

PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS AND YOUR WORKPLACE

Safe Work Australia announced a new Model Code of Practice in July 2022, *Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work*. It is a practical guide to achieving psychosocial and wellbeing standards in Work Health and Safety across Australia. Model Codes are not enforceable until they have been approved in the relevant state or territory and but over the course of the last few and next few months, most Australian jurisdictions will adopt the changes to the Regulations and the new Code of Practice.

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The Code of Practice will be enforceable in the following states on the dates below:

- New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia and South Australia: Oct-Dec 2022
- Commonwealth, Queensland, ACT: 1 April 2023
- Victoria: 1 September 2023
- Northern Territory: late 2023 (yet to be determined)

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

In effect, the Code outlines a broader shift in the minimum responsibilities of bosses or business owners managing psychosocial risks in the workplace. Regardless of the challenges, bosses and business owners will now need to do risk assessments in their workplaces and review their control measures around psychosocial hazards.

These issues aren't new, but they haven't really been addressed in the WHS Legislation until now. The Boland Review of the WHS Legislation (Marie Boland, *Review of the Model Work Health and Safety Laws*, March 2020) made several recommendations, two of which related to psychosocial health and wellbeing. One suggested the amendment of the Regulations to ensure they appropriately addresses psychosocial health risks and to have appropriate control measures, while the other made recommended the review of incident notification to include notification for psychosocial injuries.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT YOU?

As a boss or business owner (PCBU (Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking)), you are responsible for the health, wellbeing, and safety of people in your workplace. You currently manage hazards around falls, manual handling, chemicals, and cuts, and you now also need to manage psychosocial risks in the same way.

WHAT IS A PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARD AND HOW DO WE MANAGE IT?

Psychosocial hazards are hazards that may cause psychological and/or physical harm to a worker. They arise from or relate to, the way jobs and tasks are managed, organised, or supervised, the working environment or equipment at a workplace, social factors such as social interactions and workplace relationships. Psychosocial hazards also include where the task or job itself has inherent psychosocial risks or hazards such as workplace issues that lead to chronic stress and the physical manifestations of that such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, musculoskeletal injuries, and chronic diseases.

Examples of psychosocial hazards according to SafeWork Australia include:

- job demands
 - too high eg, working long hours without enough breaks, not having the right skills to complete the job or displaying

false emotions such as being friendly to difficult customers;

- or too low eg, long idle periods where you can't complete any tasks or highly monotonous or repetitive work;
- low job control
- little say or control in how you do your job or break times or having to ask permission for routine tasks;
- poor support
- not getting enough support from supervisors or other workers to do your job well, such as not getting enough information or not having equipment you need to do the job safely;
- lack of role clarity
- not being clear on your role and responsibilities or expectations eg, when two people are given the same task or when reporting lines are unclear or conflicting or changing work expectations such as contradictory instructions;
- poor organisational change management
- changes that are poorly planned because of timing or lack of communication or not thinking about how a change could affect WHS risks;
- inadequate reward and recognition
- an imbalance where the effort put in doesn't match the recognition or reward eg, not enough feedback or some people getting rewarded and not others;
- poor organisational justice
- management being inconsistent, unfair, or discriminatory in decisions eg, not taking into account worker's reasonable needs, not keeping private information about a worker confidential or blaming workers when it isn't their fault;
- traumatic events or material
- worker being exposed to a traumatic event such as a workplace incident or

fatality, a natural disaster such as a bushfire, supporting/counselling staff dealing with trauma or being exposed to extreme risks;

- remote or isolated work
- worker in places where it takes a long time to enter or exit or help would take a long time to come or working alone after hours or unreliable technology like no mobile coverage;
- poor physical environment
- this is more than just not liking the décor or it being a bit cold first thing in the morning, it is more about working in uncomfortable conditions which make it hard to concentrate due to noise or temperature, having to wear poorly fitting PPE or equipment that doesn't properly work or working in a hazardous environment such as at heights;
- harmful behaviours
- worker being exposed to violence and aggression or bullying or harassment such as sexual, racial, disability, age etc or conflict in workplace relationships.

WHAT DOES A BOSS OR BUSINESS OWNER (PCBU) NEED TO DO?

1. Identify the psychosocial hazards

You will need to identify which of these hazards are relevant or occurring. This can be done like you would identify any other hazard by talking and listening to your workers, observing how they interact, inspecting your workplace and doing a survey of all workers. Looking at previous records such as absenteeism or staff turnover can help too. Look at how information is given, how the work is performed eg, are the workers rushed, do they have all the equipment they need, and look also at the workplace culture eg, is inappropriate behaviour tolerated.

2. Assess the risks

Once you have identified the hazard the next step is to assess the severity of the risks. This involves looking at how serious the risk is, how likely it will occur and the duration if it does. It is a good idea to look at what controls are already in place.

3. Control the risks

As with any other risks to health and safety, a boss or business owner (PCBU) must eliminate the risks if it is reasonably practicable to do so, or otherwise minimise the risks so far as reasonably practicable. For example, you could have regular discussions about work expectations and deadlines, put things in writing so that the expectations are clearer for all, have systems in place for escalating issues and getting support from managers, increasing breaks and recovery times after a worker has been exposed to traumatic events.

4. Review control measures

Review the control measures regularly. Don't implement something and then forget about it. You must review it regularly to ensure it is set up correctly and working as it should be. If it is not, then the process needs to start over.

5. Take these issues seriously

Deal with all complaints promptly and make sure you take them seriously. Brushing them off won't make it go away. Get started and make sure you are ready for when you need to comply.

For further information please see [Safe Work in your home state](#). You will find the Code and many other resources including checklists to help make this process much easier.

