



An Assessment of Psychosocial Hazards in the Workplace

May, 2016

Final Report to Partner Organisations Summary of Key Findings



PEOPLE AT WORK PROJECT

report

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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Project Management Committee

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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The Australian National University

Professor Prashant Bordia, Chief Investigator

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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.
3. Trends for the Psychosocial Hazards and Worker Outcomes across Jurisdictions, Sectors, Industries, and Occupations.
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%.

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

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%).

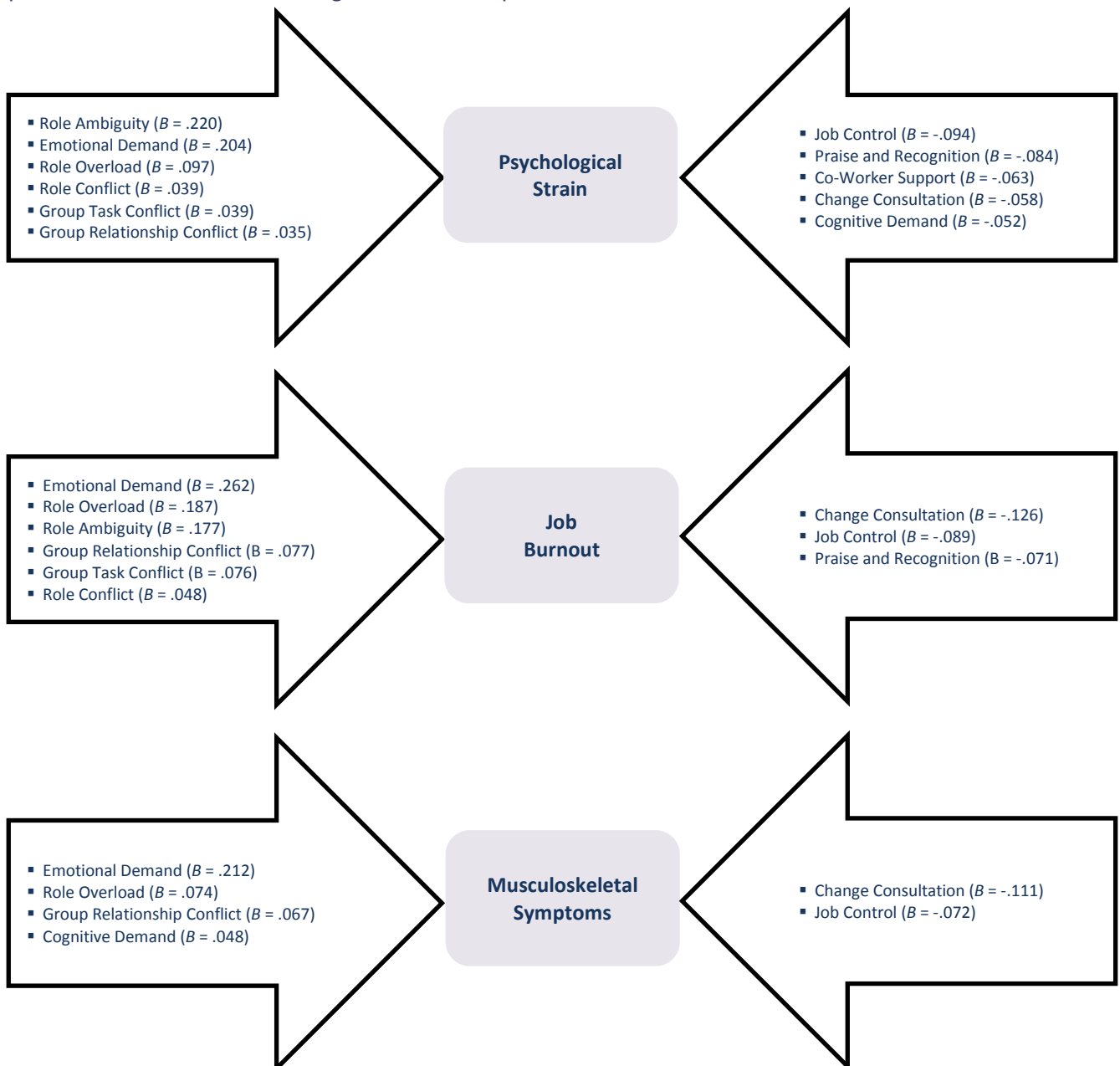
Occupational Trends

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

Occupation	Compares Favourably to Overall Sample	Compares Unfavourably to Overall Sample
Managers	✓ Higher Job Control	✗ Higher Role Conflict
Education Professionals		✗ Higher Role Overload ✗ Higher Emotional Demand ✗ Higher Job Burnout
