Insight aims to provide useful information, links and tips in the areas of Risk Management, Work Health and Safety, Business Continuity Management, and other areas relating to management systems and corporate governance.

Considering the psychosocial impact of natural disasters

In the face of increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters, employers play a critical role in safeguarding not only the physical wellbeing of their workforce but also their psychosocial safety. Whilst it goes without saying that organisations must have developed & implemented Emergency and Business Continuity Plans to ensure the continuity of business operations post a disruption event, preparation must go beyond this and should extend to supporting employees holistically before disaster strikes.

With current technologies available, for many large-scale disaster events, there is generally a build-up period with pre-emptive warnings from the authorities, as evident during fires, cyclones and pandemic events in recent years. At the same time, on the media front, there is all too often a hype that serves to create anxiety amongst the general public. This is amplified by social media's sharing of information across the various platforms, frequently with an element of misinformation.

It is vital that employers begin by ensuring clear communication about their internal emergency procedures. This includes outlining evacuation plans, business closures, remote work arrangements, and how employees will receive updates. Making this information easily accessible and regularly reviewed fosters a sense of control and preparedness among staff.

In addition to practical logistics, attention must be paid to the emotional and psychological impact of an approaching disaster. Anxiety, fear, and uncertainty are common responses that can affect mental health and productivity, with knock-on effects to customer service. Employers can support psychosocial safety by encouraging open dialogue, offering Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) (including proactively communicating with their EAPs in the lead up to an event), and training leaders to recognise signs of distress. Creating a psychologically safe environment, where employees feel heard and supported, can significantly reduce the mental burden in the lead-up to a crisis.

Flexibility is also key. Allowing time off for employees to prepare their homes and care for loved ones, or offering remote work when possible, demonstrates empathy & fosters trust. For employees in vulnerable areas, individual circumstances should be considered to accommodate their unique needs.

Finally, it is important to lead by example. Leaders who model calm, preparedness, and compassion help set the tone for the entire organisation.

By prioritising both the physical and psychosocial wellbeing of employees, businesses not only meet their duty of care but also build resilience within their teams, ensuring they are better prepared to face the challenges of natural disasters together.

The effective management of physical and psychosocial safety during natural disasters is linked to the organisation's management systems, and specifically their Safety Management System. Are processes clearly and succinctly developed? And are they readily available for their target audience? In many cases, unfortunately, experience has shown that documented procedures are lengthy and verbose, offering little guidance to employees when they are needed. Is an 80 page Emergency Plan of any real use either in the lead up or during an emergency event? Whilst it may contain useful information, if it is not accessible or comprehensible, it is not referred to, and therefore when most needed it becomes useless.

A starting point for all organisations, is to review their emergency documentation with the lens of understanding and efficacy, and not simply one of compliance.

Please [contact QRMC](#) for more information or assistance.

The challenges of managing safety in multi-cultural Australia

As Australia continues to grow its multi-cultural workforce, our workplaces are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse. The challenges for managing onsite safety in these workplaces grows exponentially when language and cultural barriers impact on the ability to effectively communicate with the workforce.

This subset of the workforce – broadly classified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers – has been recognised as being at a higher risk or more vulnerable, not only due to the challenges in communicating but also from the fact that there is a disproportionately high percentage of these workers in higher risk industries such as manufacturing, construction and warehousing.

In addition, there are a range of government schemes, incentives and programs that promote the use of 'imported' workers in large groups on short-term arrangements, to support specific higher risk industries (such as red meat processing).

While considered to be good business (or a necessary requirement) within many organisations, this poses a considerable number of concerns from a WHS perspective, most notably how to effectively communicate with a 'culturally and linguistically diverse' workforce. These risks include communication-related issues such as basic miscommunication, instructions and signage not being able to be understood correctly, and a failure to report hazards or unsafe practices.

Most larger employers with these types of workforces have recognised the risk, by tying together a series of actions to provide information in different languages, using visual language instead of words, using informal in-house translators, and relying on demonstration-based training. But there is also a need to be wary, and culturally-attuned to *your specific* workforce. For example, within a typical 'Australian' workplace culture, the workers may acknowledge what the Supervisor is saying in the toolbox talk by nodding their heads, however there are a number of nationalities / cultural groups who use the 'head nod', but culturally it is not used to represent comprehension.

The other main concern is the worker's understanding and application of the employer's requirements, and this is greatly influenced by culture, including culture toward work. Cultural differences can influence how workers perceive and prioritise workplace safety. For example, workers from different cultural backgrounds are likely to have varying attitudes towards authority, safety risks, and working as part of a team.

While not wishing to over-generalise, vulnerable CALD or migrant workers often display a low likelihood of questioning onsite safety practices, with the risk of unsafe work practices proceeding unchallenged for fear of losing their job.

The management of safety within this subset of workforce is challenging, and while there are minimal resources currently available through WHSQ, a quick Google search indicates that other jurisdictions have resources that may be useful, including:

- Worksafe NSW has a dedicated webpage, stepping through the risk factors (for both CALD and migrant workers) and providing some resources,
- WorksafeVic has a dedicated webpage and resources supporting their Compliance code: Communicating occupational health and safety across languages,
- WorksafeACT has a dedicated webpage for Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers, and
- Safework Aus are working on Guidance for employers on communicating with migrant and multicultural workers.

Please **contact QRMC** for more information or assistance.