Corporate Mental Health
Alliance AUSTRALIA

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Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace:

Evaluating options for psychosocial risk assessment

Psychosocial risk assessment tools and approaches

There are a range of different tools and approaches to psychosocial risk assessment, which need to be considered in relation to your specific workplace context. There is no right answer when choosing a psychosocial risk assessment tool.

Just like using any other risk assessment tool, a deep understanding of the nature of the risks in question, as well as knowledge of your organisation's context will ensure that you are well placed to choose the most optimal tool for your work scenario. Considerations for why it is important to undertake psychosocial risk assessment and planning the risk assessment are available in Documents 1 and 2.

This document outlines some of the things to consider when evaluating different approaches to psychosocial risk assessment.

Types of tools and level of focus

Most commonly, psychosocial risk assessment tools, and other tools used to inform psychosocial risk assessment processes (e.g., engagement surveys) take the form of surveys that can be answered by workers.

These surveys can differ in important ways including:

- Whether they include an assessment of impact of the hazards identified by workers (e.g., the health-related outcomes that may be experienced in relation to the hazard; or in general in relation to the work environment.

- Whether they include an assessment of severity and/or duration of any of the hazards identified by workers.

- The timeframe within which hazards and risks are identified (e.g., 6 months, 12 months).

- The level of analysis (e.g., personal experience of workers; general perceptions of the work environment; perceptions of organisational actions/responses).

- The extent of coverage of the full range of common psychosocial hazards (see Resources section for more information).

When deciding whether to use a particular tool for assessing psychosocial risk in your work scenario, it is useful to understand the key features of the tool and its approach to ensure it aligns with the objectives of your assessment and increase the chance of reliably assessing risk in your work context.

These assessment tools are do not always include a traditional hazard and risk matrix, where likelihood and consequence are assessed, but the information from the assessment can feed into your regular risk management process, with whatever approach to risk assessment you may use (e.g., bow tie analyses).

Psychosocial risk assessment tools also differ in the perspective or discipline which informs how they were developed, their intended use and purpose. Different perspectives may be more or less appropriate for your organisation's needs. For example, tools may be influenced by the:

- *human resources tradition*, similar to engagement surveys, with attention to commitment, satisfaction, perceptions of trust, leadership and organisational support.
- *health and well-being perspective,* with attention to a range of health outcomes, mood, work-life balance, and strategies to avoid or improve such outcomes (e.g., exercise, mindfulness, lifestyle changes).
- *workplace health and safety framework*, with a focus on risk identification, assessment and control.

Some approaches may combine these frameworks, and this may reflect the disciplines/perspectives of the tool developers. Developers may include researchers (from various disciplines), HR practitioners, WHS practitioners, and technology and other consultants.

Considerations when evaluating tools

Organisations may have a range of potential tools to evaluate. The following are some considerations to help inform decision making.

Table 1. Issues to consider when evaluating psychosocial risk assessment tools

Aspect of the assessment tool	Issues to consider
Purpose, scope and focus	• What was the tool originally designed for? • Was the tool originally designed for a particular perspective/discipline, and does this align with your organisational needs? • Who is the intended responder? (e.g., is it completed by workers, or management representatives) • What is the stated aim of the tool, and how does it achieve this aim? • What risks are included, and how do these align with those most relevant to your organisation (which may depend on which guidance or Standards you use e.g., ISO45003, SafeWork NSW Code of Practice 2022)?
Follow up processes	• After the tool is implemented, what process does the organisation need to follow to use the data? (e.g., a consultation process, focus groups)
What it measures	• How comprehensively does the tool cover known psychosocial risks? • Does it include risk assessment, or only risk identification? • Does it include hazards and risks, outcomes/impacts, their severity and duration? • Is there a total score, or indicator score, and at what level? (e.g., individual worker versus organisational level)
Time frame	• What is the reference time frame used in the tool? (e.g., exposure to risk over the last 6 months) • How long does the assessment take responders to complete?
Data management and reporting (who, where, how, when)	• What format are the data in? • Who receives the data? • Who owns the data? • Where is it stored? • How is confidentiality maintained, and identification of work units ensured? • Are the results anonymous? • What level of support does the tool provider give for interpretation of the data? • How are text-based comments treated? • How is the data disseminated to the business?
Publication, validation and use	• What (peer reviewed or independent) publications are available about the tool? • What information is available about the validity of the tool, and how validity was established? • What information is available about the development and testing of the tool? • What information is available about other users of the tool and usage cases?

