

Guide to Preventing and Responding to Bullying in the Workplace



The extent of the workplace bullying problem

How widespread is workplace bullying? Systemic underreportingⁱ makes the precise figure difficult to determine; researchers at the University of South Australia qualify that only ten per cent of workers self-identify as victims of workplace bullying. Despite that, the remaining data suggests that bullying in the workplace is not just widespread but becoming ever more commonplace.

Indeed, Safe Work Australia revealed that the number of serious workplace injuries related to bullying and harassment nearly doubled over the course of the 2010sⁱⁱ. International studies place Australia as the sixth-highest offender of workplace bullying, compared to the 31 European countries also measuredⁱⁱⁱ.

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The cost of workplace bullying

These figures are troubling. For employers, specifically, they should come as a wake-up call. After all, workplace bullying erodes the bottom line.

By how much? A 2018 Productivity Commission report showed that workplace bullying costs the national economy up to AUD 36 billion every year^{iv}.

Workplace bullying is one of the leading causes of work-related mental stress. That stress often contributes to decreased morale and productivity, higher turnover and early retirement payouts, as well as loss of reputation for firms when reports of bullying and harassment leak out.

The research, here, confirms the deleterious effect bullying has on workplace productivity and engagement. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission^v, bullied workers tend to be:

-  Less active or successful
-  Less confident in their work
-  Feel scared, stressed, anxious, or depressed
-  Have life outside of work affected, e.g., study and relationships
-  Want to stay away from work
-  Feel like they can't trust their employer or the people with whom they work
-  Lack confidence and happiness about themselves and their work
-  Have physical signs of stress, e.g., headaches, backaches, sleep problems

What's more, workplace bullying is a legal issue for organisations. Employers have a common law duty to take reasonable care of the health and safety of their employees. That duty is breached when bullying or harassment (including sexual harassment) occurs within the workplace; and it is the victim's perception that is the relevant factor when assessing claims.

When bullying is proven, a victim can seek remediation by applying to the Fair Work Commission for a stop order. If bullying behaviour leads to workplace injury (e.g., psychiatric illness), the victim can lodge a workers' compensation claim.

Practical recommendations for preventing workplace bullying









With the costs so steep, what is it that employers can do to prevent workplace bullying? Though employers might understand the colloquial definition of bullying, they will also need to master the legal definition of workplace bullying before attempting to stamp it out.

According to the Fair Work Act, bullying constitutes repeated unreasonable behaviour that creates risk to an employee’s health and safety. Further statutory definitions follow below:

	Bullying	Harassment
Legal definition	Defined under section 789FD of the <i>Fair Work Amendment Act 2013</i> (Cth) as when an individual or group of individuals repeatedly behave unreasonably towards a worker and that behaviour creates a risk to health and safety.	Provisions included across a range of legislation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section 28A of the <i>Sex Discrimination Act 1984</i> defines sexual harassment as when a person makes an unwelcome sexual advance, an unwelcome request for sexual favours, or engages in other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature in relation to a person. This occurs in circumstances where it is possible that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated or intimidated. Sexual harassment can be subtle and implicit rather than explicit; • Section 18C of the <i>Racial Discrimination Act 1975</i> prohibits offensive behaviour based on racial hatred. Offensive behaviour includes an act that is likely to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another because of their race, colour or national or ethnic origin; and • Section 25 of the <i>Disability Discrimination Act 1992</i> prohibits harassment in relation to an employee’s disability.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yelling, screaming, or offensive language • Excluding or isolating employees • Psychological harassment • Intimidation • Assigning meaningless tasks unrelated to the job • Giving employees impossible jobs • Deliberately changing work rosters to inconvenience particular employees • Undermining work performance by deliberately withholding information vital for effective work performance • Constant unconstructive criticism and/or nit-picking • Suppression of ideas • Overloading a person with work or allowing insufficient time for completion and criticising the employees work in relation to this. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling insulting jokes about particular racial groups • Sending explicit or sexually suggestive emails or text messages • Displaying racially offensive or pornographic posters or screen savers • Making derogatory comments or taunts about a person’s disability • Asking intrusive questions about someone’s personal life, including their sex life.

