INSECURE WORK

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WHAT IS INSECURE WORK

Insecure work refers to employment arrangements characterised by a lack of permanency, stability, predictability or workplace protections. It includes arrangements such as casual work, fixed-term contracts, gig and platform-based jobs, labour hire roles and freelance arrangements (see **examples** for a complete list). These types of work often do not provide regular hours, long-term job security or access to essential benefits like paid leave, sick leave, redundancy pay or superannuation contributions.

Workers in insecure jobs may face unpredictable income, minimal protections against unfair dismissal and limited opportunities for career progression or skill development. Insecure work can result from systemic issues such as cost-cutting measures, deregulated labour markets and the increasing casualisation of the workforce.

Insecure work is a psychosocial hazard because it creates conditions that undermine workers' mental health, safety and wellbeing. The unpredictability of hours and income contributes to chronic stress, as workers struggle to meet financial obligations or plan for the future. A lack of control over work conditions or job security can lead to feelings of helplessness, frustration and low morale. Insecure work also exacerbates power imbalances in the workplace.

Workers in precarious roles often feel unable to advocate for themselves or raise concerns about unfair treatment, fearing the loss of future work opportunities. This imbalance increases vulnerability to other workplace hazards such as bullying and harassment, as workers may feel they have no choice but to tolerate inappropriate behaviour. It can also lead to exploitation, with workers' lack of options purposefully taken advantage of to impose unfair pay, excessive workloads or unsafe conditions.

Insecure work often fosters isolation, as workers may lack the consistency or tenure needed to build strong workplace relationships or access organisational support. The absence of stability and benefits, such as sick leave or redundancy pay, exacerbates these pressures, making it difficult for workers to balance personal responsibilities or recover from illness or injury. These factors combine to create a toxic environment where stress, anxiety and burnout are common. The cumulative effects of insecure work make it a key contributor to poor mental health outcomes.

EXAMPLES OF INSECURE WORK

Insecure work can manifest in various forms, each contributing uniquely to workers' vulnerability and workplace risks. Many roles that should be classified as permanent, offering consistent hours and entitlements like paid leave, are wrongfully maintained under insecure arrangements such as casual work, fixed-term contracts or independent contracting (sham contracting). This practice leaves workers without the stability and protections they deserve.

Some examples of insecure work include:

Casual work: Jobs with no guaranteed hours or ongoing employment, such as hospitality staff scheduled only during peak times or retail workers employed on a day-to-day basis.

Fixed-term contracts: Roles with a defined end date, like project-based employment for IT professionals or maternity leave replacements in schools, offering no assurance of renewal or continuity.

Gig work: Task-based jobs often done independently of formal organisations, such as freelance photographers or musicians hired for one-off projects.

Platform-based work: Jobs facilitated through apps like Uber, Deliveroo, or Airtasker, where workers are paid per task without minimum wage guarantees, job security or access to paid leave.

Labour hire arrangements: Workers employed by an agency but placed within another organisation, such as construction labourers or warehouse staff, often receiving fewer benefits than directly employed colleagues.

Freelance work: Project-based roles with no long-term commitments or protections, such as graphic designers or writers hired for one-off assignments.

Seasonal work: Employment tied to specific periods, such as agricultural labourers hired during harvest season or retail staff employed temporarily during the holiday rush.

On-call work: Roles requiring workers to be available for shifts at short notice, often with limited control over their schedules, like emergency maintenance technicians or casual nursing staff.

Indicators of insecure work may include:

- Employees expressing discomfort or suspicion about being constantly watched.
- Increased reports of stress, anxiety or reduced morale.
- Visible surveillance equipment installed in private or unexpected areas, such as break rooms.
- Frequent complaints about privacy invasion or excessive monitoring practices.
- A decline in employee engagement or trust in management.
- Workers avoiding certain areas or behaviours out of fear of being monitored.
- Policies or reports that suggest monitoring extends to personal devices or activities.

- Unexplained disciplinary actions tied to information not openly disclosed to employees.

IMPACTS OF INSECURE WORK

ON WORKERS

Financial stress: Unpredictable income and lack of entitlements contribute to chronic financial strain, increasing anxiety and mental health risks.

