Managing psychosocial hazards

MinEx

Health and Safety in NZ extractives

Contents

1 Introduction

The best outcomes are achieved when a business and its workers work together on health and safety.

When psychosocial hazards and risks at work are not effectively managed, this may increase the risk of work-related psychological and physical injuries, incidents and errors.

Ensuring a systematic process to manage psychosocial hazards and risks will help the person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) and statutory officers meet their responsibilities under the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) 2015, and HSWA (Mining Operations and Quarrying Operations) Regulations 2022. It will also decrease organisational disruptions and costs resulting from work-related harm and may improve health and safety and broader organisational performance and productivity.

Statutory officers, including owners or PCBUs, have an obligation under the HSWA to identify hazards impacting on worker health, select and implement controls for risks to worker health and develop a Worker Health Plan for worker health.

The intent of this booklet is to provide you with help in ways to manage psychosocial hazards and engage and communicate with your workers to improve safety and health outcomes at your workplace.

2 What are psychosocial hazards?

Psychosocial hazards at work are aspects of work and situations that may cause stress which in turn can lead to psychological or physical harm. They arise under four headings:

Bullying – Repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers such as victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening a person.

Harassment – When someone directs attention to another person including watching, loitering, following, accosting, interfering with another person's property or acting in ways that causes the person to fear for their safety (includes making people feel uncomfortable).

Violence – Acts of violence towards a person can be verbal (verbal abuse, threats, shouting, swearing) or physical (stalking, throwing objects, hitting, damage to property).

Stress – Indicators of excessive stress include increases in sick leave, absenteeism, tiredness, irritability and errors.

These hazards stem from:
- the way the tasks or job are designed, organised, managed and supervised;
- tasks or jobs where there are inherent psychosocial hazards and risks;
- the equipment, working environment or requirements to undertake duties in physically hazardous environments, and
- social factors at work, workplace relationships.

Some hazards by themselves have the potential to cause serious harm, such as experiencing occupational violence. In most circumstances, hazards will not occur alone but together with a range of psychosocial and physical hazards.

Psychosocial hazards can lead to impaired performance (increased stress levels, decreased emotional well-being), increased absenteeism, low morale and more mistakes and incidents. This will inevitably result in loss of company reputation, resignations and difficulty recruiting, poor customer service/product quality, and significant cost to the business.

3 Bullying

A 2016 study claims New Zealand has the second highest rate of workplace bullying in the world.

Behaviour must be unreasonable and repeated to constitute bullying. Common examples of bullying behaviour are:

- supervisor victimising or belittling a worker, including intimidation or verbal abuse;
- a worker or group of workers picking on a fellow worker, including belittling comments, ridiculing, physical attacks;
- subjecting younger workers to humiliation;
- unfair threats of dismissal;
- unwanted sexual advances;
- theft or destruction of property;
- intrusion on privacy, such as being spied on or stalked.

Disciplinary procedures, giving constructive feedback, telling employees how to do their work and performance management do not constitute bullying unless they are unreasonable.

4 Harassment

Harassment is defined as behaviour that is directed at another person such as watching, loitering, following, accosting, interfering with another person's property or acting in ways that causes a person to fear for their safety at least twice in a 12-month period. Harassment can cause humiliation, offence or intimidation. Usually, harassment behaviours are repeated, but one instance of harassment can cause reasonable stress and force an individual to resign from their job to avoid future episodes.

The following are examples of harassment:
- unwanted sexual advances;
- jokes related to sex, race, culture etc;
- printed material that is disrespectful to workers as a result of their ethnicity, sex, cultural diversity;
- insults based on ethnicity, gender, cultural diversity.

Harassment exists if a worker or member of the public feels uncomfortable as a result of any of the above.

5 Violence

Workplace violence has been identified as a leading form of occupational injury and fatality. Violence can include:

- physical acts against another person such as stalking, throwing objects, hitting, pushing, arguments;
- verbal abuse, threats, shouting, rumours or swearing;
- damage to property, vandalism, pranks or sabotage;
- physical assaults, psychological trauma, anger-related incidents, rape, arson, and murder.

The identification of violence at work, including gender-based violence, should be integral to health and safety prevention programmes and risk assessments. If acts of violence are repeated, they will constitute bullying.

6 Managing psychosocial hazards

When managing psychosocial hazards, the PCBU should take into account tasks and activities that may increase risks to particular groups, for example, workers who are younger, in training, older, or who are new to the organisation. You also need to consider those with diverse language, literacy, numeracy, or cultural backgrounds, or who have experienced a work-related injury, illness or previous exposure to a traumatic event.

The site's risk management process should:
- identify reasonably foreseeable risks for these workers;
- ensure risk controls take these workers' needs into account, and ensure a fair and transparent process;
- ensure workplace behavioural standards are known and upheld, including reminding all workers of their legal duty not to cause harm through their behaviours to others or themselves while at work.

By talking to your workers, including those from at-risk groups, you can decide if they may need additional support to be healthy and safe at work.

Managing psychosocial hazards and risks may require decisions that may be perceived as causing stress and therefore a health and safety risk. However, reasonable management action, when carried out lawfully and in a reasonable way, may be uncomfortable or distressing to some but is a legitimate way for managers and supervisors to:
- lead, direct and control how work is done;
- give feedback and manage performance, including around inappropriate or harmful workplace behaviours;
- deal with differences of opinions and disagreements, and/or
- recruit, assign, transfer, implement disciplinary action or terminate employment.

7 Steps to dealing with issues

Step 1 – Build a constructive, healthy employment relationship
Employees, employers and unions are obliged to deal with each other at all times in good faith (act honestly, openly, and without hidden motives, work constructively and positively together). For an employer to take any action against an employee they must have a genuine or valid reason to act. When undertaking any action against an employee, the employer must follow a fair process.

Step 2 – Stop issues before they start
If an employer or employee thinks there is a problem, it should be raised as soon as possible as this can help stop them becoming bigger and harder to resolve. Take time to communicate clearly which includes listening.

Ignoring a problem and hoping it will go away can lead to bigger problems later. Don't jump to conclusions when an issue is first raised. Any decisions should be made fairly and consistently. Gather information and think before acting.

Make sure workplace policies, practices and/or work rules are well communicated and easy to understand, and put in place effective systems and processes for setting performance expectations and managing performance issues.

Step 3 – Develop procedures for dealing with issues
Put in place processes to address and investigate complaints of bullying, discrimination, or harassment raised by employees. Employees and employers should keep themselves well informed about their employment rights and responsibilities.

Promote a culture where everyone shares the responsibility for preventing and clearing up confusion or mistakes. For example, if an employee believes they are being overpaid, the employee should raise the potential error.

If you are not confident dealing with these issues it may help to engage an expert. An employee assistance programme (EAP) is a free and confidential counselling service offered by some employers to their employees to support their well-being in the workplace and in their personal lives.

Useful Resources

MinEx – Health and Safety in NZ Extractives – www.minex.org.nz

NSW Code of Practice – Managing psychosocial hazards at work
https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/983353/
Code-of-Practice_Managing-psychosocial-hazards.pdf

WorkSafe Guidelines – https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/research/
psychosocial-hazards-in-work-environments-and-effective-approaches-for-
managing-them/

Safe Quarry – Mental health and wellbeing https://www.safequarry.com/
home/about-the-hub/mpa-supporting-mental-health.aspx

MinEx

Health and Safety in NZ extractives

www.minex.org.nz