

Keeping the Workplace Psychosocially Safe for National Safe Work Month

October is National Safe Work Month, a time to “commit to building a safe and healthy workplace”, but what does a “safe and healthy workplace” actually mean?

SAFE AT WORK

Safe Work Australia has released the campaign for National Safe Work Month, taking place in October 2023. The overarching theme for 2023 is “For everyone’s safety, work safely” — encouraging everyone to prioritise health and safety in the workplace, including mental health.

COVID-19 has further accentuated the significance of workplace safety. Employers have adapted to the new landscape by implementing stringent health protocols, remote work arrangements, and innovative safety measures to mitigate the spread of the virus. The pandemic underscored the dynamic nature of workplace safety, demonstrating that it isn't just confined to physical hazards but also encompasses psychological and health-related challenges.

With the easing of pandemic restrictions, a hybrid work model is emerging, demanding employers to re-evaluate safety strategies once again. National Safe Work Month offers a timely reminder for organisations to foster a safety culture that adapts to these evolving circumstances. As the workplace continues to evolve, the importance of maintaining a safe and healthy work environment for employees remains paramount.

WORK SAFETY IN AUSTRALIA

Even though significant strides have been made in enhancing workplace safety over the years, the evolving nature of work, changing technologies, and emerging risks necessitate a continuous focus on safety measures.

Stats from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, in the 2021-22* period:

- 497,300 people had a work-related injury or illness (3.5% of people who worked at some time during the year).
- The most common cause of injury or illness was 'Lifting, pushing, pulling or bending' (24%).
- 66% had time off as a result of the injury or illness.
- 31% received workers compensation for the injury or illness.

*Given this time period was during the later stages of the pandemic, the data collected may not represent a 'typical' year, particularly in Victoria which was most heavily impacted.

Work Safe Australia notes that safety in the workplace extends beyond immediate injuries and accidents, and can include the prevention of long-term illnesses and chronic conditions that can arise from occupational hazards, such as sitting or standing for long periods, working with hazardous materials, or working in shifts – all of which can long-term consequences for our health.

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MORE THAN PHYSICAL SAFETY

Promoting a safe and healthy workplace extends beyond physical safety to encompass psychological wellbeing. The model Work Health and Safety (WH&S) laws emphasise the need for employers to address psychosocial risks, ensuring that workers are shielded from factors that could compromise their health and safety at work.

These factors include:

- Job demands
- Low job control
- Insufficient support
- Unclear role definition
- Ineffective organisational change management
- Lack of adequate reward and recognition
- Exposure to traumatic events or materials
- Remote or isolated work conditions
- Inadequate physical work environment
- Incidents of violence and aggression
- Instances of bullying
- Harassment, including sexual harassment
- Conflict or problematic workplace relationships

While this might seem like a significant task, there are numerous approaches a workplace can adopt to cultivate positive physical and psychosocial conditions.

LIMITING THE RISKS

Difficult working conditions can impact employees' mental health, causing problems like depression, anxiety, or burnout. These issues don't only affect the employees themselves – they can also spread through the whole organisation, harming financial performance and reputation. When employees are dealing with mental health challenges, they may not work as well, feel less motivated, and struggle to be creative. Moreover, they might also experience more physical illnesses and need more time off work.

According to the Productivity Commission, Australia's economy loses around \$60 billion every year due to healthcare expenses, decreased productivity, and other related costs.

PREVENTION AT WORK

Companies can proactively limit both physical and psychosocial risks in the workplace by adopting a comprehensive approach to safety and wellbeing.

To address physical risks, organisations should prioritise robust safety protocols, provide regular training, and equipment maintenance. Adequate signage, protective gear, ergonomic workstations, and proper ventilation are vital components of creating a safe physical environment. Regular workplace inspections, hazard assessments, and open channels for reporting potential dangers empower employees to actively participate in maintaining their own safety.

For psychosocial risks, fostering a supportive and inclusive work culture is paramount. Encouraging open communication, providing mental health resources, and conducting stress-reduction programs can help reduce psychosocial stressors. Managers should receive training on recognising signs of stress, addressing conflicts, and offering flexible work arrangements when feasible. Additionally, promoting work-life balance and clear expectations can help mitigate feelings of overwhelm and burnout.

HOW CONVERGE CAN HELP

At Converge, we have a range of products and services to support organisations to create and sustain safe and healthy workplaces.

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OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK ASSESSMENT

Converge adopts the following steps to apply the risk management approach to eliminate or reduce psychosocial risks, as far as reasonably practicable:



We provide a report aligning with the WH&S legislation amendments, containing a risk assessment, implementation and prevention plan to demonstrate compliance.

OUR CULTURE & PSYCHOSOCIAL HEALTH AUDIT

At Converge, we have a holistic approach to measuring and improving the psychosocial health and wellbeing in the workplace. Our Culture Psychosocial Health Assessment and Audit Tool is a systematic and cultural assessment that is designed to prevent psychological harm, enhance early intervention efforts and support recovery.

The Tool not only aligns with the Psychological Health and Safety At Work and Safe Work Australia's national guidance (the industry standard), but also assesses an organisation's current level of psychosocial health and wellbeing maturity using a two-pronged, 360-degree approach.

OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK MANAGEMENT TRAINING

Our psychosocial risk management training is designed to enhance organisation, leader and employee capability to identify and manage psychosocial risks within their workplace. This includes designing the training for those who will be

organising or conducting risk assessments within the organisation (Health and Safety professionals, Human Resources), those who will implement or support the risk assessment process (leadership, supervisors, Health and Safety Representatives) and those who will be consulted or contribute to the risk assessment (employees, contractors).

[Click here](#) to learn more.

GET INVOLVED THIS OCTOBER

Every year, Safe Work Australia ask businesses, employers and workers across Australia to join in and commit to building safe and healthy workplaces for all Australians.

This year, there are four weekly themes:

1. Managing risks at work,
2. Protecting workers mental health,
3. Supporting workers, and
4. Ensuring a safe and healthy workplace for all.

[Click here](#) to learn how you and your organisation can join in and play a part this month.

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