

NECESSARY (BUT NOT SUFFICIENT)

Has your organisation carried out a psychological risk assessment? Good! But as **HILLARY BENNETT** argues, this process is necessary but not sufficient. There is more work to be done.



The evidence is clear – the quality of our work environments profoundly affects our physical and mental health. Work that is well designed, organised and resourced enables people to thrive, while poorly designed work can exact a heavy toll, causing harm to both physical and mental health.

As the understanding of mentally healthy work has developed, so has the awareness that focusing on personal resilience is not enough. Long-term, sustainable mentally healthy work requires a focus on the work and not just the *worker*. There are many work-related factors with the potential to cause physical and/or mental harm – these exist in all types of work and at all organisational levels, functions, and operational teams. These factors are known as psychosocial hazards. A psychosocial hazard is anything that relates to:

- The way a task or job is designed, organised, managed, and supervised.
- Tasks or jobs with inherent psychosocial hazards and risks (eg in the emergency services sector).
- The equipment, the working environment, or

requirements to undertake duties in physically hazardous environments.

- Social factors at work and workplace relationships, interactions, and behaviours.

PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARD-ID

Some psychosocial hazards may be hazardous on their own, others may only be so if combined with other hazards. Whether a psychosocial hazard is a psychosocial risk creating harm depends on the individual and the context. Harm can be caused by both direct and indirect exposure to a psychosocial hazard. Exposure can be either cumulative (gradual and built over time) or event-based (eg experiencing or witnessing a serious injury or experiencing threats of harm or serious injury).

Since the publication of ISO 45003 in 2021 – the first international guidance on managing psychosocial risk – there has been increased focus on the identification of psychosocial hazards and risks. This has highlighted that managing risks in the workplace, which may lead to physical and *psychological* injury, is an essential part of creating a safe, healthy, and productive workplace.

WHERE ARE THE CONTROLS?

In both New Zealand and Australian health and safety legislation, health is defined as meaning physical and mental health. New Zealand does not yet have regulations to manage psychosocial hazards at work, but, in Australia, there is the *Code of Practice for Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work* (2022). It is only a matter of time until New Zealand follows suit.

With this growing awareness of the obligation to identify psychosocial hazards, there has been increased focus on completing psychosocial risk assessments. The purpose of a psychosocial risk assessment is no different to that of a physical safety risk assessment (identify psychosocial hazards, assess the associated risks, and develop appropriate controls to manage those risks). The purpose of control measures is to eliminate or – failing that – minimise the risk associated with these workplace psychosocial factors.

Many organisations are identifying psychosocial hazards (eg high work demands, lack of role clarity, etc) and assessing risk, but have neither focused on developing appropriate controls nor given much attention to

designing in protective work factors (eg flexibility, adequate rest breaks, etc). This is where the Better Work By Design process can help.