Of course, it is simply not enough to understand the statutory definitions. Bullying rarely occurs in isolation from wider organisational factors. In fact, workplace bullying is typically symptomatic of those wider organisational factors – often cultural and safety issues likely to be dragging down productivity and increasing risk, as well.






As such, employers as well as deputised HR and Safety leaders will need to be on the lookout for the specific factors likeliest to enable bullying cultures to develop. Factors to monitor^{vi} include:

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|--|---|---|---|
|  | Working hours |  | Career opportunities |
|  | How entitlements are coordinated |  | How performance is monitored and appraised |
|  | Performance management |  | How environment and relationships are developed in the office |
|  | Clear roles and allocated tasks and workloads |  | Mental health culture |
|  | Sufficient training | | |

Developing a mentally healthy workplace

Mental health stands out. In the literature, it is clear that developing a mentally healthy workplace is a vital precondition for preventing the emergence of workplace bullying. The outstanding question for most organisations is how to do so.

Here, it is helpful to develop practices and values that align with the attributes of mentally healthy workplaces. According to research in this space^{vii}, those specific attributes include:

-  **Job design.** Demands of the job, control in the work environment, resources provided, the level of work engagement, the characteristics of the job, and potential exposure to trauma.
-  **Team/group factors.** Support from colleagues and managers, the quality of interpersonal relationships, effective leadership, and the availability of manager training.
-  **Organisational factors.** Changes to the organisation, support from the organisation, recognising and rewarding work, how justice is perceived in an organisation, a psychosocial safety climate, positive organisational climate, and a safe physical environment.
-  **Home/work conflict.** The degree to which conflicting demands from home, including significant life events, interfere with work.
-  **Individual biopsychosocial factors.** Genetics, personality, early life events, cognitive and behavioural patterns, mental health history, lifestyle factors and coping style.

Senior leadership must also be involved and committed to supporting the necessary mental health and wellbeing programs that would make a meaningful dent in workplace bullying.

To do so, leadership will have to deputise wellbeing committees comprised of representatives from Safety and HR who will go out and conduct situational analyses of the current state of mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. The specific measurement tools available to such committees are likely to include data coming from or related to:

- 

Sickness absence



Surveys of employee engagement
- 

Work-related psychological injuries



Audits of existing leadership and management training
- 

Return to work rates



Examinations of the mental health strategies of similar organisations
- 

Exit interviews



External expert advice and best practices from psychologically healthy workplace programs
- 

