



Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Modern Workplace Hazards

Today, employers must also consider psychosocial factors within the scope of occupational health and safety because of their significant effect on employee well-being. While these workplace hazards are psychological, "using [the term] 'psychosocial' makes it clear that we are identifying workplace hazards, not diagnosing an individual." Organizations that recognize the value of creating a supportive work environment prioritize their workforce's mental and emotional health.¹

In this article, we'll look at some modern occupational hazards and explore whether some organizations are at increased risk of having employees experience them. Employers need to know how to address psychosocial hazards effectively. To help, we'll share five things you can assess to determine your organization's preparedness level for effectively identifying and managing this aspect of occupational health and safety.

What are psychosocial workplace hazards?

Psychosocial workplace hazards encompass a range of factors, including the organization and assignment of work, as well as the emotional impact experienced by employees during their workdays. These factors, rooted in the workplace's social dynamics, significantly affect employee well-being and their capacity to engage collaboratively in a work setting. Although these hazards might not be immediately visible, they are genuine concerns for occupational health and safety. They become evident through symptoms of job-related stress among workers. Factors contributing to this stress include excessive workloads and harmful workplace environments characterized by discrimination, harassment, and insufficient social support. Such conditions foster feelings of despair and apathy among employees, leading to increased instances of burnout and mental health challenges. It is crucial for employers to recognize and address these psychosocial hazards to foster a healthier, more supportive work environment.

What are some warning signs that an organization may be at a higher risk of having psychosocial hazards present in the workplace?

Signs can surface in people “when the overall demands of their job are excessive and greater than their capacity to cope with them.”² Employers must address these hazards because they are “identifiable, measurable, controllable and preventable” interactions at work, categorizing them as psychosocial.³ Here are some examples:

- Excessive workloads
- Conflicting demands and lack of role clarity
- Lack of involvement in making decisions that affect workers
- Lack of influence over the way the job is done
- Poorly managed organizational change
- Job insecurity
- Ineffective communication
- Lack of support from management or colleagues
- Psychological and sexual harassment
- Difficult customers, patients, pupils, etc.⁴

When the risks are high, employees and organizations experience several challenges:⁵

Employees

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Burnout
- Depression
- Cardiovascular disease
- Musculoskeletal disorders
- Somatic symptoms
- Chronic fatigue
- Absenteeism

Organizations

- Poor business performance
- Absenteeism
- Presenteeism
- High turnover
- Increased workplace accidents and injuries
- Early retirement (because of poor mental health of employees)
- Damaged reputation



What organizations or occupations may be at greater risk of experiencing psychosocial hazards?

Several factors that can contribute to an organization or occupation having a higher risk of experiencing psychosocial hazards. Factors can vary across industries and workplaces. Certain occupations and roles also place higher demands on employees because of their nature to have direct involvement in emotionally challenging or traumatic events and situations. Sometimes, the physical demands of these jobs can exacerbate fatigue, directly affecting emotional capacity and increasing the risk of compassion fatigue.

Higher risk occupations / roles	Challenges that increase risk	
Healthcare professionals • Doctors, nurses, technicians	• High stress • Repeated exposure to critical incidents • Long hours	• High pressure • Difficult decisions • Shift work fatigue
Emergency services/first responders • Police, firefighters, paramedics	• High stress • Repeated exposure to critical incidents • Shift work fatigue • Long hours	• Trauma • Anxiety • PTSD
Social workers and psychological services personnel	• Dealing with emotionally charged situations • Abuse • Domestic violence • Poverty	• Compassion fatigue • Vicarious trauma • Long hours • Limited time for adequate breaks • High demands / limited time
Teachers	• Heavy workloads • Challenging classroom management situations	• Administrative pressures • High emotional demands
Customer service • Front-facing with the public • Call-centres	• Dealing with angry, irrational, and demanding customers • High stress • Emotional strain	• Repetitiveness of work • Performance targets • Burnout
Financial services	• Deadline pressures • High-pressure situations	• Responsibility for managing large transactions can create stress and anxiety
Legal professionals	• Heavy workloads • Tight deadlines	• Emotional toll of client issues • Moral / ethical injury
Journalists and other roles within the media	• Deadline pressures • Exposure to traumatic events • Pressure to prepare stories quickly	• Stress and emotional strain • Pressures of maintaining physical appearance for on-camera roles can lead to body dysmorphia
Military personnel	• Deployment into active service/combat • Trauma • Separation from family and support networks • Significant psychological and physical hazards	• Transitional challenges from work to civilian life • Long hours / under pressure • Moral / ethical injury • Increased risk of sleep disruption
Air traffic controllers	• Constant vigilance and responsibility for safe movement of air traffic • High stress	• Burnout

What are five things organizations can do to address psychosocial safety issues in the workplace?

Identifying, preventing, and managing psychosocial occupational hazards requires a proactive approach from employers. Promoting safe, healthy, and positive working environments is crucial for employees to be productive. Here are some strategies you can use to support a shift within your organization:


1. **Encourage honest and open communication at all organizational levels** so employees feel comfortable and safe expressing opinions, ideas, and concerns without fearing reprisal. There should also be a process for anonymous feedback to maintain confidentiality.
2. **Set clear expectations for leadership roles** and ensure that leaders exemplify them by demonstrating vulnerability, humility, honesty, and a willingness to admit mistakes. Leaders are pivotal in setting an organization's tone and establishing the psychosocial safety baseline. Employees need to see that leaders value openness, courage, transparency, and learning so that they feel encouraged to speak up.
3. **Provide training** so that everyone in the organization understands psychological safety. Education must be available for all employees at all levels, without exception. Focusing on effective communication methods, active listening and conflict resolution helps everyone understand the commitment and their roles in participating in upholding it.
4. **Have zero-tolerance for harassment, bullying, and discrimination** backed up by a documented policy of what actions will be taken to investigate and address any incidents reported. Sending a message that these types of behaviours will not be tolerated contributes to making the workplace safe.

5. **Promote diversity and inclusion** to ensure that all employees, regardless of background, are respected. Ensure that HR practices support diversity and provide opportunities for employees to share their perspectives to get a read on the tone within the organization.

Psychosocial safety is a significant responsibility for employers but avoiding it could be catastrophic. Employers can consider implementing employee resource groups, mentorship programs, and initiatives celebrating diversity to reinforce a sense of belonging. By prioritizing it, employers can create a workplace where employees feel supported, engaged, and motivated to contribute their best work.

References:

1. Ontario Federation of Labour (n.d.). Does the OHS cover psychosocial hazards? Yes! A support document for workers and their advocates. Ontario Federation of Labour. Retrieved December 2, 2023 from https://ofl.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021.12.01-MH-WG_Resource-COPE-1.pdf
2. European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (n.d.) Psychosocial risks and mental health at work. OSHWiki- Networking Knowledge. Retrieved December 2, 2023 from <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-mental-health>
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5. Ibid.


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