

A simple overview of ISO 45003

What the new guidelines mean for
managing psychosocial risks in the workplace



Updated

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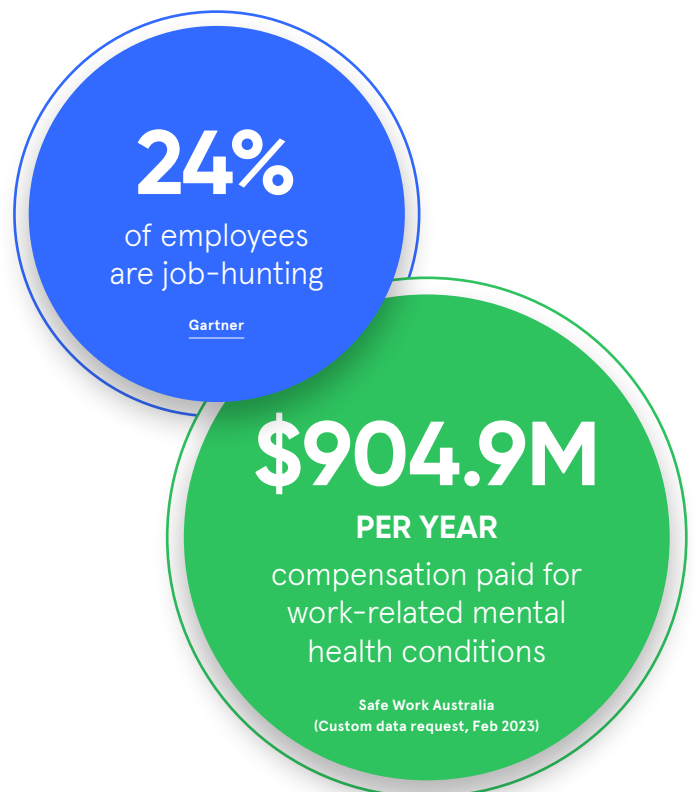
Introduction

In a perfect world, every workplace is safe, every employee is well, every person is engaged and productive, every organisation fulfils its moral and financial objectives, and everyone involved 'does the right thing'. There are no risks to brand reputation, no workplace harassment claims, no compensation costs, no litigations, no retention issues, and no lives lost to suicide.

In reality, we know that in Australia alone, \$904.9 million per year is paid in compensation for work-related mental health conditions. At least 65,000 suicide attempts are made over the same period. News feeds are full of #MeToo, burnout, boreout, bullying, harassment and headlines such as, "a quarter of Australian employees are seeking a new job".

In the past 18 months, CEOs, board members, WHS managers, and People and Culture Directors have anxiously watched as:

- In an Australian first, the Administrative Appeals Tribunal of Australia found in favour of a worker's compensation claim from an Australian Tax Office employee who suffered a psychological injury due to his excessive workload;



- BHP suffered potentially irreparable reputation damage after the media exposed the Australian mining giant's "culture of cover up" and termination of nearly 50 workers for sexual assaults and harassment at its Western Australian mining camps;
- The federal government - suffering similarly damaging sexual harassment allegations at Parliament House - reviewed the Respect@Work Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report (2020). They agreed to introduce significant changes to the Fair Work Act and the Sex Discrimination Act, including the confirmation of sexual harassment as grounds for dismissal and the voiding of the get-out-of-jail-free card for members of parliament, judges, and state public servants;
- Burnout stole the limelight at Microsoft, LinkedIn, Bumble, and Nike, prompting each company to give their employees one week off to recover; and
- New Zealand's Humphries Construction officially sanctioned the use of sick leave for mental health days and gave employees an extra five days of sick leave to recharge.

The launch of ISO 45003 is a timely reminder that organisations have both a responsibility and an incentive to create **safe and healthy workplaces** if they care about employee wellbeing, recruitment, retention, productivity, innovation, brand reputation, and organisational resilience.



What is ISO 45003?

Published in June 2021, ISO 45003 is the first global standard that provides specific guidance on the **management of psychosocial risks and promotion of wellbeing at work**, in a manner consistent with other health and safety risks in the workplace.

The new standard is applicable to organisations of all sizes and in all sectors. It is intended to be used in conjunction with its parent standard, ISO 45001, which contains requirements and guidance on planning, implementing, reviewing, evaluating and improving an OH&S management system.

At its core, ISO 45003 is a risk management tool to help organisations in their shared responsibility to **build safer and healthier workplaces**. What makes it unique is that it emphasises the business imperative for promoting and protecting psychological (not just physical) health in the workplace.



Do organisations need to comply?

From a legal perspective, adherence to ISO 45003 is recommended, but not strictly mandatory, because it is a guidance standard not a requirements standard, with no official certification and no compliance check.

From a business perspective, ISO 45003's best practice recommendations offer many potential business gains, and dismissing the standard might arguably be considered negligent if a regulator were to determine that an organisation was aware of the best practice but chose to ignore it.

The opportunity

The beauty of guidance standards, such as the new ISO 45003, is their window of opportunity for organisations to **lead from the front**.

Peter Kelly, a senior psychologist and an original member on the Standards Committee UK for Management Standards for Psychological Health and Safety, suggests, "Don't see [ISO 45003] as something that's adding a burden, see [it as] a key to opening the doors to get better workplaces for people."



Why is ISO 45003 important?

ISO 45003 represents an affirmative step towards employee wellbeing. It expands the traditional workplace focus on physical health and safety to consider the equally important workplace need for psychological health and safety. Employees and organisations that commit to ISO 45003 and the effective management of psychosocial risks can benefit directly and indirectly, in the short and long term.

Positive outcomes for employees

- ✓ Greater wellbeing at work
- ✓ Motivation to perform well
- ✓ Clear role clarity and better workload balance
- ✓ Peace of mind that work is a safe place
- ✓ Diverse and collaborative environment
- ✓ Sense of pride in the workplace
- ✓ Improved health and health behaviours
- ✓ Enhanced job satisfaction
- ✓ Increased job productivity
- ✓ Less need for workers' compensation
- ✓ Supportive environment for speaking up
- ✓ Decreased inclination to quit

Positive outcomes for organisations

- ✓ Higher employee wellbeing rates
- ✓ Engaged and high performing workforce
- ✓ Reduced performance management and retraining
- ✓ Safer and more inclusive work environment
- ✓ Greater idea sharing and innovation
- ✓ Enhanced reputation and ability to attract talent
- ✓ Reduced absenteeism and presenteeism
- ✓ Higher retention and lowered recruitment costs
- ✓ Improved productivity and work/product quality
- ✓ Reduction of workers' compensation claims
- ✓ Fewer workplace investigations and less litigation
- ✓ Strengthened organisational resilience



currently feel or have felt **bullied or harassed at work**



have experienced workplace aggression **from managers**



have taken time off work in the last 12 months due to concerns about **their mental wellbeing**

Source: October 2021 [Sonder survey](#) (conducted by McGregor Tan) of 1,025 employees in Australia working a minimum of 20 hours per week.

How does ISO 45003 fit in with existing WHS rules and guidelines?

This section was prepared (and updated in August 2022) in conjunction with McCullough Robertson Lawyers. Their Employment Relations and Safety Group has extensive experience advising business and government on all aspects of WHS compliance, internal investigations, regulatory investigations and prosecutions.

Work health and safety (WHS) in AU/NZ

There are four primary levels of regulations and guidelines across Australia and New Zealand:



Level 1: WHS legislation

The strongest of these is the first level, which is enforceable by law, and comprises the **WHS Act** and **WHS Regulations** in Australia, and the **Health and Safety at Work Act 2015** in New Zealand. The Australian rules came as a result of a 2009 National Review into the Model Occupational Health and Safety Laws, which led the Commonwealth, territories, and states (except Victoria) to adopt the Model Work Health and Safety Act (WHS Act) and the Model Work Health and Safety Regulations (WHS Regulations). The WHS laws in each jurisdiction are therefore broadly the same, subject to minor variations. New Zealand's Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 was based in part on Australia's Model WHS Act, subject to some variations.

Level 2: Mandatory national standards

In a limited number of circumstances, WHS regulations mandate compliance with particular national standards, or at least parts of them. This means that failure to comply with that standard can amount to a breach of the applicable WHS law.