Aspect of the assessment tool	Issues to consider
Accessibility and usability	• Has the tool been designed to be accessible for people with disability? (e.g., with screen readers, people with neurodiversity, people with sensory impairments) • Has the usability of the tool been tested, and if so, where is this reported?
Exposure to trauma	• How has the tool considered issues of re-exposure to trauma as a result of completing the assessment?
Language, culture and terminology	• What is the reading age of the tool? • How does the tool accommodate culturally and linguistically diverse responders? • How are any technical terms used in the tool explained?
Response validation and bias	• What strategies are employed in the tool to reduce biased responding? (e.g., due to acquiescence, social desirability) (*examples include question order, question framing, use of text input boxes, requirement for evidence of issues rather than tick-boxes*) • Do the response options lend themselves to biased of tick and flick" responses? (e.g., tick boxes where positive outcomes can easily be achieved, compared to response boxes requiring evidence and justification of responses)
Customisation	• What (if any) elements of the tool can be customised without affecting the validity of the tool? (*note: in most survey tools, items and response scales should not be changed, added, or removed*) • Are there any optional elements of the tool which can be added or changed for different purposes?
Questions/items	• What instructions are provided to survey respondents at the start of the survey? Are these instructions clear? • Are the response options for each question phrased in a manner that is appropriate for the question? (e.g., strongly agree to strongly disagree, yes/no, frequency ratings, severity ratings, rankings) • What are the implications of "mid-scale" or unlabelled response options? (e.g., do they mean "neutral" or "not sure"/ "don't know" or "not applicable") • Are there double-barrelled questions where the meaning is hard to interpret? (i.e., questions with two issues in one question, but only one response option)
Survey layout and pilot testing	• Is the layout of the survey clear and easy to navigate? (e.g., back buttons, save buttons, "next" buttons) • Is there a progress bar to inform the respondent of their progress? • Is there survey logic to ensure the respondent doesn't need to answer irrelevant questions? • Has the layout of the survey been pilot tested by administrators?

Options other than tools

Using an existing psychosocial risk assessment tool may not always be the right option for your organisation. As outlined in other documents, it may be that different approaches are used over time, as you learn more about the risks that are present, and risks that may emerge or change with changing work tasks, work groups, and the wider environment. You may also find that qualitative data collection through consultation may provide more useful data for an assessment of psychosocial risk in your organisational context than collecting quantitative data via survey metrics.

A range of issues can undermine the usefulness and reliability of tools for psychosocial risk assessment (tools covered in table 2) including:

- Survey fatigue (see DiLeonardo, Lauricella & Schaninger, 2021).

- History of assessments and surveys being done with little or no meaningful follow up.

- A culture of fear and distrust, which can lead to poor response rates/participation, or manipulated responses.

- A historical overreliance on band aid solutions that don't address core drivers of psychosocial risks (e.g., meditation classes when there is fundamentally too few staff).

- A history of assessments that neglect core issues in relation to psychosocial risks (e.g., only measuring distal outcomes such as levels of engagement, rather than work design and organisational structures that contribute to disengagement) (see also Huebner & Zacher, 2021).

Where implementing a risk assessment tool is likely to have poor engagement, or even exacerbate poor workplace outcomes, more bespoke processes may be appropriate. This could include, for example, using focus groups or interviews to supplement existing knowledge from incident reports and known hazards in your organisation or industry. In some workplace cultures with robust consultation processes, consultation may identify the risks to be assessed and controlled without use of a more formal risk identification tool. Knowing the elements of the various tools available (see Tables 1 and 2) can help identify strategies that might be best for you, (e.g., a survey followed by a participative process) or whether you

need something else entirely. This might consist of a series of consultative processes in small groups across a large organisation, facilitated externally, or by senior staff from other parts of the organisation who have developed competencies in group facilitation and consultation.

However, caution should be used when employing untested or unfamiliar methodologies. In cases like these, it is important to ensure that your organisation has the right skills and competencies to ensure coverage of all psychosocial risks in any bespoke approach you may develop. Some organisations may need support from experts in selecting and administrating existing psychosocial risk assessment tools, designing and implementing action plans, and designing new and ongoing assessment methods.

Key Points

A range of psychosocial risk assessment tools are available, which differ in their coverage, perspective, and application. Understanding your organisations needs and context is important for assessing which tools might work best for you, and/or whether you need to design alternate approaches.

The management team of a health service located in a regional area is aware of longstanding psychosocial risks that are affecting their staff. Several reviews of the service have been implemented over time, and management were keen to understand the current risks and move towards taking action.

External consultants were called in to assist identifying and assessing risks, and developing action plans. It was felt that further surveys would not result in sufficient responses, due to survey fatigue and low engagement. Instead, the consultants gathered data on risks from group interviews, and identified the main themes from the feedback. The consultants developed a list of possible actions, including an outline of the mechanism by which the proposed action would address some of the psychosocial hazards identified. A large group of stakeholders from all levels of employment in the workplace was convened to work together to prioritise the actions and create action plans.

