

# A risk management approach to occupational stress



Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

Risk management is a five-step process for controlling exposure to health and safety risks associated with hazards in the workplace.

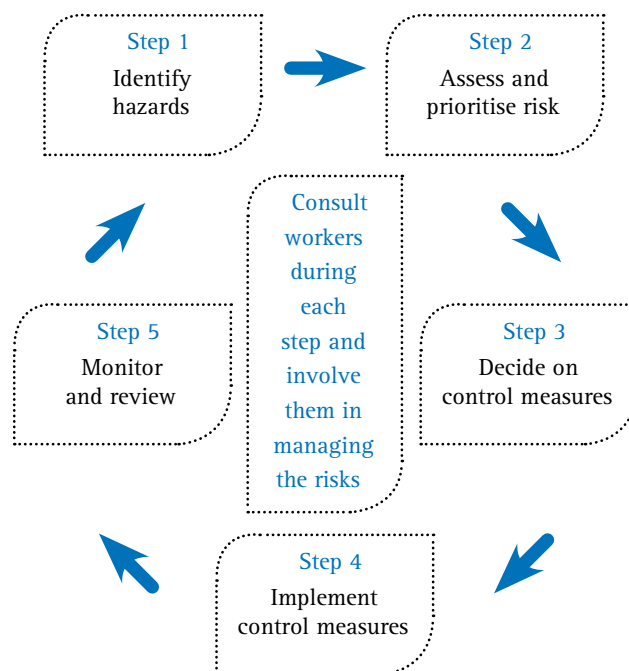
The *Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995* asserts that, to properly manage exposure to risks, a person must:

1. identify hazards
2. assess risks that may result because of the hazards
3. decide on appropriate control measures to prevent or minimise the level of the risks
4. implement control measures, and
5. monitor and review the effectiveness of the measures.

Many of the discussions about stress risk management have traditionally been focussed on individuals within an organisation who are already distressed. This approach is not only costly, but it also means that the employer may not be fully meeting their obligation to prevent or minimise risks from people being exposed to stressors at work.

The risk of occupational stress may be present in any workplace. Employers should apply the risk management process (illustrated in Figure 1) to prevent or minimise exposure to potential causes of occupational stress.

Figure 1. The five step risk management process



## Step 1: Identify the hazards

The first step in the risk management process is to identify workplace hazards. This means looking for those things in the workplace that have the potential to cause harm. The source of occupational stress can be determined by evaluating: productivity levels, rates of absenteeism, separation rates/turnover, exit interviews, staff engagement/morale, customer feedback, peak/seasonal demands, analysing incident reports and data trends.

## Step 2: Assess and prioritise the risk

This step involves assessing the likelihood and consequences of injury or illness that may result from exposure to occupational stressors. Stressors or risk factors for occupational stress include:

- work demands
- low control
- poor support
- lack of role clarity
- poorly managed change
- poorly managed relationships
- low levels of recognition and reward
- organisational justice.

### How to conduct a risk assessment

Risk factors for occupational stress can be assessed by understanding worker complaints, observing interactions between workers, gaining feedback from workers, having one-on-one discussions with workers and through the use of focus groups or a worker survey.

*Focus groups* are small groups of typically 6-10 people from across the organisation. The purpose of a focus group is to provide a forum for assessing the risk of exposure to occupational stressors. This is done by considering each of the occupational stress risk factors listed above and how they may or may not apply to their workplace.

Another effective approach to finding out about workplace stressors is to administer a *worker survey*. Surveys can be an important tool in soliciting which stressors are present in the workplace, evaluating the degree to which they are affecting workers and pinpointing where they are originating. When undertaking a worker survey, one must consider the size of the group to be surveyed, how participants are to be selected and how survey results will be fed back to staff. Anonymity must be guaranteed throughout the entire process.

Findings from focus groups or worker surveys would then inform a decision about the likelihood and consequences of injury or illness from exposure to occupational stress and make it clear which risk factors are contributing to that risk.

## Step 3: Decide on control measures

After assessing the risk and determining which factor(s) have the greatest contribution to that risk, the most appropriate control measure(s) to enable it to be properly managed needs to be selected. When selecting a particular control, it is important to be able to justify why it was chosen over a different measure.

For occupational stress, deciding on control measures usually means altering a problem risk factor. For instance, reducing work demands, increasing the level of control a worker has over his or her job, and increasing the amount of peer and/or supervisor support a person is receiving.

## Step 4: Implement control measures

After the most appropriate control measures have been identified, the next step is to put these controls into place.

Examples of control measures to manage the risk of occupational stress include:

- improving supervisor/managerial skills through coaching, mentoring and/or training
- planning workloads to meet potential demands
- setting clear performance goals/accountability
- ensuring role clarity and reassessing job descriptions
- setting new or adjusting current HR procedures
- providing assistance (e.g. an employee assistance program)
- communicating policy and availability of assistance
- checking understanding and implementation of changes
- promoting effective early rehabilitation.

## Step 5: Monitor and review

The last step of the risk management process is to monitor and review the effectiveness of the control measures that have been implemented. When monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of control measures, it is important to weigh up whether the chosen controls are effective or whether they need some modification.

Risk management for occupational stress is not a one-off exercise, but something that must go on continually in the organisation. The dynamics and complexity of organisations can mean that changes such as a new supervisor or new workers or new processes or procedures can have marked, unexpected and unplanned effects on the stress levels of workers.