Level 3: Codes of practice

The WHS Act authorises the ministers in each jurisdiction to approve a code of practice. Codes of practice should be followed and can be used by safety regulators in a prosecution as evidence of steps that could or should have been taken to comply with the law.

Level 4: International standards

International standards such as *ISO 45003 – set by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)* – provide guidance for how to comply with duties under WHS laws, but they are not enforceable unless compliance is specifically mandated in WHS regulations. However, regulators looking for evidence of compliance with legislation may reflect on observance of recommendations in guidance documents. Organisations may also choose to mandate compliance as part of a contractual requirement.

	Rule or guideline	Example	Jurisdiction
1	Acts and regulations	Model Work Health and Safety Act (WHS Act)	Australian Commonwealth, states (excluding VIC) and territories
		Health and Safety at Work Act 2015	NZ
		Model Work Health and Safety Regulations (WHS Regulations)	Australian Commonwealth, states (excluding VIC) and territories
2	Mandatory national standards	There are currently none specific to psychosocial hazards	AU NZ
3	Codes of practice	Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work	NSW
		Code of Practice: Psychosocial hazards in the workplace	WA
		Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022	QLD
		Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work	TAS
4	International standards	ISO 45003:21 Occupational health and safety management – Psychological health and safety at work – Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks	Global

Jurisdictional duty

In May 2021, NSW implemented the **Code of Practice: Managing Psychosocial Hazards at work**. By doing so, they became the first AU/NZ jurisdiction to implement an approved code of practice addressing psychosocial hazards. [Western Australia](#) (in February 2022), [Tasmania](#) (in January 2023) and [Queensland](#) (from 1 April 2023) have also introduced similar codes of practice in their respective jurisdictions. The [Northern Territory](#) has announced that they will approve the Model Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work.

NSW became the first jurisdiction to adopt the amendments to the [Model WHS Regulations](#). From 1 October 2022, PCBUs in NSW must manage psychosocial risks and implement control measures to eliminate psychosocial risks so far as is reasonably practicable, and if it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate psychosocial risks, to minimise the risks so far as is reasonably practicable. From 12 December 2022, PCBUs in Tasmania must implement control measures to manage psychosocial risks. From 23 December 2022, PCBUs in Western Australia must implement control measures to

manage psychosocial risks. Queensland and the Commonwealth have also passed amendments to their Work Health and Safety Regulations requiring PCBUs to implement control measures to manage psychosocial risks from 1 April 2023, and similarly, the Northern Territory has also passed an amendment which commenced on 1 July 2023. The ACT has also amended its Work Health and Safety Regulation to require PCBUs to manage psychosocial risks from 27 November 2023. At the time of publication, South Australia has committed to, and announced, a similar amendment which is expected to become law in December 2023.






For jurisdictions without a code of practice for managing psychosocial hazards in the workplace, **ISO 45003 provides a useful guide to assist organisations in complying with their duties under WHS laws.**

In some jurisdictions, these duties vary slightly, and each workplace will have a unique way of dealing with psychosocial hazards that is particular to the context and content of the work.

Duty	Description	Jurisdiction
Primary duty	A person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) has a primary duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, workers and other people are not exposed to psychological health and safety risks arising from the business or undertaking.	ACT, NT, WA, NSW, SA, QLD, TAS
Primary duty	A person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) has a primary duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, workers and other people are not exposed to mental health and safety risks arising from the business or undertaking.	NZ
Employer duty	An employer must, so far as is reasonably practicable: (i) provide and maintain for employees of the employer a working environment that is safe and without risks to psychological health ; and (ii) ensure that persons other than employees of the employer are not exposed to risks to their psychological health or safety arising from the conduct of the undertaking of the employer.	VIC

How can I comply with my duty?

