An Assessment of Psychosocial Hazards in the Workplace

May, 2016
Final Report to Partner Organisations
Summary of Key Findings

The People at Work Project is a research collaboration among Queensland University of Technology and The Australian National University, with Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, WorkCover NSW, WorkSafe Victoria, Comcare, Safe Work Australia, and beyondblue (Partner Organisations). The project is funded by the Australian Research Council and the Partner Organisations.

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- Workplace Health and Safety Queensland
- WorkCover NSW
- WorkSafe Victoria
- Comcare
- Safe Work Australia
- beyondblue
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The Project Management Committee (PMC) governing the People at Work Project met on a monthly basis (2012-2015) and comprised representatives with expertise in Workplace Health and Safety from all Partner Organisations, in addition to the University Researchers. Individuals serving on the PMC for varying terms were:

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Professor Nerina Jimmieson, Chief Investigator  
Dr Michelle Tucker, Project Manager

**The Australian National University**
Professor Prashant Bordia, Chief Investigator

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Megan Kelly, Principal Adviser, Leadership and Culture Unit  
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Dr Ruth Wright, Researcher, Policy & Services Branch

**beyondblue**
Nick Arvanitis, Workplace & Workforce Project Manager  
Naomi Murphy, Workplace & Workforce Project Manager
The People at Work Project

Established in 2007, the People at Work Project (www.peopleatworkproject.com.au) is a collaboration among Queensland University of Technology, The Australian National University, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, WorkCover NSW, WorkSafe Victoria, Comcare, Safe Work Australia, and beyondblue.

The overall aim of the People at Work Project is to assist employers to install a 5-step psychosocial risk management process at the level of the workplace or enterprise. In accord with most process models of risk management in regards to any context, the People at Work Project follows the stages of (1) Preparing, (2) Assessing through Surveying, (3) Consulting on Outcomes, (4) Taking Action, and (5) Reviewing and Improving.

In order for organisations to fulfil their primary duty of care to ensure, so far as it is reasonably practicable, the provision and maintenance of a work environment without risks to workplace health and safety, it is essential to take investigative steps to identify and assess the level of risk. In the context of work-related mental health, these steps involve determining areas of the business that have poorer mental health and how that poorer mental health is related to work characteristics. Thus, a major goal of the People at Work Project has been to develop a risk assessment survey tool, based on reliable and valid scales, for measuring 13 specific psychosocial hazards and 3 worker outcomes.

The risk assessment survey tool is based on the Job Demands-Resources Model of occupational stress and assesses 13 Psychosocial Hazards (7 Job Demands & 6 Job Resources) and 3 Worker Outcomes (Psychological Strain, Job Burnout, & Musculoskeletal Symptoms).

Objectives of the Final Report

1. Prevalence rates for 13 Psychosocial Hazards (7 Job Demands & 6 Job Resources) for the Overall Sample.
2. Prevalence rates for 3 Worker Outcomes for the Overall Sample.
4. Risk analyses that determine the extent to which each of the 13 Psychosocial Hazards is associated with the 3 Worker Outcomes for the Overall Sample.
5. Prevalence rates for the Experience and Witnessing of Bullying, along with a detailed analysis of the Types and Sources of Workplace Bullying.
6. Risk analyses that determine the extent to which the Experience of Workplace Bullying is associated with the 3 Worker Outcomes for the Overall Sample.
Sample Profile

This Final Report is based on the survey responses of 11,890 workers recruited across 79 organisations that participated in the People at Work Project from May, 2013 to December, 2015. Response rates across organisations ranged from 13% to 100%, with an average response rate of 56%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Profile</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Jurisdictions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>3,888</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>3,345</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>1,183</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>3,150</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Sectors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>7,997</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>3,893</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Industries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, Gas, Water, &amp; Waste Services</td>
<td>2,065</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, Postal, &amp; Warehousing</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information &amp; Media</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, Scientific, &amp; Technical Services</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration &amp; Safety</td>
<td>4,465</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education &amp; Training</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care &amp; Social Assistance</td>
<td>2,059</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Recreation Services</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Services</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Occupations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>1,584</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Professionals</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design Engineering Science Transport Professionals</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Professionals</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Professionals</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Professionals</td>
<td>1,147</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering ICT Science Technicians</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical &amp; Telecommunications Workers</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Technicians &amp; Trades Workers</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Welfare Support Workers</td>
<td>745</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers &amp; Aides</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Community &amp; Personal Service Workers</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical &amp; Administrative Workers</td>
<td>2,620</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Workers</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery Operators &amp; Drivers</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Overall Picture

- The most prevalent Job Demand was Cognitive Demand, with 80% of the Overall Sample reporting high levels.
- The least prevalent Job Demand was Role Ambiguity, with 81% of the Overall Sample reporting low levels.
- The most prevalent Job Resource was Co-Worker Support, with 77% of the Overall Sample reporting high levels.
- The least prevalent Job Resource was Change Consultation, with 24% of the Overall Sample reporting low levels.
- The majority of workers (57%) reported low levels of Psychological Strain and just 4% of workers were classified as having high levels of Psychological Strain.
- 40% of workers reported low levels of Job Burnout and 17% of workers reported high levels of Job Burnout.
- 16% of the Overall Sample reported high levels of Musculoskeletal Symptoms.
- Males (mean = 3.0) reported lower Musculoskeletal Symptoms than females (mean = 3.5).
- The most prevalent body locations for musculoskeletal pain were Neck (33%) and Shoulders (33%), followed by Lower Back (30%), Upper Back (22%), and the least prevalent was Wrists/Hands (17%).