Stress and anxiety: Job insecurity creates ongoing uncertainty, leading to heightened stress and an increased risk of depression or burnout.

Exacerbated power imbalances: Fear of losing future work discourages workers from reporting unfair treatment, exposing them to psychosocial hazards like bullying and harassment.

Exploitation: Workers may endure unsafe conditions, unfair pay or excessive workloads, amplifying stress and mental fatigue.

Lack of progression: Limited training or upskilling opportunities leave workers trapped in precarious roles, reducing self-esteem and motivation.

Work-life disruption: Irregular hours and unpredictable shifts interfere with personal responsibilities, affecting relationships and overall mental wellbeing.

Isolation: Insecure roles often hinder workplace connections, increasing feelings of alienation and reducing access to support networks.

ON ORGANISATIONS

Reduced productivity: Stress, anxiety, and disengagement among insecure workers lower efficiency and increase errors.

Higher turnover: The lack of stability leads to frequent resignations, increasing recruitment and training costs.

Increased absenteeism: Mental and physical health issues linked to insecure work result in more sick leave and decreased reliability.

Safety risks: Stress and fatigue among insecure workers increase the likelihood of workplace incidents and injuries.

Decline in morale: A workforce characterised by insecurity can create a negative workplace culture, reducing overall team cohesion.

Reputational damage: Poor treatment of workers and high turnover can harm an organisation's public image, affecting customer trust and stakeholder confidence.

Limited innovation: Disengaged and overburdened workers are less likely to contribute ideas or take initiative.

Legal and compliance risks: Failure to address insecure work practices can lead to disputes, legal action, and fines for breaches of workplace laws.

RISK ASSESSMENT - RISK MANAGEMENT - CONTROL MEASURES

Risk Assessment involves identifying potential hazards, assessing their level of risk (such as likelihood and impact of injuries), and developing *Risk Management* plans to mitigate or control them. It is *a proactive process* that aims to *prevent* harm.

Control Measures are specific actions or procedures put in place to manage or mitigate identified risks. They are implemented after hazards have been identified and risks assessed as part of the risk management process. Control measures are designed to reduce the likelihood of harm or the severity of its impact by eliminating risks wherever possible. In cases where risks cannot be entirely eliminated (e.g. the risk of fire for firefighters), the focus is on reducing the risks to the lowest practicable level to minimise the likelihood and severity of harm.

The *Hierarchy of Control* should be referred to as best practice for the most effective ways to control risks.

Substantial research evidence also shows that Risk Assessments, Risk Management plans and Control Measures are *significantly more effective* when developed *in consultation* with workers. Refer to Section 47 (Duty to Consult Workers) and Section 48 (Nature of Consultation) of the WHS Act, or Section 35 of the OHS Act in Victoria, for specific legal obligations regarding worker consultation.

No one should experience harm or injury in the workplace, including physical and psychological. **Employers have a duty** to ensure health and safety by identifying and eliminating psychosocial risks, or minimising them as far as is reasonably practicable (for a definition of "reasonably practicable", *see Section 18 on Page 25* of the WHS Act (or *Part 3, Division 1, Clause (2) on Page 23* of the OHS Act if you are located in Victoria).

The **duration**, **frequency** and **severity** of workers' exposure to psychosocial hazards influences the level of risk. Hazards that interact or combine (e.g. job demands and fatigue) can further amplify the overall risk.

Additional information on the risk management process is available in the Code of Practice: How to manage work health and safety risks as well as Section 2 of the Model Code of Practice for managing Psychosocial Risks.

Examples of Risk Management Strategies and Control Measures for Insecure Work

*The following are examples of ways this hazard can be prevented or controlled, however **please remember to use the Hierarchy of Control** as best practice when implementing such examples at your workplace.*

Hierarchy of Control Guides for each recognised psychosocial hazard are** **available here.