Health Professionals		✗ Higher Emotional Demand
Electrical & Telecommunications Workers		✗ Lower Praise & Recognition
Carers & Aides	✓ Lower Role Overload ✓ Lower Role Ambiguity ✓ Lower Role Conflict	
Machinery Operators & Drivers	✓ Lower Role Overload ✓ Lower Role Ambiguity ✓ Lower Role Conflict ✓ Lower Emotional Demand ✓ Lower Job Burnout	
Labourers	✓ Lower Emotional Demand	

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.



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

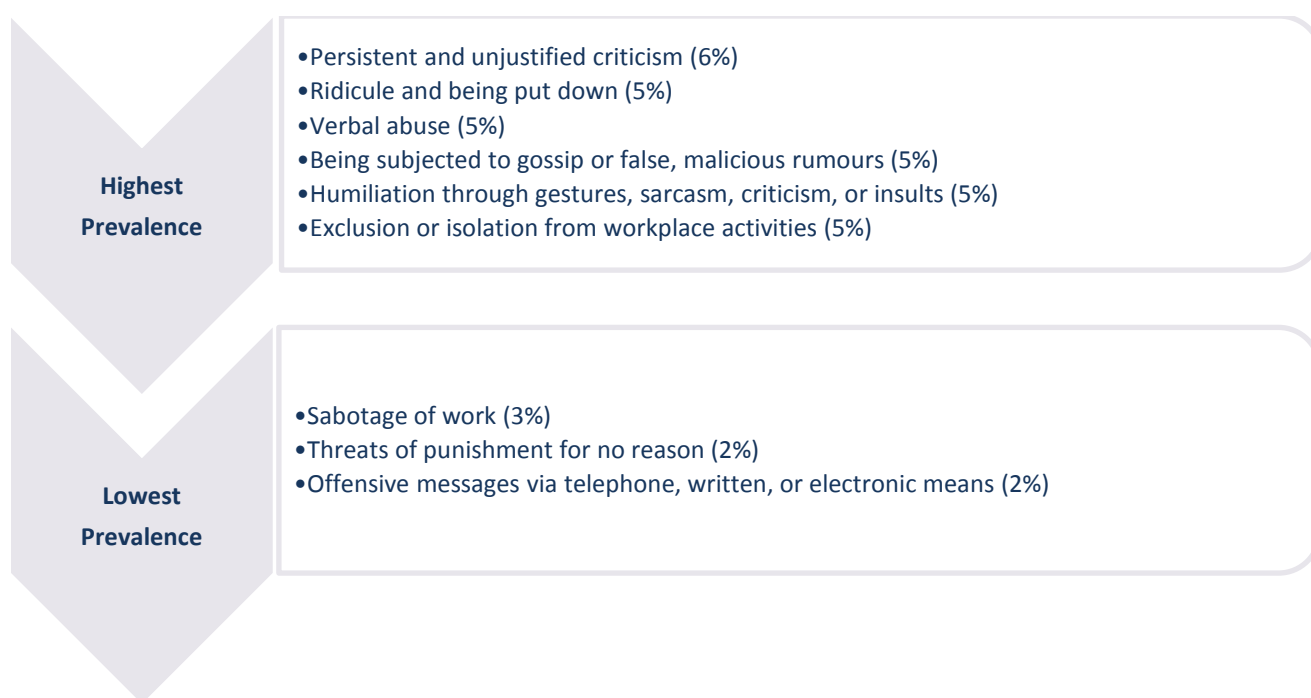
The People at Work Project also examined exposure to workplace bullying and its impact on worker stress reactions. For the purposes of the People at Work Project, workplace bullying was defined as “repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health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

61% of the Overall Sample report never.

32% of the Overall Sample report rarely, once in a while, or some of the time.

7% of the Overall Sample report monthly, weekly, or almost daily.

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:



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

1. Development and validation of a survey tool for assessing psychosocial hazards.
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.