ISO 45003 can help you comply with your jurisdictional duty in the following ways:

How can I comply with my duty?	Examples	ISO 45003:21 reference
 <p>Identify all psychosocial hazards and/or risks in the workplace</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult workers to see if their needs and expectations are being met, and if activities should be redesigned or reallocated Determine if there are underlying or systemic issues relating to bullying or harassment Ensure any risk assessment considers social factors, the diversity of workers, and the context of the organisation Check if time pressures and production schedules can be improved with your supply chain 	<p>Introduction, 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.2, 5.1, 6, 6.1.2.1.3, 8.1.2.2</p>
 <p>Assess and prioritise the psychosocial hazards and risks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decide their levels of severity Articulate which workers are most at risk Review the effectiveness of current controls, if any Assess how each hazard interacts with each other 	<p>4.1.3, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1.1.1, 6.1.2.1.3, 8.1.2.3</p>
 <p>Manage and minimise psychosocial hazards and risks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review policies, procedures and safety management systems (including emergency response plan and incident response plan) Establish organisational-level controls to both promote wellbeing at work and prevent (or reduce) harmful effects of psychosocial hazards and risks Ensure actions are implemented early Provide relevant training and instruction to all involved 	<p>7.2.2, 7.3.1, 7.3.2, 7.5.1, 8.1.1.3, 8.1.2.3, 8.2, 8.3, 9.1</p>
 <p>Review processes from identify to manage on a regular basis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate how quickly hazards and risks are identified, assessed and managed Collect and review information on a regular basis Include relevant management responsibilities in performance reviews Seek independent audits and external advice, if needed 	<p>4, 7.2, 9.2, 9.3</p>
 <p>Respond to reports of psychosocial hazards and risks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate the incident, remembering to communicate well with workers about the proposed investigation Consider if there is a notifiable incident, and if so, notify Record the risk management processes and outcomes Support each worker's return to work 	<p>6.1.2.1.3, 10.1, 10.2</p>

Definitions

Psychosocial risks

Psychosocial hazards

relate to how work is organised, social factors at work, and aspects of the work environment, equipment and hazardous tasks.

ISO

Psychosocial risk

relates to the potential of these types of hazards to cause several types of outcomes on individual health, safety and wellbeing, and on organisational performance and sustainability.

ISO

Psychosocial risks at work

are factors that may affect a worker's psychological response to their work and workplace conditions, and may result in poor health and poor health behaviours (including reduced productivity and absences from work).

ISO

Such as:

- Lack of job clarity
- Workload too high or too low
- Poor organisational support
- Social exclusion
- Bullying
- Harassment
- Remote or isolated work
- Violent or traumatic events
- Lack of control of the work and working methods



Poor health

- High stress
- Fatigue
- Burnout
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Sleep disorders
- Musculoskeletal disorders
- Cardiovascular disease

Poor health behaviours

- Poor diet
- Smoking
- Aggression
- Substance misuse
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Low levels of physical activity
- Failing to show up for work
- Care-seeking behaviours
- Lack of adherence to prescribed medication

Wellbeing at work

Wellbeing

“Encompasses the health of the whole person - physical, mental, social and emotional” and “is most likely to flourish in a supportive and inclusive environment”.

Be You

Workplace Wellbeing (ISO 45003)

Defined in ISO 45003 as the “fulfilment of the **physical, mental, social** and **cognitive** needs and expectations of a worker related to their work”. It “relates to all aspects of working life, including work organisation, social factors at work, and work environment and hazardous tasks”. It “can also contribute to the quality of life outside of work”.

ISO

Workplace Wellbeing (ILO)

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) considers workplace wellbeing “a key factor in determining an organisation’s long-term effectiveness [as] many studies show a direct link between productivity levels and the general health and wellbeing of the workforce”.

ILO



Inside ISO 45003

ISO 45003 is structured into ten sections and three tables, as follows:

Sections

1 Scope

2 Normative references

3 Terms and definitions

4 Context of the organisation

- Understanding the organisation and its context
 - General
 - External issues
 - Internal issues
- Understanding the needs and expectations of workers and other interested parties
- Determining the scope of the OH&S management system
- OH&S management system

5 Leadership and worker participation

- Leadership and commitment
- OH&S policy
- Organisational roles, responsibilities and authorities
- Consultation and participation of workers

6 Planning

- Actions to address risks and opportunities
 - General
 - Hazard identification and assessment of risks and opportunities
- Objectives to address psychosocial risk

7 Support

- Resources
- Competence
- Awareness
- Communication
- Documented information
 - General
 - Confidentiality

