QRMC RISK, SAFETY AND BUSINESS ADVISORY CONSULTANCY

insight

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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.

Stopping Work for Safety – Does It Extend to Psychosocial Risk?

Most organisations promote a clear and consistent message within their WHS Policy commitments, that workers have the right to stop work if they believe it is unsafe. This principle is well understood and readily applied when dealing with physical hazards, such as lifting excessive loads, working in extreme weather, or undertaking tasks without adequate training or competence.

But does this same principle extend to psychosocial hazards?

In practice, there are situations where the answer appears obvious. For example, when a worker is exposed to abusive, threatening, or violent behaviour from a customer or member of the public, stopping work would be widely supported and understood. These scenarios pass a common sense test and are generally accepted as legitimate grounds for ceasing work.

The challenge arises in the more subtle and less visible nature of psychosocial hazards. Unlike physical risks, these hazards are often personal, influenced by individual circumstances, and tend to develop cumulatively over time. A task that feels manageable to one worker may be overwhelming to another, particularly if they are experiencing pressures both within and outside the workplace.

This raises an important question – does your organisational culture genuinely support a worker saying, "Boss, I am not feeling up to *that* task today, I am not in the right headspace - can I be reassigned?"

Equally important is how such a request is perceived. In the absence of a visible hazard, there is a concern that the worker may be judged as lacking resilience, being unproductive, or avoiding work. These perceptions, whether real or implied, can discourage (other) workers from speaking up.

Many workers are understandably reluctant to stop work if they believe they will be required to justify their decision in detail, particularly to someone unfamiliar with their situation. For example, a field worker needing to explain their circumstances through a remote reporting channel may choose to continue working rather than raise a concern early.



The response from frontline supervisors is critical. Their immediate reaction sets the tone for what is acceptable within the organisation. A supportive and respectful response reinforces a culture where safety, including psychological safety, is prioritised. Conversely, a dismissive or sceptical response can quickly undermine broader leadership messaging and discourage future reporting.

Organisations should recognise that every interaction between managers, supervisors, and workers contributes to shaping culture. When a worker adjusts or stops work due to psychosocial factors, it presents an opportunity to reinforce that safety is the priority, rather than production or schedule.

Creating an environment where workers feel safe to speak up requires deliberate effort. This includes normalising conversations about psychosocial risk, removing unnecessary barriers to reporting, and ensuring that workers are not required to overly justify their decisions in moments of vulnerability.

Clear rules, procedures, and training are essential to support the stopping of work due to psychosocial factors. Workers must understand when and how to stop or adjust work, and supervisors must be equipped to respond consistently.

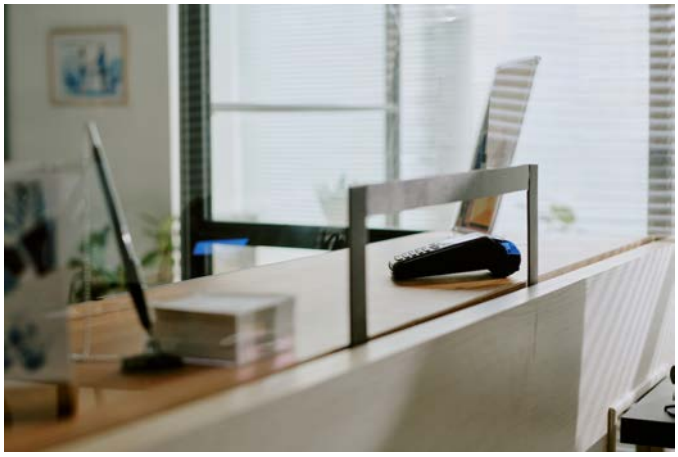
Ultimately, the principle of stopping work for safety must apply consistently across both physical and psychosocial hazards. Anything less risks sending a conflicting message about what safety truly means in practice.

Please contact QRMC for more information.

Beyond the Signs on the Wall: Managing Occupational Violence as a Real Workplace Risk

Occupational violence is not a theoretical concern; it is a foreseeable and increasingly recognised workplace hazard that can have serious physical and psychological consequences. For employers, the obligation is clear: this risk must be actively managed in the same structured way as any other safety risk, rather than addressed through policies or awareness material alone.

Too often, organisational responses stop at providing information, training modules, or signage aimed at encouraging respectful behaviour. While these are important foundations, they rarely address the underlying conditions that allow occupational violence to occur. A "tick-the-box" approach to training does not meet the standard of what is reasonably practicable, particularly where workers are exposed to elevated risk through public interaction, enforcement roles, or high-stress service environments.



Effective risk management begins with recognising occupational violence as a system-level issue. Employers should assess when, where, and how workers are exposed to aggression, threats, or assault. This means looking beyond individual behaviour and examining workload pressures, service delivery models, environmental design, and escalation pathways. It also requires involving workers in identifying real-world triggers and vulnerabilities.

Workplace design plays a critical role in prevention. Simple but deliberate design choices, such as controlled access points, clear sightlines, secure interview rooms, duress alarms, and physical barriers where appropriate, can significantly reduce the likelihood and severity of violent incidents. Designing spaces that support safe interactions is a proactive control measure, not a reactive afterthought.

Technology also provides practical and increasingly accessible solutions. The use of CCTV, for example, not only supports incident response and investigation but can act as a deterrent when appropriately implemented and communicated. Similarly, body-worn cameras in certain high-risk roles can contribute to both transparency and have been proven to discourage or de-escalate potential situations. These controls should be considered within a broader risk management framework rather than adopted in isolation.

Importantly, organisations should also be looking to strengthen capability through more immersive and practical training methods. Traditional classroom-based or online training often fails to simulate the pressure and unpredictability of real interactions. Virtual reality (VR) training offers a more effective alternative, allowing workers to practice responding to escalating situations in a controlled but realistic environment. This builds confidence, improves decision-making under stress, and supports consistent application of de-escalation techniques.

Moving beyond information provision also means ensuring that systems exist to support workers before, during, and after an incident. This includes clear reporting processes, timely response protocols, post-incident support, and a commitment to learning from events. Without these elements, even well-designed controls can fall short.

Ultimately, managing occupational violence requires a shift in mindset, from awareness to action. Employers must be able to demonstrate that they have systematically identified the risk, implemented appropriate controls, and continuously reviewed their effectiveness. This is not only a legal expectation under work health and safety legislation, but a fundamental aspect of providing a safe system of work.

Organisations that take this broader, more practical approach will not only reduce harm, but also build a safer, more resilient workplace where workers feel protected and supported in carrying out their roles.

Please contact QRMC for more information.

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