Understanding Workplace Psychosocial Factors

A practical tip sheet for employers and leaders to better understand and recognize workplace psychosocial factors.

Tip Sheet | Employers | Leaders | Psychosocial Factors

12 - 15 min read

Purpose

This tip sheet helps employers and leaders recognize workplace psychosocial factors, understand their impact on worker mental health, and take practical steps to reduce risk and strengthen protective psychosocial factors at work.

Who this Tip Sheet is For

This tip sheet is intended for individuals who influence work conditions and support worker psychological health and safety, including:

- Employers and senior leaders who set priorities, allocate resources, and shape workplace culture
- Management and leaders responsible for day-to-day work, schedules, and team interactions
- Health and safety representatives and committee members involved in identifying and addressing workplace risks
- HR and people leaders supporting prevention, accommodation, and return-to-work efforts

This resource is designed for those who may not be mental health experts, but who have practical influence over how work is organized, and how psychosocial risks are identified and addressed.

"It's not just about providing discrete mental health supports. It's about the whole system. . ."
- Sarah Salvis, Paramedic Services Chief

What are Psychosocial Factors?

Psychosocial factors in the context of work, are conditions that can affect a worker's psychological health and safety. Psychosocial factors exist at varying levels of the workplace (system, organizational, departmental, team, and job-levels).

These levels are interconnected and interact in different ways to influence mental health and wellbeing at work. At every level, there are meaningful actions that can be taken to protect and support psychological wellbeing

Workplace-Level Psychosocial Factors

Workplace-level psychosocial factors are **organizational conditions that shape the overall work environment**. They tend to affect **many or all workers**, regardless of role, and are usually influenced by **leadership decisions, policies, and systems**.

These factors reflect how work is organized and managed, such as:

- Leadership practices and clarity of expectations
- Organizational culture, civility, and respect
- Workload management across the organization
- Recognition, fairness, and opportunities for growth
- Availability of psychological and social support

Because these factors are system-wide, they are typically addressed through organizational policies, leadership practices, and structural changes, rather than individual accommodations.

Job-Level Psychosocial Factors

Job-level psychosocial factors relate to the specific **demands, conditions, and exposures** of a particular role. They can vary significantly between jobs, teams, or departments — even within the same organization.

These factors reflect how work is experienced at the task or role level, such as:

- Emotional, cognitive, or psychological demands of the job
- Exposure to traumatic or distressing materials or events
- Degree of control or autonomy in day-to-day tasks
- Role clarity, competing demands, or conflicting expectations
- Pace, intensity, or unpredictability of the work
- Specific management styles of a particular role

Job-level factors are often addressed through **job design, workload adjustments, training, supervision, and targeted supports**, rather than organization-wide changes.

Protective vs. Harmful Psychosocial Factors

Psychosocial factors can be either protective or harmful to mental health depending on how they are managed and experienced by workers.

Protective Psychosocial Factors

Protective factors support wellbeing and help workers cope with job demands. Examples include:

- Supportive leadership
- Clear communication and expectations
- Fair recognition and reward
- Opportunities for learning and growth
- Strong coworker support

Harmful Psychosocial Factors

Harmful factors increase stress and the risk of psychological harm. Examples include:

- Excessive workload
- Lack of support or resources
- Poor work-life balance
- Exposure to violence, trauma, or harassment
- Unclear roles or working outside scope

How the Two Levels Work Together

Workplace-level and job-level psychosocial factors interact. For example, a psychologically supportive workplace can reduce the impact of demanding jobs, while weak organizational systems can amplify job-related stressors.

Both levels must be considered to:

- Accurately identify psychosocial risks
- Select appropriate prevention and mitigation strategies
- Avoid placing responsibility solely on individual workers

Many psychosocial factors are within the influence and responsibility of employers and leaders. They include how work is designed, how people are treated, and how support is provided.

Key Takeaway

Whether a factor is protective or harmful depends on its impact on workers — not intent.

Workplace Psychosocial Factors

The following cards map job-level psychosocial factors to the CSA Z1003 framework, illustrating how specific conditions on the job contribute to organizational psychological health and safety. Use them to inform prevention planning, guide risk assessments, and strengthen psychological health and safety at your workplace

Organizational

Job-Based

Psychological & Social Support

Access to practical, emotional, and social support within and from the workplace.

- Belonging & Inclusion at Work
- Protection/Support for Potentially Traumatic Events & Materials
- Job Resources
- Knowledge, Skills, Training & Ability
- Supervisor Support
- Coworker Support

Clear Leadership & Expectations

Clear roles, priorities, and direction so expectations are understood.

- Job Autonomy
- Role-Aligned Job Tasks
- Job Resources
- Supervisor Support
- Balanced Effort-Reward Ratios

Organizational Culture

Shared values and practices that shape workplace behaviour.