- **Consult with workers and representatives:** Involve employees in discussions about job security and workplace changes to build trust and ensure fairness.
- **Establish clear and transparent policies on employment terms:** Communicate expectations, contract conditions and opportunities for transition to secure work.
- **Offer permanent positions where possible**: Review roles to ensure they are classified appropriately and convert casual or fixed-term positions to permanent roles when feasible.
- **Provide predictable rosters and hours:** Establish stable work schedules to reduce uncertainty and support financial planning for workers.
- **Ensure fair wages:** Pay workers fairly and in line with legal entitlements to reduce financial stress and exploitation risks.
- **Provide access to entitlements:** Offer benefits like paid leave, superannuation and redundancy pay to all workers, including casual and contract staff.
- **Avoid misclassifications**: Ensure contractors are not misclassified to deny them their rights and entitlements.
- **Invest in training and development:** Create pathways for skill-building and career progression to improve job security and worker satisfaction.
- **Monitor workload and expectations:** Prevent excessive workloads that can arise from insecure staffing practices by ensuring adequate resourcing.
- **Encourage transparency and reporting:** Create a no-blame culture for reporting concerns related to job security, bullying or exploitation.
- **Use workforce planning:** Anticipate future staffing needs to minimise reliance on insecure arrangements and create a stable workforce.

DO	DO NOT
Offer employment arrangements that prioritise stability and security.	Misclassify roles to deny workers access to entitlements.
Provide clear and honest communication about job expectations.	Rely excessively on casual or contract labour for permanent needs.
Regularly assess the impact of job insecurity on workers' mental health.	Exploit workers' fear of losing future opportunities. Ignore worker concerns about job security or unfair treatment.

Actively listen to worker concerns about job stability.

Promote a culture of fairness and respect across all employment types.

Build pathways to career progression for insecure roles.

Recognise and address power imbalances in the workplace.

Take proactive steps to prevent bullying or exploitation of insecure workers.

Overburden insecure workers with excessive workloads.

Use insecure arrangements as a cost-saving measure at workers' expense.

Create unpredictable schedules that disrupt work-life balance.

Allow bullying or harassment of insecure workers to go unaddressed.

Fail to provide clear information about employment terms and conditions.

Assume insecure workers can advocate for themselves without support.

MANAGING RISKS – Points to Remember…

Consult workers and HSRs. Establish Health and Safety Committees with at least 50% representation from workers. Encourage feedback, especially on any changes.

Consider how long, how often and how severely workers are exposed to hazards. The longer, more often and worse the low job control, the higher the risk that workers may be harmed.

Utilise surveys and tools to assess psychosocial risks in the workplace, particularly for businesses with over 20 employees.

Establish a system for workers to report their concerns, while ensuring anonymity as an option and treating their concerns with respect and seriousness to encourage reporting. Workers should know HOW to report a concern, risk or hazard and WHO to approach if assistance is needed.

Observe work and behaviours, such as prolonged work duration, excessive paperwork, or customer frustration, which may indicate low job control.

Review available information, including employee retention, incident reports, complaints, time-off records, injuries, incidents, and workers' compensation to identify potential hazards.

Identify other hazards present and evaluate how they may interact or combine to create new, heightened risks. For instance, high job demands could pose a greater risk in workplaces with low job control if workers are unable to take breaks or switch tasks to manage fatigue.

Continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of risk management strategies to ensure that they are reducing the risk of injury and adjust them as needed, including access to improvement/suggestion forms for workers. If a review indicates that the current measures are inadequate or failing, immediately take steps to identify and establish new measures to mitigate the risks.

MIND YOUR HEAD: RESOURCES

Mind Your Head **has compiled a suite of resources to help you address Psychosocial Hazards in your Workplace**

1. **The Step-by-Step Guide to Addressing Psychosocial Hazards in the Workplace** will take you through each step of the process, including identifying hazards, assessing risks, controlling risks using best practice (the Hierarchy of Control) and reviewing control measures.

2. **The Psychosocial Hazards Workplace Survey** can be used to assist in identifying hazards in your workplace, including assessing the level of risk.

3. **Mind Your Head's Example Action Plan** demonstrates a completed Risk Assessment, with interventions and controls listed. You can also access examples of implementation strategies for every intervention listed via this document. **The Action Plan Template** can be used for your own workplace, based on the above example.

4. **Hierarchy of Controls Guides** for each recognised psychosocial hazard are available to assist you in choosing appropriate Control Measures for your workplace.