

Mentally Healthy Workplaces: Facilitators, motivators and barriers to improved management of psychosocial risks at work

Industry Summary Report

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This summary report is based on the qualitative study exploring the barriers and motivators to workers and businesses in adopting and maintaining mental health interventions and strategies. Special thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Maryland, Dr. Carlo Capponeccia, Dr Leigh-ann Onnis, Mr Dominic Manca, Dr Vinod Gopaldasanii, Ms Tatjana Jokic, Dr Robyn Coman, Associate Professor Sharron O'Neill, Associate Professor Ben Farr-Warton and Professor Tim Bentley for collaboration on this project.

Mental stress is the fourth most common mechanism of injury or disease amongst claims for serious injury in Australian workplaces. The impact on mental health from work-related sources is gathering increased attention from governments and policy makers. The recent National Guidance Material on psychological health and safety at work from SafeWork Australia promotes a risk management approach to addressing this issue – where aspects of how work is designed and organised create harm to psychological health. These sources of harm (hazards) are part of what employers have a duty to identify and eliminate as far as reasonably practicable under workplace health and safety law and are detailed in the Code of Practice: Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work released by SafeWork NSW in 2021. However, incorporating the recommendations in this guidance material in the workplace can be challenging for organisations.

This study is part of a larger collaborative project between UNSW, Edith Cowan University, UOW, JK Corporate Resourcing, and the Centre for Work Health & Safety focused on improving mental health at work.

The aims of the study were to explore:

- 1) how organisations are currently evaluating and managing psychosocial risks;
- 2) the factors that made it more difficult to effectively control these risks;

3) conditions within a particular organisation, industry, or wider community that made it easier to address and control psychosocial risks at work;

4) recommendations for strategies, initiatives, or conditions that would improve organisations' ability to managing psychosocial risk.

For this study, we interviewed 34 HR managers and health and safety professionals employed in one of four high-risk industries (Professional, scientific and technical services; Information media and telecommunications; Transport, postal and warehousing; and Manufacturing) as per the *NSW Mentally Healthy Workplaces Strategy 2018-22* about how psychosocial risks were managed in their organisations.

Most participating organisations were aware of their duty to address mental health at work and were actively pursuing initiatives to support individual workers' mental health. The majority of these initiatives focused on providing support to workers who were already experiencing stress (e.g. employee assistance programs, mental health first aid training). The understanding of an organisational-focused, risk management approach to mental health varied considerably between organisations. The main factors that made it difficult for organisations to address psychosocial hazards included:

- Poor leadership engagement, support and understanding of how sources of harm within the organisation could impact mental health (and how they could be controlled)
- Poorly defined responsibilities, or poor communication and collaboration between the various teams managing different aspects of mental health at work (e.g. psychosocial risks, wellness, psychological injury, and mental ill-health)
- Inconsistent use of terms “*mental health*”, “*wellness*”, “*psychosocial hazards*” and “*psychosocial risks*” within industry, in public messaging, and within organisations
- A lack of organisational expertise related to mental health at work
- A lack of organisational focus on the control of psychosocial risks or on mental health at work in general

Factors that helped organisations to manage mental health at work included:

- Leadership commitment to effectively addressing psychosocial risks
- Normalisation of psychosocial risk management by including psychosocial risks within the usual risk management processes
- Raised awareness of mental health at work and the responsibility of the organisation for controlling psychosocial risks
- The reduction of stigma around mental illness in the community in general.

Organisations identified a number of ways in which they would address the barriers described above given the resources and opportunity including:

- Increasing leadership and management competency in mental health at work and how to manage it
- Increasing financial and personnel resources to implement interventions
- Increasing understanding and competency in the use of work design to reduce or eliminate psychosocial risks within an organisation
- Improved industry level leadership in the management of psychosocial risk
- Increased number of easily accessible resources focused on practical implementation interventions

Based on these results, future strategies to improve the management of psychosocial risks at work include:

- Clarification of the terminology used to describe mental health at work to improve understanding of differences between wellness, mental ill health, and psychosocial hazards/risks
- A shift in WHS focus from individual functioning to organisational sources of harm, in keeping with a WHS risk management framework
- Developing competencies among WHS professionals in organisational approaches to managing mental health at work
- Working with industry leaders to develop collaborative responses to the Guidelines for the Management of Mental Health at work and the NSW Code of Practice: *Managing psychosocial hazards at work.*
- Developing improved strategies for evaluating psychosocial hazards in workplace