

Flexible working and psychosocial safety

Summary report

August 2021

This research summary is based on the *Flexible working and psychosocial safety* research produced by the Centre for Work Health and Safety, Edith Cowan University, Southern Cross University, The University of New South Wales, and Live Better. Special thanks to Professor Tim Bentley and his team for their collaboration on this project.

Background

The changing world of work encompasses emerging trends that are complex and require nuanced and holistic solutions, such as those offered through flexible work arrangements. In 2020, remote working became an increasingly common form of flexible work arrangement as governments, employers and workers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by rapidly adopting working from home. In fact, according to the NSW Innovation and Productivity Council (2020), by May 2020, it is estimated that 46% of NSW workers were working remotely due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Whether the proportion of NSW workers who work remotely will remain at this level in the post-COVID-19 pandemic landscape is unknown, however, indications are that many workers will continue to work remotely in some capacity in the future. This shift towards new ways of working highlights the need for employers to ensure that they are meeting their obligation to provide a safe working environment for flexible workers.

Overview of the study

This research study examined the psychosocial risks associated with undertaking flexible and remote work, seeking to provide employers and workers with evidence-based information to aid in the prevention of psychological harm for flexible workers. The study comprised three phases: 1) a survey of a diverse sample of flexible workers which collected data concerning their exposure to psychosocial risks; 2) interviews concerning psychosocial risk exposures, and the barriers that flexible

workers face when seeking to engage with workplace health and safety (WHS) systems; and 3) the development of a model of best practice for flexible working arrangements that promotes participation in workplace health and safety by flexible workers.

Key takeaways

Analysis of the experiences of 1039 NSW-based flexible workers through a survey suggests that:

- Flexible working did not create additional cognitive load or psychological demand on workers, compared to office-based employees, with the exception of social isolation and ill-treatment.
- Respondents who worked flexibly experienced a more positive working environment than non-flexible workers, and in particular, more support
- Psychological health did not differ significantly between flexible and non-flexible workers. Wellbeing, psychological distress, job stress or burnout were reported at similarly moderate levels by flexible and non-flexible workers alike.
- Flexible workers' industry, contract type, and demographic features were not overly efficacious in shaping psychosocial risk. However, across several psychosocial risk outcomes, age was significant in reducing risk, while having a disability, caring for a partner, or caring for children under five were associated with increased risk level for negative health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Safety compliance and safety participation were rated significantly lower by flexible workers.

Experience of 52 NSW flexible workers and managers on the exposure of flexible workers to psychosocial risks, as well as the workplace health and safety experience of flexible workers found that:

- Social isolation is a key psychosocial risk factor for flexible workers.
- Flexible work has the potential to improve employees' work-life balance, but negative impacts on work-life balance.
- Remote and flexible work was experienced differently by different demographic cohorts. Flexible working helped some workers with a disability while women faced additional demands placed on them when working from home due to societal gender norms.
- An improper ergonomic set up is a barrier to safe flexible work. This caused physical pain for some flexible workers. Some organisations offered financial support for staff to set up ergonomically appropriate work stations and home, but many did not.

- Flexible workers placed a high value on feeling trusted by their line manager, and their employer generally.
- Some flexible workers stated that their organisation did not have work health and safety (WHS) processes in place for remote workers. Some flexible workers felt that training around mental health issues while working from home was lacking, while others raised training as an area for improvement.
- Both flexible workers and managers felt that the responsibility for WHS issues at home was unclear.

The third report describes a model for effective flexible worker engagement in WHS within a psychologically safe environment and provides a summary of the types of resources that would comprise a toolbox for flexible workers.

The key factors that affect individual worker engagement with WHS and psychological safety directly and indirectly are:

- the external environment (e.g. guidance and tools from regulatory and government bodies and other external parties inform organisational policy)
- organisation (senior management commitment to and resourcing of flexible working)
- line managers (support and resourcing for work teams engaged in flexible working)
- individual and work teams (tools to enable effective and safe participation in flexible working and effective engagement with WHS).
- genuine participation and collaboration between management and flexible workers, and resourcing of flexible working across the system.

Conclusions

Our findings highlight that effective WHS systems should comprise resources and tools tailored to the needs of flexible workers for: identifying and reporting psychological hazards, WHS participation and compliance, fostering a WHS culture of trust and open communication, and integrated capacity and competence building mechanisms (e.g. training and education). Further, organisations will need to provide adequate resourcing, monitor workloads and boundary management for flexible workers, and ensure that WHS systems and processes support a psychologically safe working environment inclusive of flexible workers.