- Balanced Effort-Reward Ratios
- Workplace Civility
- Harassment-Free Workplace
- Consideration for Morals, Ethics and Values
- Job Resources
- Supervisor Support
- Coworker Support

Recognition & Reward

Effort and contributions are acknowledged and fairly rewarded.

- Balanced Effort-Reward Ratios
- Supervisor Support

Growth & Development

Opportunities to learn, build skills, and grow in meaningful ways.

- Knowledge, Skills, Training & Ability
- Balanced Effort-Reward Ratios
- Supervisor Support

Workplace Psychosocial Factors

Organizational

Job-Based



Civility & Respect

Workplace that is respectful and free from harassment, bullying, or incivility.

- Workplace Civility
- Harassment & Violence Free Workplace
- Consideration for Morals, Ethics and Values
- Coworker Support



Involvement & Influence

Having a voice in decisions that affect work and working conditions.

- Job Autonomy
- Supervisor Support



Psychological Demands

Work demands match workers' skills, training, and psychological capacity.

- Working Time
- Workload
- Cognitive Demands
- Physical Demands
- Protection/Support for Potentially Traumatic Events & Materials



Workload Management

Work demands are reasonable, manageable, and supported by adequate resources.

- Working Time
- Workload
- Cognitive Demands
- Physical Demands



Engagement

Workers feel motivated, connected, and committed to their work.

- Belonging & Inclusion at Work
- Job Autonomy
- Supervisor Support
- Coworker Support

Workplace Psychosocial Factors

Organizational

Job-Based

Balance

Work supports balance between job demands, personal life, and recovery time.

- Working Time
- Workload

Protection of Physical Safety

Work is designed to prevent physical injury and reduce exposure to hazards.

- Physical Demands
- Physical Exposures
- Protection/Support for Workplace Violence
- Protection/Support for Potentially Traumatic Events & Materials

Psychological Protection

Work conditions support speaking up without fear of negative consequences.

- Balanced Effort-Reward Ratios
- Physical Exposures
- Workplace Civility
- Protection from Harassment & Violence
- Protection/Support for Potentially Traumatic Events & Materials
- Consideration for Morals, Ethics and Values

Protection from Moral Distress

Work allows staff to act with integrity while feeling supported in tough choices.

- Consideration for Morals, Ethics and Values
- Role-Aligned Job Tasks
- Protection/Support for Potentially Traumatic Events & Materials

Protection for Psychological Self-Care

Work encourages self-care and access to supports for mental wellbeing.

- Working Time
- Workload
- Job Resources
- Supervisor Support
- Coworker Support

Why Psychosocial Factors Matter



Psychosocial factors influence more than morale. When left unaddressed, harmful psychosocial conditions can contribute to:

- Stress-related injuries
- Burnout , disengagement or moral injury
- Increased absenteeism and turnover
- Reduced trust in leadership and the organization
- Other physical symptoms, e.g. musculoskeletal disorders

Creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace means strengthening protective factors while reducing or controlling harmful ones.

What Employers and Leaders Can Do

1. Focus on What's Within Your Control

While not every stressor can be eliminated, leaders have meaningful influence over:

- How work is structured and resourced
- Clarity of roles and expectations
- How concerns are responded to
- The quality of supervision and team support
- Norms around respect, fairness, and recognition
- Modelling healthy behaviours

Small, consistent leadership actions can significantly shape workers' experiences. In general, employers and leaders should aim to minimize harmful workplace factors and promote and enable protective workplace factors.

2. Listen to Workers and Seek Feedback

Workers are the best source of information about psychosocial risks in their jobs.

Effective ways to gather insight include:

- Regular check-ins and team discussions
- Surveys or pulse checks
- Safety talks that include psychological health
- Encouraging workers to identify stressors and supports in their roles

Creating an environment where workers feel safe speaking up — without fear of negative consequences — is essential.

Key Takeaways for Employers and Leaders

- Leaders have influence/some control over psychosocial factors on the job
- Leaders can aim to strengthen protective factors and reduce harmful ones
- Leaders should listen to workers and involve them in solutions and planning
- Leaders can address risks early and at the job level
- Leadership behaviour shapes trust, safety, and recovery - be a healthy role model

3. Identify and Address Psychosocial Risks

Psychosocial risk assessment helps employers to:

- Identify where psychological harm may occur
- Understand which job demands are most challenging
- Target practical improvements at the job or team level
- Monitor whether changes are making a difference

Leaders play a key role by:

- Participating in these assessments
- Supporting follow-up actions (moving from intention to action)
- Reinforcing that psychological health is part of workplace safety

4. Understand The Role of Stigma

When addressing psychosocial factors, it is also important to consider mental health stigma.
Stigma can:

- Discourage workers from seeking help
- Increase distress and isolation
- Worsen the impact of harmful job conditions

Leaders influence stigma through everyday actions — language, attitudes, and how injuries or mental health concerns are handled.

Key Takeaway

Normalizing support and responding respectfully can remove barriers to recovery.



Image Credit: Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources