that more formal and ongoing monitoring and assessment is required.
- **Understanding your context.** Consistent with practices in basic risk management and safety management systems (ISO31000: 2018; ISO45001: 2018; ISO45003: 2021), understanding the context in which your organisation operates is critical to planning your psychosocial risk assessment, and implementing any actions that arise from it.



Elements of your internal and external context not only affect the psychosocial risks that are present but can affect how you should proceed to assess those risks.

Understanding the context in which psychosocial risks may arise, and how these hazards may co-occur or combine with other hazards is an important part of preliminary planning for any risk assessment.

Examples of contextual factors that may impact psychosocial risks, and their assessment are shown below.

Internal 	External 
Workforce characteristics (culture; gender mix; age; skill sets language, literacy and numeracy)	Availability of labour and skills
Organisational structure and governance	Wider social, political and economic factors
Organisational size, location	Supply chain disruption
Work tasks, locations, timeframes and demands	Natural disasters, emergencies and other crises
Flexible work arrangements and other work environments and conditions	Shared workplaces and equipment
Competency of staff in relation to risk management	Industrial relations, remuneration and employment conditions
Workforce diversity and inclusion	Customer/client service requirements, demographics and expectations

It's not always easy to see how context affects risks and how they can be assessed.



What are some ways in which workplace context can affect risk?

- Language, culture, skill sets and information preferences can affect willingness to participate in surveys, as well as interpretation of questions. These factors can also affect willingness to engage in open discussions to identify risks which may be critical of supervisors.
- Interacting with external workers as part of a supply chain can introduce risks through clashing work cultures, time pressures and role ambiguity.
- Workers in remote or rural areas who may not be able to find other local work, or workers in precarious employment may be less willing to identify risks.
- Social movements and changing social values may influence the need to include particular terminology or issues in risk assessment, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement, the MeToo movement.

Timing of the assessment

When considering when the psychosocial risk assessment might be best conducted, a few issues should be considered. Like any other data gathering exercise that could involve staff time, peak demand periods should be avoided. Similarly, it may be wise to consider the time of the assessment relative to any major workplace restructure. If this cannot be avoided (e.g., With recurring or regular assessments), tailoring elements of the assessment to account for these experiences and/or factoring these issues into the analysis should be undertaken, particularly in relation to analysis of trends over time.

Critical incidents and workplace change

Risk assessments need to be reviewed and refined following critical incidents of psychosocial risks, similar to the case for any other type of critical incident (for example, a physical safety incident, security incident, or data privacy breach). The occurrence of critical incidents, such as a major workplace bullying investigation, a psychological injury, or an episode related to mental ill-health can be the trigger for commencing a psychosocial risk assessment.

If a regular assessment process is already in place, critical events can trigger the need for review and refinement of the assessment and the strategies that are in place to control risks. This review and revision should be part of the overarching plan. This is consistent with regular practices to manage all types of safety and health hazards, with continual improvement (see ISO45001: 2018).

If there is a critical incident that has triggered your organisation's first psychosocial risk assessment, you might need to ensure that the assessment is broader than the circumstances of the incident, so that those involved don't feel targeted. Keeping the focus on the main psychosocial hazards can help in this regard.

Injuries and return to work

When planning assessment of psychosocial risk, it is vital for organisations to consider their injury management and return to work processes and how these are impacted by both personal and workplace psychosocial factors. While it is widely known that the management of psychological injuries is poorer than other categories of workplace injury (Wyatt, Cotton and Lane, 2017), psychosocial risks can occur before and after a psychological injury, and before and after a non-psychological injury.

During the absence from work and a return-to-work process, psychosocial risks can increase to any worker involved – not just the injured worker – regardless of injury status, or type of injury. This is because the work system (for at least one worker, but potentially many others) has changed. Including injury and return to work processes in the assessment planning is important to ensure that injuries are not exacerbated, and to minimise exposure to new or existing risks (see also ISO45003 Clause 8.3).

Changing the assessment over time

Continual improvement of the system to assess and manage risks also means that the manner in which you perform the assessment may change. Based on results, you may find that only some issues need to be re-explored every year, while other emerging issues require different approaches to data collection.

Changes could include:

- Including different items/questions in any survey tool used, based on content from free-text responses from workers.
- Increasing the “spotlight” on particular themes or issues in some years, or in some locations. This might include emerging hazards, or topical issues (e.g., vicarious trauma; interaction of psychosocial risks with hazardous manual tasks).

- Adding different methodologies for collecting information at various times (e.g., supplementing last year’s survey, which showed interesting results on customer interaction, with focus groups on customer interaction issues).
- Refining the methods of engagement and communication about the assessment process, including for example, wider consultation about the purpose of the assessment, or changes to the instructions than frame responses to assessment questions.





Do you have a strategy for communicating the assessment results with your workers?

Planning how you will inform workers of the results of any assessment is important, particularly if you're using a survey, or a data gathering method in which workers are asked to participate. Some assessments may share information with workers about their own responses, but they don't always report on aggregated results.

Having a plan for what information will be shared (including the rationale for gathering this information), its format, how it will be discussed, and what actions, if any, will be invited from stakeholders is important to communicate at the start of the assessment, so that those involved know what to expect, and can decide how to engage.

A climate of transparency in communication has been linked to a range of positive outcomes included workplace engagement, improved perceptions of leadership, (Jiang & Shen, 2020; Stewart et al., 2017) and relationships between employees and their organisation (Lee & Li, 2020). Some organisations receiving unexpected or negative feedback from employees in engagement surveys have adopted "radical transparency" approaches to sharing all of the feedback they received in order to build trust (Voice project, 2022).

Communication about results can affect what results you receive over time. Planning the communication and engagement process is crucial to psychosocial risk assessment, but also ultimately affects risk controls through the organisational climate it can help create.



Planning the actions you'll take post assessment

Planning to implement a psychosocial risk assessment is only the first step. Planning is needed for how the data will be analysed, interpreted, communicated, and acted upon. This might include the need for involving people with other skill sets from your organisation (e.g., IT, HR, data analytics, communications), or seeking external advice and assistance if required.

When planning action, you should consider:

- How, and to what extent will you report on the assessment to workers, managers and senior leaders, with recommended actions?
- How will the findings be reported, and to whom will they be available?
- Who will be responsible for developing prioritised actions based on the assessment?
- How will consultation and participation in relation to the proposed actions be conducted?
- Over what time course will planned actions be implemented?
- What data will be used to review and evaluate the outcomes of the actions, and the process by which they were implemented? (Caponecchia et al. 2022)

Plan for bad news

Expect things to look worse before they get better. If your assessment is working, you should initially expect increased reporting of problems, not fewer. In fact, unless you're really sure that you're already getting everything right in your organisational design, an assessment that shows no problems should be viewed with suspicion.

Key points

Planning a psychosocial risk assessment should incorporate the organisation's needs, existing knowledge, and any particular internal and external contextual factors that may affect psychosocial risks within the workplace. Importantly, this assessment should also factor in potential changes over time as the organisation increases in maturity and complexity. Considering the appropriate channels and modalities for communicating any results or findings with staff and stakeholders, encouraging their participation, and ensuring adequate evaluation following implementation is an important part of planning.