A DESIGN PROCESS

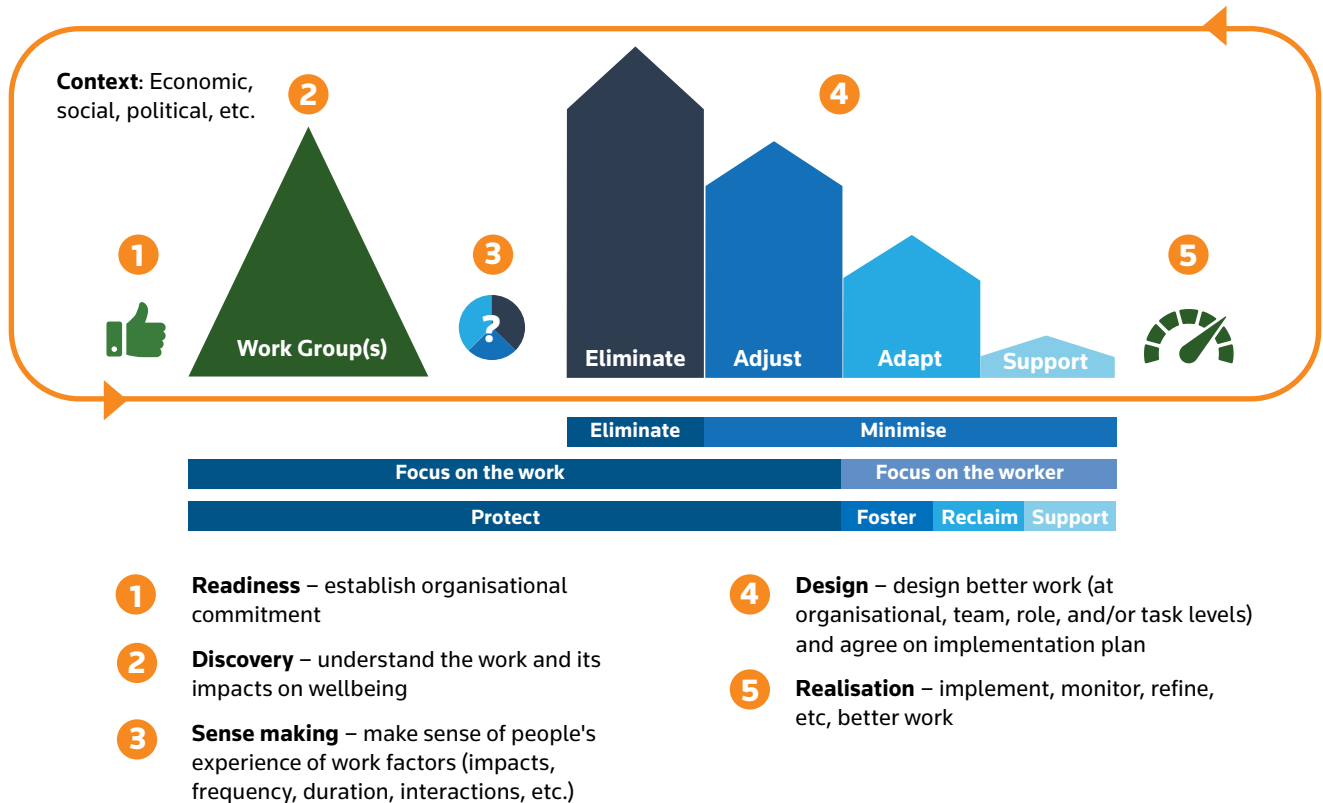
Better Work By Design is a 5-stage *process*, not a simple risk assessment. It requires boards and senior leaders to understand that the intent is the design of better work, not simply the identification of psychosocial risks. It is important that senior leaders are given an opportunity to understand what they are committing to and how they can support the process. This is known as the **Socialisation** stage.

The **Discovery** stage involves engaging workers to provide a work-as-done (as opposed to a work-as-imagined) view of their current work in relation to factors that are harmful to, as well as protective, of their wellbeing. This can be done using surveys, focus groups, observation, document reviews, and so on.

Having identified the harmful work factors, the **Sense-Making** stage involves exploring:

- Who is exposed to the hazards or risks?
- How often is a worker exposed to the hazards or risks?

Leading Safety, 2025



WE SHOULD FOCUS FIRST ON CHANGING THE WORK BEFORE LOOKING AT **WHAT WORKERS CAN DO TO PREVENT OR MINIMISE HARM.**

- (frequency)?
- How long is a worker exposed to the hazards or risks (duration)?
 - How severe are the likely consequences from this exposure (severity)?
 - Do these factors combine or interact to cause harm?

Similar questions can be asked about the nature and impact of protective work factors.

DESIGN AND REALISATION

In the **Design** stage, controls to manage psychosocial hazards – and ways to facilitate protective

work factors – are identified. Psychosocial control measures should follow the same hierarchy as is traditionally used for physical safety. In other words, we should focus first on changing the work before looking at what workers can do to prevent or minimise harm.

The most effective controls will eliminate or minimise the psychosocial hazard through elimination and/or the adjustment of the work, rather than developing the skills, knowledge, and experience of workers or providing individual counselling. The focus of the

design stage could relate to any combination of task, individual, social, and organisational factors.

The **Realisation** stage captures the reality that the design and implementation of better work is an iterative, continuous improvement process.

EXAMINING THE WORK

Creating a workplace where sustained, long-term wellbeing is possible requires the courage and commitment to methodically examine – and, through good design, improve – the work people do, rather than simply toughening people up or

positioning an ambulance at the bottom of the proverbial cliff. Better work provides opportunities for meaning, connection, learning, and growth – the cornerstones of positive mental health and wellbeing.

Winston Churchill is said to have said: People stumble over the truth from time to time, but most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened. Leaders have a responsibility to do better than that. The design of mentally healthy work requires more than just psychosocial risk assessment.

Dr HILLARY BENNETT is a director of consultancy Leading Safety.