After prioritising the actions, the group specified the barriers and facilitators to the actions, the resources that would be needed, the key accountabilities, and the timeframes for implementation.

Table 2. Examples of psychosocial risk assessment tools and related surveys

Name	Year and Origin	Type	Description
Psychosocial risk assessment tool	Queensland (2020)	Risk assessment tool	This psychosocial risk assessment, which includes a usable template, follows the steps of identifying the hazards, risk assessment, controlling the risks and reviewing the control measures. It is undertaken from the perspective of the employer / management committee i.e., it does not include responses from workers. Developed by Worksafe QLD. Freely available.
People at work	Australia (2016)	Risk Assessment tool and process	The survey is a part of a five-step process that you can use to identify, assess and control risks to psychological health at work. The survey is based on the job demands – resource model of workplace stress and assesses 13 psychosocial hazards and 3 worker outcomes. Following the survey, a process of consultation and participation is used to develop action plans. Guidance and resources are provided for each step. Developed by researchers and in partnership with Australian workplace health and safety regulators. Freely available.

Name	Year and Origin	Type	Description
Thrive at work	Australia	Survey tool and associated resources	The Thrive at Work survey is an assessment tool that measures employee perceptions in relation to the Thrive at Work framework (Mitigate Illness, Prevent harm, Promote Thriving), including psychological risks. The survey provides an understanding of current employee well-being and measures the degree to which employees believe the organisation mitigates illness, prevents harm and promotes thriving. It provides organisations with an opportunity to consult employees on key mental health and well-being matters. A range of other tools are freely available. Developed by researchers. Access to survey by contacting the developers, who also offer support and consultancy. Some tools are freely available on website e.g., ROI tool, current practice assessment tool.
HSE Indicator tool	United Kingdom	Survey tool and associated resources	This survey indicator tool was designed as part of the UK Health and Safety Executive Management Standards framework and asks respondents (workers) about the frequency of experiences related to six core areas of work stress in the last 6 months (demands, control, managerial support, peer support, relationships, role, and change). A range of guidance material is also available, including tools to assist with analysis of the indicator tool, how to develop action plans, and sample policies, based on the Management Standards framework. Developed by the UK HSE. Freely available.

Name	Year and Origin	Type	Description
Guarding Minds at Work	Canada (2007 and updated in 2020)	Survey tool and associated resources	A 79-item survey used to help employers effectively identify and address organizational issues related to psychological health and safety in the workplace.

Based on the framework of the Canadian Mental Health at work Standard, and the 13 elements of this Standard. (Organisational Culture; Psychological and social support; Clear leadership and expectations; Civility and respect; Psychological demands; Growth and development; Recognition and reward; Involvement and influence; Workload management; Engagement; Balance; Psychological Protection; Protection of physical safety).

Additional resources are available to assist with interpreting the survey data, plan and communicate about the assessment, and conducting an organisational review. Understanding the Canadian Standard would assist with interpretation.

Developed by researchers and practitioners.

Freely available. |
| COPSOQ | Denmark (version 3, 2020) | Survey | The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ) is a survey that is designed to assess psychosocial factors in the workplace, and enable national and international comparisons, evaluate interventions, facilitate surveillance and benchmarking, and improve communications between different relevant bodies (e.g., workplaces, work environment professionals and researchers).

The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire includes the main dimensions of the most influential psychosocial theories at work, including the Job-Strain, Demand-Control-Support and Effort-Reward-Imbalance models, but also includes emotional demands and role clarity. It also includes items that assess individual's health, wellbeing, personality, coping style and self-esteem.

There are core items, along with additional items that are most suited for research purposes.

Developed by researchers.

Guidance on implementation is available.

Freely available. |

Name	Year and Origin	Type	Description
Job content questionnaire	United States of America	Survey	This tool is based on the job demand control support model which suggests that the source of work stress and work motivation is a function of three basic job characteristics; job demands, job control, and social support. It is a self-administered questionnaire with 49 items. It has mainly been used in research applications. Psychosocial features of jobs at the task or job level. An additional scale (JCQ2) can be used which is more focused on job content at the job and organisational level. For example, it includes scales on new social emotional demands and hazards; company fairness; decision-making inclusiveness; organisational instability; social trust in teams; job insecurity in the global labour market. Developed by researchers. Costs available after submitting information about intended use/publication and vary with sample size.
FlourishDX	Australia	Survey app and online platform	App-based survey via which workers indicate exposure to psychosocial hazards, and outcomes that may be associated with them. Tips on risk controls are provided to organisational survey administrators via the online platform.