Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards in retail

safe work australia

This case study provides examples of some common psychosocial hazards and risk control measures in a retail workplace.

A person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) must eliminate physical and psychosocial risks in the workplace, or if that is not reasonably practicable, minimise risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

PCBUs must consult with workers and other duty holders in managing work health and safety risks.

Horizon Retailers employs 300 workers across multiple stores

Horizon Retailers' senior management team is hearing concerns from store managers about staff reporting stress, anxiety and burnout. Staff retention is down and sick days have gone up.

The company has good processes for managing physical WHS risks, including worker consultation. The management team agrees that these consultative forums and risk management processes should be used to better manage psychosocial hazards, which have not been given the same attention as physical hazards.

Psychosocial hazards that may arise at work:

- job demands
- low job control
- poor support
- lack of role clarity
- poor organisational change management
- inadequate reward and recognition
- poor organisational justice
- traumatic events or material
- remote or isolated work
- poor physical environment
- violence and aggression
- bullying
- harassment including sexual harassment
- conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions.

What does Horizon Retailers do next?

Horizon Retailers review the Model Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work, which provides practical guidance. Horizon Retailers also decides to use the free psychosocial risk assessment survey People at Work which identifies the hazards and risks that are impacting the psychological health of their workers. The results of the survey show that psychosocial hazards are causing harm to workers.

The Health and Safety Team goes out to meet with managers and workers across the stores to better understand the problems and involve workers in the risk management process.

Workers are encouraged to talk to their health and safety representative (HSR). Contact officers are available for staff who do not feel comfortable raising their concerns directly. This may help young and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers who are often more at risk because of language barriers, racism and may have less work experience and confidence.

Retail: Manage the risk of psychosocial hazards at work

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What psychosocial hazards are found?

High job demands

- Some store managers say they are understaffed, particularly during peak seasons. Company data shows frequent last-minute shift changes and it is hard to keep staff.

- Workers on the shop floor say they have high workloads and are overwhelmed juggling tasks. This can lead to making mistakes or cutting corners on safe work practices from being too rushed.

- Workers sometimes skip breaks and stay past their shift to make sure they finish their tasks. They are worried they will be criticised for not completing their work on time and be seen as lazy or incompetent. This leads to long work hours which causes fatigue.

Aggressive customers and poor workplace culture

- Customers being rude or aggressive is one of the main problems reported by staff. They sometimes make racist, homophobic, sexist, ableist or sexually harassing comments.

- In some cases, situations escalate to violence and help is needed from security personnel. This is distressing for workers and customers. It is clear that these incidents are causing harm.

- Some workers say their store has an unpleasant workplace culture. Workers exclude others, won't help each other when needed and there is favouritism when assigning shifts. These behaviours can escalate to bullying. There is a perception that management ignores these issues, which discourages workers from reporting them.

Poor support and training

- Mistakes in work practices show that some staff haven't been trained well enough for their job. Some staff don't want to ask too many questions in case they are seen as 'difficult' or lose shifts.

- Some stores have a higher number of customer complaints which could mean staff aren't receiving adequate customer service training.

- Some workers and managers do not understand the standards of respectful behaviour expected, including merit-based decision making, and promoting a positive workplace culture.

- Some workers on the shop floor do not feel supported by store managers when customers are rude or abusive or they experience racism or sexual harassment.

- Workers do not know how to, or do not want to, report problems because of 'how it might look' to their colleagues and manager. Managers sometimes don't know what to do when workers come to them for help.

- Workers say it can be difficult to help each other with their work because everyone is busy.

- Workers sometimes get unfair negative feedback or criticism about things outside their control.

Retail: Manage the risk of psychosocial hazards at work

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Controlling psychosocial risks

The Health and Safety Team identify a range of control measures to eliminate or minimise risks so far as is reasonably practicable. Some controls address multiple hazards.

Work systems and processes

- Management focuses on reducing excessive work demands and fatigue. Staff numbers and work tasks are changed where possible to align with workers' preferences, skills and busy periods. A recruitment drive is underway to increase staffing.

- Extra staff are rostered in advance of well-known busy periods to meet work demands and avoid customer frustration if there are long delays or queues.

- An app is introduced as another tool to support communication between managers and staff on availability preferences and leave requests to manage fatigue risks and improve their work-life balance.

- The online information platform is being upgraded to help workers keep track of their tasks and quickly meet customers' needs such as finding stock items.

- Refund processes are changed to clearly communicate policies to customers, provide more flexibility and be managed by trained staff to avoid customer abuse.

- Work processes and sales scripts are reviewed to ensure workers feel empowered to remove themselves from situations which may be headed towards harassment or abuse.

- The view that "the customer is always right" is reassessed and there is a clear and documented process for staff to escalate problems to managers to receive support.

Physical work environment and facilities

- Physical barriers, visible security cameras and alarm systems are checked, particularly in stores which are known for abuse from customers. Some stores need screens, locked counters or security personnel.

- Clear signage is displayed about behavioural standards (e.g. no tolerance for sexual harassment, abuse or violence) and customer processes (e.g. bag checks, customer complaints and managing queues).

- Refund areas are away from busy areas where possible.

- Some store layouts are changed for better aisle space, ventilation, temperature and lighting to avoid customer complaints. Comfortable break areas encourage workers to socialise and build relationships.

Training, safe work practices and behaviours

- Induction training is changed to make sure workers understand their tasks and have time to learn from experienced workers through 'buddy' shifts. Training material is updated to include videos.

- Young, recently promoted and inexperienced workers, along with CALD and people with different learning needs, are given extra training so they feel more prepared and confident in their work.

- Where possible, people are matched with roles which use their skills and experience.

- Workers are given updated training in respectful behaviour, customer service, conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques to manage difficult customers and promote a respectful workplace.

- Store managers attend training on psychosocial risk management; creating an inclusive and supportive workplace culture and setting realistic work expectations.

- Horizon Retailers reviews Safe Work Australia's guidance and introduces and implements policies to address workplace sexual harassment, bullying and violence.

- Leaders at all levels of the company commit to modelling and reinforcing a respectful and positive workplace environment which focuses on teamwork. Weekly team meetings are held to discuss any challenges, issues or worker support needs and to celebrate successes.

Checking the controls are working as intended

Horizon Retailers commit to making sure the control measures are working effectively by carrying out reviews at each store every year. The People at Work survey will be carried out every two years to capture any early indicators of poor psychological health and safety in the workplace.

Reviews will also take place if there are changes in how work is done which may change WHS risks, and if:

- if an HSR requests a review or issues are raised by workers, or

- in response to workplace incident trends or serious incidents.

Note: The company in this case study, Horizon Retailers, was created as a broad example of a small retail business. Any resemblance to an actual business is purely coincidental.