Staff turnover rates



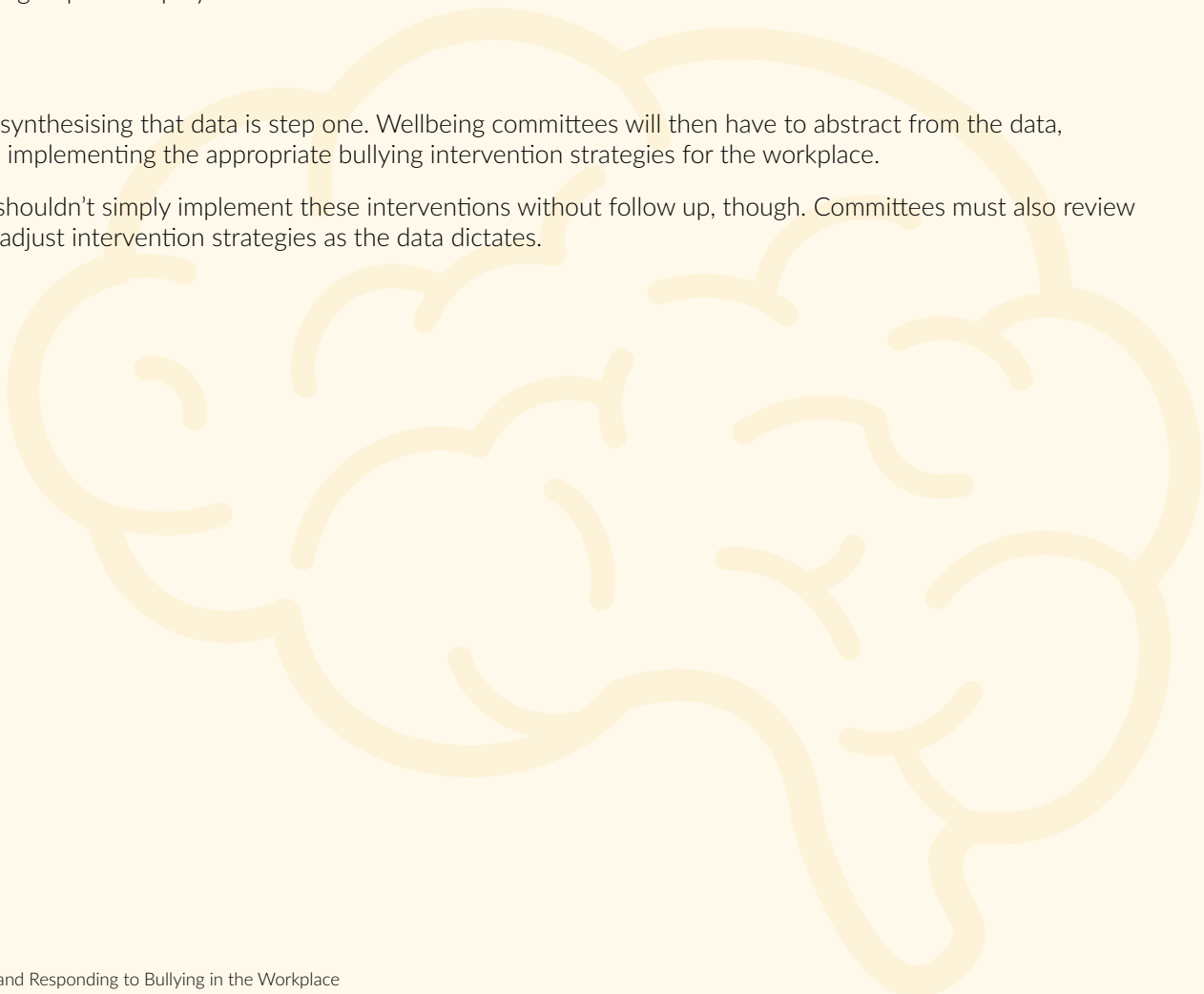
Recognition of upcoming organisational change
- 

Audits of existing mental health policies and procedures
- 

Focus groups of employees

Gathering and synthesising that data is step one. Wellbeing committees will then have to abstract from the data, identifying and implementing the appropriate bullying intervention strategies for the workplace.

Organisations shouldn't simply implement these interventions without follow up, though. Committees must also review outcomes and adjust intervention strategies as the data dictates.



What might workplace mental health strategies and tangible actions look like? According to the best-practice literature^{viii}, they might look like the following:











Workplace mental health strategy	Examples of broad actions implemented in the workplace
<p>Designing and managing work to minimise harm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for workers to have control over their work schedules • Provide opportunities for workers to be involved in decision-making • Meet safety requirements to reduce risks to mental and physical injury
<p>Promoting protective factors to maximise resilience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build an organisational culture of flexibility on where, when, and how work is performed • Provide opportunities for employee participation in organisational level decisions • Provide professional development opportunities • Provide resource groups to support workers in career management • Ensure senior staff engage in mental health promotion and develop a positive team / organisational climate and a psychosocial safety climate • Leadership training including workplace mental health education • Ensuring policies and processes are in place to maximise organisational justice • Implement workplace health promotion programs • Develop a mental health policy including zero tolerance of bullying and discrimination • Promote fair effort and reward structures • Ensure that change is managed in an inclusive manner with open and realistic communication
<p>Enhancing personal resilience, generally and for those at risk</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide stress management and resilience training which utilises evidence-based approaches • Provide stress management and resilience training for those in high-risk jobs • Promote regular physical activity at the worksite • Provide mentoring and coaching
<p>Promoting and facilitating early help-seeking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider conducting wellness checks • Provide stress management training • Ensure any existing EAP and workplace counselling programs are using experienced staff and evidence-based methods • Provide mental health first aid training • Consider the role of peer support schemes • Ensure policies relating to response to workplace trauma are evidence based and not reliant on routine psychological debriefing

Workplace mental health strategy	Examples of broad actions implemented in the workplace
Supporting workers' recover from mental illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training programs for leaders and supervisors on how to support workers' recovery • Support partial sickness absence • Modify job/work schedule/duties where appropriate • Support workers on return-to-work and/or those receiving work-focused exposure therapy • Eliminate discrimination from recruitment
Increasing awareness of mental illness and reducing stigma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide mental health first aid training • Conduct regular mental health awareness programs and training • Promote mental health related events • Provide access to mental health information and resources • Include mental health education in staff induction and people development

The role of digital technology in operationalising your mental health and wellbeing program

What about the start-up costs of getting such a best-practice program operationalised? Clearly, organisations can't afford to belabour implementation and tracking, especially now with workplace bullying on the steep rise.

Here, digital wellbeing management technologies can help businesses (1) respond to mental health and wellbeing events, (2) implement and track proactive initiatives to support their personnel, as well as (3) better understand the opportunities for mental health and wellbeing improvement to ward off systemic bullying. What capabilities to look out for? The following come to mind:

-  Gain situational awareness of current events impacting on personnel through live weather, Twitter, and pandemic feeds
-  Customise initiatives based on current events or unique organisational requirements
-  Broadcast communications to distributed personnel in seconds using email, SMS, or voice
-  Schedule periodic working from home ergonomic assessments for distributed staff
-  Conduct a welfare checks at scale enabling personnel to respond via email, SMS, or voice and triage the response to events
-  Enable personnel to request mental health and wellbeing support
-  Direct personnel to support programs and best-practice content
-  Push surveys to personnel to understand how they are coping before, during, and after events
-  Securely store personnel information in a single solution or import from your HR Software
-  Launch initiatives with templates that take the heavy lifting out of creation and implementation

Besides that, the platforms in question provide tools for all levels of the organisation weighing in on workplace bullying questions; executives can oversee events and analytics; line managers can manage events and launch initiatives with centralised dashboards; and staff can access tools and participate in initiatives on any device.

Benefits of digital wellbeing management technology

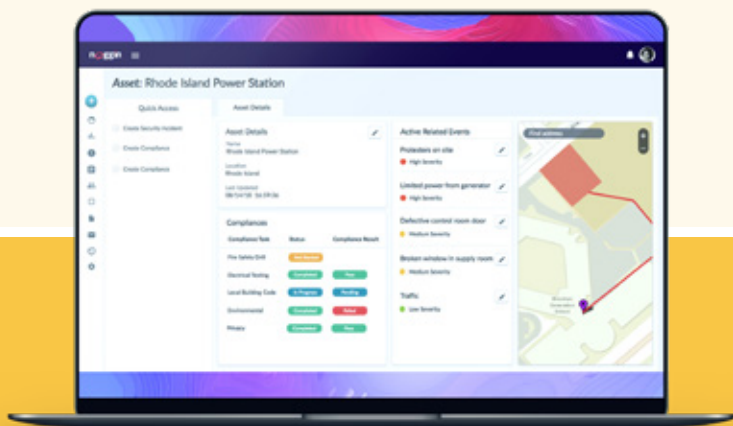
- Integrated with safety management software to reduce start-up costs and increase efficiency
- Reduce the risk of injuries and illness in your organisation
- Reduce churn by providing better supports to personnel
- Understand how personnel are coping with traumatic events
- Increase resilience by providing tools for personnel to grow in their work and personal life
- Monitor organisational morale across your organisation
- Draw insights into which initiatives add the most value
- Effective spend of Mental health and Wellbeing budgets to deliver on organisational targets

Finally, workplace bullying erodes the productivity of employees while creating liability and reputational hazards for employers. In conjunction with the wider mental health and wellbeing crisis, the bullying epidemic has also exacerbated safety risk for employers.

Organisations can continue to dismiss the threat at their doorsteps, or they can act to protect their bottom lines. Action means putting in place coherent mental health and wellbeing strategies to prevent bullying from flourishing. Testing those strategies, though, requires digital wellbeing management technologies, housed in safety management platforms. In addition to monitoring for continuing improvement, these technologies can cut down start-up costs and provide better supports for personnel, while reducing churn and boosting productivity.

Citations

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- iii. Priscilla Pho, *Smart Company: Two-thirds of Australian employees experience workplace bullying: Here's how to intervene.* Available at <https://www.smartcompany.com.au/people-human-resources/wellbeing/workplace-bullying-study/>.
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