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.

Organisations that participate in the People at Work Project will be contributing to a national research project aimed at understanding how workplace characteristics influence employee health and well-being in different industries and occupations.
The purpose of this case study is to demonstrate the process and potential benefits of undertaking systematic risk management for work-related psychological injury. The People at Work Project follows a 5-step framework and includes a suite of freely available resources to assist organisations in the identification and management of psychosocial risks in their workplace. A key feature of the People at Work Project is the use of a reliable and valid risk assessment tool designed to assess a range of different job demands and job resources that have been shown to have implications for the psychological health of workers.

The Work Area - An Overview

The specific work area subject to this case study is the Corporate Services Division within a complex and geographically dispersed public sector agency. The type of work undertaken by workers is somewhat varied; however, in general, their work is cognitively demanding with short timeframes and is indicative of being part of a centralised function within a client service focussed agency.

Although the Corporate Services Division did not have a comparatively poor workers’ compensation performance compared to other departmental areas, or within public sector agencies, recent increases in unplanned absences and higher than usual turnover raised concerns with senior management that there may be some systemic issues at play. For these reasons, senior management decided to undertake the People at Work Project process.

In short, the aim of the People at Work Project as it was applied to this organisation was to provide a framework that assisted the Corporate Services Division to implement a risk management process for work-related psychological injury resulting from exposure to high demands and low resources.
Step 1 - Preparing the Work Area

Through an initial meeting and presentation, the management team of the Corporate Services Division was engaged by their WHS/HR Adviser in regards to the People at Work Project. This important step gained their ongoing and visible commitment to the process. The management team also agreed to the establishment of a senior steering committee to meet at vital decision-making times as identified by a nominated working group. The working group comprised representatives from health and safety, communications, and finance, and was responsible for developing and implementing the PAW Pre-Survey Communications Plan.

Step 2 - Completing the People at Work Survey

The organisation liaised with members of the People at Work Project Team based at the universities to tailor the survey (in regards to appropriate workgroup names for the breakdown reports) so that the results could be reported back to the Corporate Services Division in a meaningful way. By using the PAW Project Management Plan, appropriate timeframes and launch and closing dates for the survey were agreed upon.

Next, the Department’s Director-General circulated an internal email inviting all 300 workers across the Corporate Services Division and its 7 individual work units to complete the survey. A total of 144 surveys were returned during the four weeks of data collection (48% response rate).

The People at Work Project Team compiled a report for the Corporate Services Division that showed both the overall results and breakdown results for 4 of the 7 work units that had a sufficiently large response rate. This report provided scores for psychological well-being, as well as a risk assessment profile for each of the high job demands and low job resources. For the division overall, the highest job demands were Cognitive Demand and Role Overload and the lowest job resources were Change Consultation and Procedural Justice.

The table below provides an overview of the survey results from workers in the Corporate Services Division (highest scores to lowest scores):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Job Demands</th>
<th>Low Job Resources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Role Overload</td>
<td>2. Procedural Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Group Relationship Conflict</td>
<td>3. Praise and Recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emotional Demand</td>
<td>4. Supervisor Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Group Task Conflict</td>
<td>5. Job Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Co-Worker Support</td>
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Step 3 - Consulting on Outcomes

Following the guidelines outlined in the PAW Post-Survey Communications Plan, a presentation of the survey results was first delivered to the senior management team of the Corporate Services Division. Members of the working group took the lead on this presentation. Then, the results for each of the work units were formally communicated to each manager and their workers.

Using the PAW Focus Group Guide, a series of focus groups were conducted with individual work units across the Corporate Services Division. Qualified staff from a separate area of the business facilitated these sessions to ensure objectivity. Participant attendance at the focus groups was encouraged but remained voluntary. The purpose of the focus groups was to provide an opportunity for workers to contribute to a discussion to provide further context to the psychosocial issues identified.

Results of the survey were discussed and possible causes and solutions were workshopped. When discussing issues related to the specific high job demands (cognitive demand & role overload) and low job resources (change consultation & procedural justice) highlighted in the report, several issues related to the current work design and established communication processes were identified as underlying causes:

1. Increased face-to-face and telephone enquiries from clients, putting counter staff under pressure
2. Low levels of communication and worker consultation, particularly during times of change
3. Need for improved knowledge sharing across teams

This information was used to inform the development of an action plan for future interventions to manage psychosocial risks in the Corporate Services Division and throughout the agency more broadly.
Step 4 - Taking Action

A draft risk control plan was developed using the survey results and the focus group feedback. Following the PAW Action Planning Guide, this plan outlined the risk factors and underlying causal factors identified, and some potential solutions identified by focus group participants. These recommendations were submitted to senior management for their consideration and endorsement. The following interventions were subsequently implemented:

- **workplace standards workshop** – these workshops were designed to create a forum to generate thought and discussion about individual and team performance; to enhance group cohesiveness; and to articulate team expectations. The short-term outcome of the workshops was an agreed statement that clearly outlined the behavioural expectations of the group and established individual accountability.

- **culture teams** – voluntary teams were formed to work on strategies and actions to foster a culture of knowledge sharing across the branch.

- **weekly information sharing** – a weekly stand-up meeting to provide a forum for team members to share relevant activities for the upcoming week.

- **behaviour assessment tool** – applied to assist participants in developing personal insights into their behaviours and their preferred communication styles as well as understanding how others in their team prefer to approach work activities. This process created a shared understanding of individual differences and how different communication styles can contribute to work group performance by promoting effective communication between individuals and in teams.

- **shared team meetings** – invitation to a worker from another team to attend a team meeting for information and knowledge sharing across work groups.

- **streamlined formal communication processes** – improved between teams, by implementing a standardised cover sheet identifying work areas required to provide input into written communications, and specifying timeframes and accountabilities.

Step 5 - Reviewing and Improving

The Corporate Services Division subsequently published the above information on their intranet website to share their experiences and outcomes with other areas in the organisation. Other areas were encouraged to seek further details regarding the People at Work Project and its potential benefits through the relevant Director.

The Corporate Services Division included the People at Work survey in their annual work plan, thereby demonstrating an ongoing commitment to regular risk assessment with the People at Work survey.

The Corporate Services Division also reviewed and integrated their HR and OHS recording systems so that management could improve their ongoing monitoring of psychosocial issues in the workplace.