Preventing and managing unhealthy workplace behaviour: A perspective from an Australian safety and health regulatory authority

Helen Mott¹, Kathryn Jones¹, Justine McGillivray¹, Rodney Powell¹, Jean Mangharam¹

¹Human Factors and Ergonomics Team, WorkSafe WA, Perth, WA, AUSTRALIA

1. Introduction
In the past decade there has been an increase in interest and reports, nationally and internationally, about ‘bullying’ in the workplace, (Ariza-Montes et al, 2015; Tsuno et al 2015; SafeWork Australia, 2012). WorkSafe Western Australia (WA), as the regulator of the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) legislation, proactively and reactively addresses workplace hazards that have affected or have the potential to affect workers’ health and safety, including unhealthy workplace behaviour.

As a reflection of the growing interest in the community on workplace bullying, WorkSafe WA has experienced an increase in the number of enquiries on this subject over the past decade. Through a series of meetings between internal departments, it was agreed that the complexity of this hazard was related to several factors that have already been reported across the world including the semantics and definition of workplace bullying (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al 2010), the cross-over in applicable legislation, including those that pertain more to Industrial relations, Worker’s Compensation, Equal Opportunity and in some instances, the Criminal Act (Hutchison 2012) and the challenges of enforcing the current OSH legislation for this workplace hazard (Australian Productivity Commission 2010). It has been proposed that early intervention on organisational culture, leadership styles, systems of work, workplace relationships and supporting workers who have a higher risk of being affected by bullying and other unhealthy workplace behaviours is the most effective way to address bullying hazards in the workplace (Health and Safety Executive, 2010).

From WorkSafe WA’s perspective it was evident that to tackle this complex issue, partnership, education and enforcement, collectively, had to be applied. This presentation will outline the actions taken by WorkSafe WA to improve it’s understanding about WA’s public perception of the meaning of workplace ‘bullying’, how bullying hazards affect workers and current practice in the prevention and management workplace behaviour issues in WA. This presentation will also outline the strategies and interventions put in place by Worksafe WA and their outcomes.

2. Methods
To tackle this issue, strategies were aimed at achieving several outcomes including to: i) increase WorkSafe WA’s capacity to develop and analyse existing databases for information gathering, ii) create a meaningful and robust public enquiry filtering system, iii) improve public educational material, iv) specialise enforcement approaches for this hazard, v) increase engagement and partnership with relevant stakeholders, vi) coordinate interagency meetings with other departments that have legislation that also address inappropriate or unfair workplace behaviours and vii) run proactive campaigns in high risk sectors and worker demographics.

Because WorkSafe WA recognised that this complex hazard required specialised knowledge about the subject to develop interventions based on the above strategies, specialised scientific officers with backgrounds in Organisational Psychology and Ergonomics were recruited to become specialised inspectors in the existing Human Factors and Ergonomics Team. The need to have some specialised knowledge in this subject by inspectors was recognised as a common issue across Australian regulators (Australian Productivity Commission 2010).

3. Results
Analysis of existing internal data showed that there had been a shift in enquiry numbers, having increased from 322 in 2004/05 to 1187 in 2012/13.

An enquiry form specifically designed for workplace bullying and conflict was developed to ensure enquirers understood the role of WorkSafe, to provide advice about what information was needed for WorkSafe to conduct an investigation and to collect information about workplace characteristics and the
demographics of those workers making such enquiries. A preliminary analysis of submitted forms showed that a high proportion of participants reported that they were subjected to threatening and intimidating behaviour in their workplace. Threats often involved job security or future employment, and quite commonly they were issued by people in the position of authority like a manager, supervisor or owner. Enquiries were most likely to be from workers within the the private sector. However, it was noted that workers that worked for non-for-profit organisations were unexpectedly high in number, considering the size of that workforce. When analysing demographics it was apparent that a high number of reports were from young workers, particularly females. The most common unreasonable workplace behaviour experienced by this priority group included threats to terminate job, intimidation and verbal abuse.

Analysis of existing literature and information gathered from submitted forms, anecdotal response from inspectors across industries and call centre staff identified several high risk worker groups, including young workers, trainees/apprentices, aged workers and workers who voluntarily reported a mental health disorder. As a result of this a fast track referral system for these high risk groups from the call-centre to specialist inspectors was implemented.

Several public information products have been developed and produced in several forms, including employer and employee workshops, lunchtime seminars and webpage information and toolkits, since the roll-out of these strategies.

It has been noted that since the development of a call-centre triage and referral system, and the development and availability of specialised public information and toolkits, there has been a trend of decreased number of enquiries being referred for investigation.

The development of a specialised enforcement approach has also seen an increase in the number of enforcement action taken for each inspection.

Anecdotally, the interagency meetings that address inappropriate and unfair workplace behaviour have increased the knowledge and information shared amongst key officers from these agencies about existing legislation, services and public information in Western Australia (including Industrial Relations Commission, Equal Opportunity Commission, Worker’s Compensation Board and Labour Relations). As a result of these interagency group meetings, a webpage that guides enquirers to the most appropriate agency has been developed.

The most recent outcome as a result of this strategy has been the development and completion of a non-for-profit organisation educational, partnership and enforcement campaign.

4. Discussion

This project has widen WorkSafe’s perspective on unhealthy workplace behaviour, particularly in relation to the complexity of the subject, the growing interest by the public, and the barriers and facilitators of utilising OSH legislation, partnership and education for the purpose of preventing and managing this workplace health hazard.

References


