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PSYCHOSOCIAL HARM – coming down the track

What is psychosocial harm

Psychosocial harm typically refers to harm arising from things such as the organisation of work and the work environment, which may cause psychosocial harm or distress. These risks can lead to conditions such as stress, anxiety, depression or burnout which is a threat to health and safety of the individual and, potentially, the wider work team. The definition extends to interpersonal issues such as bullying, harassment or conflict, and employee performance - which accounts for the “social” part of the nomenclature.

Health and safety stepping out of its lane

Whilst undoubtedly psychosocial harm is a potential risk and organisations are legally required to be aware of the risk and manage it as part of the duty of care. But does appear to be a case of health and safety stepping into the HR lane and finding a new cause. The reality is psychosocial risk has been part of the HR remit for decades and businesses pay a cadre of HR experts to monitor and manage this risk. But as the latest H&S cause, spurred on by the odd conference and professional paper no doubt, business can expect a greater focus on psychosocial risk.

How to businesses may approach catering for psychological harm

The challenge is doing so without adding resource, costs or duplicating what the HR team is already doing?

For larger businesses, consistent with the government philosophy of making HSE easier and getting rid of the bureaucracy and associated cost, our strong recommendation based on years of managing the HR function in some of NZ largest organisations, is do nothing. If you have a capable HR team, then there should be no need. Managing the psychosocial harm is a core HR function and it will have people who are more competent and qualified to do so than the HSE team. All that the organisation may want to do is update the risk register with psychosocial risks and controls and continue to monitor this risk through culture surveys and performance management processes.

If you don't have an HR function, then it's the usual options

- engage an HSE advisor,
- do it yourself or
- do nothing.

We don't recommend “do nothing”

For do it yourselves types, the reality is you are highly likely to be aware of and be managing these risks already. Most smaller companies have a close relationship with their people and want to help them if there are issues impacting their work. As with other health and safety risks, the essence is SME need to demonstrate they have identified, controlled so far as reasonably practicable and are monitoring the risk and the controls.