Occupational Trends

There were several statistically significant differences for occupations compared to the Overall Sample for a number of psychosocial hazards and worker outcomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Compares Favourably to Overall Sample</th>
<th>Compares Unfavourably to Overall Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>✓ Higher Job Control</td>
<td>✗ Higher Role Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Professionals</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Higher Role Overload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Higher Emotional Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Higher Job Burnout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Professionals</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Higher Emotional Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Lower Praise &amp; Recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical &amp; Telecommunications Workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers &amp; Aides</td>
<td>✓ Lower Role Overload</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Lower Role Ambiguity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Lower Role Conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery Operators &amp; Drivers</td>
<td>✓ Lower Role Overload</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Lower Role Ambiguity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Lower Role Conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Lower Emotional Demand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Lower Job Burnout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers</td>
<td>✓ Lower Emotional Demand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Risk Analyses for Psychosocial Hazards

The extent to which each of the 13 Psychosocial Hazards is a risk to workers was determined by examining concurrent associations with Psychological Strain, Job Burnout, and Musculoskeletal Symptoms for the Overall Sample. The Job Demands and Job Resources that were statistically significant are depicted below, presented in order of their strength of relationship with the Worker Outcome.

### Psychological Strain
- Role Ambiguity ($B = .220$)
- Emotional Demand ($B = .204$)
- Role Overload ($B = .097$)
- Role Conflict ($B = .039$)
- Group Task Conflict ($B = .039$)
- Group Relationship Conflict ($B = .035$)

### Job Burnout
- Emotional Demand ($B = .262$)
- Role Overload ($B = .187$)
- Role Ambiguity ($B = .177$)
- Group Relationship Conflict ($B = .077$)
- Group Task Conflict ($B = .076$)
- Role Conflict ($B = .048$)

### Musculoskeletal Symptoms
- Emotional Demand ($B = .212$)
- Role Overload ($B = .074$)
- Group Relationship Conflict ($B = .067$)
- Cognitive Demand ($B = .048$)

### Risk Analysis Summary for the Overall Sample
- Role Overload emerged as a consistent positive predictor across all 3 Worker Outcomes, as did Emotional Demand.
- Job Control emerged as a consistent negative predictor across all 3 Worker Outcomes, as did Change Consultation.
- Role Ambiguity was the strongest predictor of Psychological Strain, and Emotional Demand was the strongest predictor of Job Burnout and Musculoskeletal Symptoms.
- Cognitive demand was found to have a curvilinear association with Psychological Strain, such that Psychological Strain is at its lowest when Cognitive Demand is kept moderate.
- Such findings underscore the importance of examining both prevalence and impact for a comprehensive understanding of psychosocial risk factors in the workplace.
Workplace Bullying Prevalence

The People at Work Project also examined exposure to workplace bullying and its impact on worker stress reactions. For the purposes of the People at Work Project, workplace bullying was defined as “repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety”. Workers responded to the question “In the past 6 months, have you experienced workplace bullying in your workgroup?”

When using the behavioural experience approach to measuring the prevalence of workplace bullying (in the last 6 months) in reference to 9 specific behaviours, the following rank order emerged:

**Highest Prevalence**
- Persistent and unjustified criticism (6%)
- Ridicule and being put down (5%)
- Verbal abuse (5%)
- Being subjected to gossip or false, malicious rumours (5%)
- Humiliation through gestures, sarcasm, criticism, or insults (5%)
- Exclusion or isolation from workplace activities (5%)

**Lowest Prevalence**
- Sabotage of work (3%)
- Threats of punishment for no reason (2%)
- Offensive messages via telephone, written, or electronic means (2%)

Main Source of Workplace Bullying
- 35.1% of those workers indicating that they had been bullied in the past 6 months identified their Co-Workers as the perpetrator, followed by Supervisors (24.5%).

Risk Analyses for Workplace Bullying
- The impact of the Experience of Workplace Bullying on worker stress reactions was found to be statistically significant. The more bullying experienced at work, the greater the likelihood of Psychological Strain, Job Burnout, and Musculoskeletal Symptoms.
- Importantly, the results indicated some non-linearity in these relationships, such that the positive effect of the Experience of Workplace Bullying on the 3 Worker Outcomes was stronger at very low levels of bullying (i.e., moving from never to rarely) but then tapers off at very high levels of bullying (i.e., monthly, weekly, almost daily).
- Overall, these findings have important practical implications, as all levels of exposure to bullying are harmful to employees, including for those employees for whom bullying does not occur often.
### Summary of Key Achievements

2. Creation of an automated report generation system, facilitating timely and responsive turn-around of reports to participating organisations, usually within a week.
3. Creation of a set of Australian benchmarks documenting the prevalence of psychosocial hazards across jurisdictions, sectors, industries, and occupations.
4. Design and launch of a project website (58,535 total visits and 53,146 unique visits to the site since it launched in March, 2013, up until December, 2015) and associated branding.
5. Freely available guidance materials to support organisations through the psychosocial risk management process (e.g., project management plan, pre- and post-survey communication plans, tip sheets for conducting focus groups and writing action plans).
6. Written and video case studies, one each for the public and private sector.