

On the drawing board



Well-designed work not only promotes and improves productivity; it also supports job satisfaction and workers' physical and mental health and safety.



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Designing or redesigning work processes in such a way as to eliminate or manage potential sources of physical and psychological harm (such as high work demand, poor support and low level of control or autonomy) will assist businesses to manage physical and psychological hazards so far as is reasonably practicable.

With this in mind, Safe Work Australia has recently released a handbook outlining 10 principles of good work design.

The publication stems from a recognition that “well designed, healthy and safe work will allow workers to have more productive lives”.

The 10 principles of good design:

- Provide the highest level of protection, so far as is reasonably practicable
- Enhance health and wellbeing
- Enhance business success and productivity
- Address physical, biomechanical, cognitive and psychosocial characteristics of work, together with the needs and capabilities of the people involved
- Consider the business needs, context and work environment
- Apply along the supply chain and across the operational lifecycle
- Engage decision makers and leaders
- Learn from experts, evidence, and experience

- Actively involve the people who do the work, including those in the supply chain and networks
- Identify hazards, assess and controls risks, and seek continuous improvement.

Safe design is also covered in the *Model Work Health and Safety Act*, which imposes a general duty on a ‘person conducting a business or undertaking’ (PCBU) to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of workers and others. It is important to remember that the term ‘health’ in the Act covers not only physical health but also mental health. The Act also imposes a specific duty on designers of plant, substances and structures used at work.

However, “well designed, healthy and safe work” extends beyond this specific duty imposed by the Act to designing work and work processes.

Businesses are required to implement a proactive systematic risk management process in line with the model Work Health and Safety Regulations, which:

- identifies hazards
- assesses the risks
- eliminates or controls the risks so far as reasonably practicable and monitors and reviews the controls. ▶

DECISION MAKERS
AND LEADERS
SHOULD BE
INVOLVED (AND
ALSO BE SEEN
TO BE INVOLVED)
IN SAFE
WORK DESIGN.

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Design conversations

Converse across the life of the business to enable continuous improvement.



This risk management process should be used to identify and manage all hazards, whether they are psychological or physical.

It is often easiest and most effective to eliminate hazards before they are introduced into a workplace. Consequently, any discussions about designing out hazards should be had at the beginning of the design phase of any proposed work.

Businesses should ensure that, at this early stage, work processes are designed in a way that supports not only productivity but also the health, safety and wellbeing of the workers within the business. In doing so, businesses should consider, for example, the roles and responsibilities of workers, the skills of workers, job demands, worker flexibility, and workers' control over their work.

Conversations about designing out hazards cannot be one off. Businesses should be proactive with their risk management and respond to changes within the workplace. Being proactive will require businesses to have a thorough understanding of the workplace and the needs of their workers. It will also require them to have a planned approach to managing all reasonably foreseeable hazards and their associated risks as they arise.

These conversations also need to be held with a range of stakeholders. The Act imposes a duty on decision makers within a business to take an active role in ascertaining that the business is complying with its duties under the Act—including the duty to ensure the health and safety of workers and others, so far as is reasonably practicable. Consequently, decision makers and leaders should be involved (and also be seen to be involved) in safe work design.

The Act also imposes a duty on a business to consult with affected workers, particularly when:

- identifying hazards and assessing risks arising from the work carried out or to be carried out
- making decisions about ways to eliminate or minimise those risks
- making decisions about the adequacy of facilities for the welfare of workers
- proposing changes that may affect the health or safety of workers.

A business should also actively involve all relevant workers in any consultation about work design, keeping in mind the definition of 'worker' extends beyond 'employee' under the Act. Effective consultation involves sharing information, providing workers with reasonable opportunities to express their views and contribute to health and safety decisions, taking the workers' views into account before making decisions and advising workers on the outcome of the consultation in a timely manner. The Act is flexible as to how this consultation occurs and envisages that it is limited by what is reasonably practicable in the circumstances.

Conversations about safe design should cover a number of issues. When dealing with psychological hazards, for example, businesses may need to consider factors including:

Work demands

- Are workers able to cope with the demands of the work?
- Are the work demands reasonable and achievable?
- Are there systems in place that allow workers to raise concerns about the demands of the work?

Work control

- Does the work allow the workers to use their skills? ▶

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- Do workers have a say about the work they undertake?
- Does the work allow the workers to further develop their skills?
- Do the workers have any input into matters such as when they work?
- Do the workers have flexibility as to their work arrangements?

Worker support

- Are the workers provided with appropriate training, information and resources?
- Do workers have an appropriate level of support from supervisors?

Work clarity

- Is the scope of the work clear?
- Are the responsibilities of the role clear?
- Do the workers understand the key objectives and performance indicators?

Change management

- Are there suitable planning, management and communication

ACTIVELY INVOLVE ALL RELEVANT WORKERS [NOT JUST EMPLOYEES] IN ANY CONSULTATION ABOUT WORK DESIGN.

processes in place to deal with job, structural or organisational change?

The duty to ensure health and safety requires businesses, decision makers and workers to adopt a proactive approach to safety so far as is reasonably practicable. Consequently, the list above provides an indication of the types of things to be discussed. It should only be considered as a springboard to further explore health and safety issues affecting work design as they relate to the circumstances of the business, and not as a checklist. 



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