8 Operation

- Operational planning and control
 - General
 - Eliminating hazards, reducing OH&S risks and promoting wellbeing at work
 - + Psychosocial risk control measures
 - + Signs of exposure to psychosocial risk
 - Management of change
 - Procurement, contracting and outsourcing
 - Emergency preparedness and response
- Rehabilitation and return to work

9 Performance evaluation

- Monitoring, measurement, analysis and performance evaluation
- Internal audit
- Management review

10 Improvement

- General
- Incident, nonconformity and corrective action
- Continual improvement

Tables

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Aspects of how work is organised

- Roles and expectations
- Job control or autonomy
- Job demands
- Organisational change management
- Remote and isolated work
- Workload and work pace
- Working hours and schedule
- Job security and precarious work

TABLE
2

Social factors at work

- Interpersonal relationships
- Leadership
- Organisational/workgroup culture
- Recognition and reward
- Career development
- Support
- Supervision
- Civility and respect
- Work/life balance
- Violence at work
- Harassment
- Bullying and victimisation

TABLE
3

Work environment, equipment and hazardous tasks



FAQs



Is ISO 45003 mandatory or recommended?

Adherence is recommended as ISO 45003 is a useful guide to assist PCBUs to discharge their obligations under WHS Laws. However, in jurisdictions which have adopted the amendments made to the Model WHS Regulations and have implemented Codes of Practice, those regulations must be complied with and the Codes of practices should be followed, unless there is an alternative course of action which achieves the same or better standard of health and safety in the workplace.



What if the psychosocial risks are from home, not from work?

ISO 45003 recognises that outside factors will impact work, but its focus is on understanding the sources of harm that an organisation can control and manage.



How does ISO 45003 fit into the ISO 45000 family?

ISO 45003:21 Occupational health and safety management – Psychological health and safety at work – Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks is a child standard of *ISO 45001:2018 Occupational health and safety management systems – Requirements with guidance for use*. ISO 45003 provides more specific psychological risk guidance and helps users satisfy the requirements of ISO 45001.



Does ISO 45003 give specific metrics around performance measurement or examples of how to best capture incident data?

No. ISO 45003 gives general guidance, but more specific details are expected in *ISO/WD 45004 Occupational health and safety management – Guidelines on performance evaluation*, which is currently in development.



Are there psychosocial risks associated with returning to the office?

Whether returning to the office from a pandemic lockdown or any other absence, a worker may experience change (for example, to routines, office set up, team structure, face time, and more) and this can be considered a psychosocial risk. Following ISO 45003 guidelines, the key to managing these risks is genuine consideration, honest consultation, and clear communication.



Do we need ISO 45003 certification?

No, unlike ISO 45001, there is no official certification available for ISO 45003. It is a guidance standard, not a requirements standard.

Next steps

ISO 45003 offers a standard for best practice, not a magic wand. As the ISO states, "The success of psychosocial risk management depends on commitment from all levels and functions of the organisation, especially from top management".

Perhaps the best advice comes from Mary Ann Baynton, who was instrumental in crafting *The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace* (2013). She suggests that wherever an organisation is on their maturity scale,

“start where you are at. Think about what you’d like to be different... Don’t delay starting to address psychological health and safety because you don’t have the ability to do it all. Just find something... There [are] lots of ways to start, but start.”

Mary Ann Baynton, 2021

Disclaimer

This document covers legal and technical issues in a general way. It is not designed to express opinions on specific cases. It is intended for information purposes only and should not be regarded as legal advice. Further advice should be obtained before taking action on any issue dealt with in this document.

About us

Sonder is an Active Care technology company that helps organisations improve the wellbeing of their people so they perform at their best.

Our mobile app provides immediate, 24/7 support from a team of safety, medical, and mental health professionals - plus onsite help for time-sensitive scenarios.

Accredited by the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS), our platform gives leaders the insights they need to act on tomorrow's wellbeing challenges today.



Immediate assessment

Chat with a Sonder care specialist in 15 seconds or less - day or night



In-person response

Get on-the-ground assistance so you're not alone in difficult times



Sonder specialists

Access our clinical team of registered nurses, doctors, psychologists, and more



Wellbeing resources

Build a happier, healthier you - in just a few minutes a day



Safety scanning

Avoid unsafe situations and outcomes before they arise

Care in your hands

Let's connect



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