

The background features a dark, abstract composition. On the right side, a large, semi-circular, metallic-looking structure is visible, resembling a globe or a large lens. It has a grid pattern on its surface, which is slightly blurred. Several thick, curved orange lines sweep across the dark background, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall aesthetic is modern and professional.

Ashurst

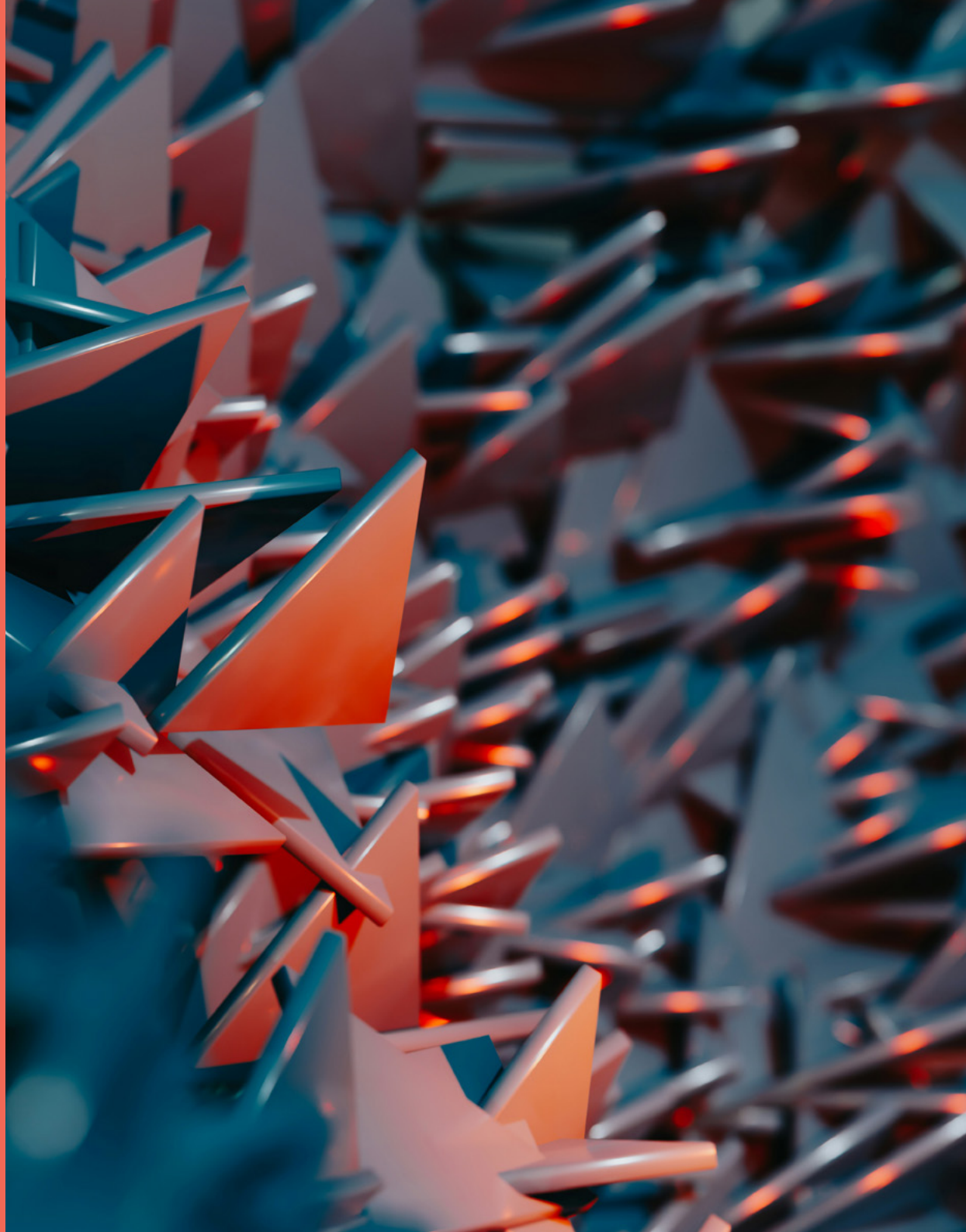
Ashurst Global Survey
on Psychosocial and
Psychological Risks in
the Workplace Report

November 2023

Outpacing change

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Executive summary

If you have had a discussion with any employer or employee over the past year about key issues in their workplace, it is likely you will have found one resounding theme – psychological health is impacting workers and the workplace, the awareness of it is at an all-time high. And everyone is struggling with effective ways to manage it.

The rise in awareness of psychological health in the workplace, and its prevalence as a workplace risk, is the result of a confluence of events. The #MeToo movement focussed attention on physical and psychological ill health from inappropriate workplace behaviour, particularly sexual harassment. There have also been recent, and profound, changes to ways of working – coupled with great leaps forward in technology (with more to come in light of the growth of Artificial Intelligence), making workers more available, but also driving expectations of work delivery, accessibility and blurring the line with personal time.

At the same time, the rise in remote working has seen workers become more isolated, with less supervision and less day-to-day in person contact with colleagues. Add to all that the expediting of the workplace mental health shift by the global pandemic, racial justice reckoning, and other macro challenges, as noted in a recent article in the Harvard Business Review [“The Future of Mental Health at Work is Safety, Community and a Healthy Organizational Culture”](#) (2023).

From a financial perspective at a global level, the World Health Organisation in its report [“World mental health report: transforming mental health for all”](#) (2022) cites the World Economic Forum’s projected cost calculations to the economy; mental health conditions could rise to up to US\$6 trillion by 2030 alongside increased social costs (more than the combined projected costs for cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory conditions).

At a regional level, the [Black Dog Institute](#) has noted that mentally unhealthy workplaces are costing Australia up to \$39 billion each year due to lost participation and productivity. Similarly, the [United Kingdom \(UK\) report “Thriving at Work”](#) estimated that ill mental health is costing employers between £33 billion and £42 billion every year, with the total impact on the UK economy ranging from £74 billion to £99 billion.

Despite the economic impact, employers are still struggling with the issue. A [European Agency for Safety and Health at Work \(EU-OHSA\) Study](#) on new and emerging risks found that 61% of European workers considered work-related stress a common problem in their workplace, and 51% reported that it was not being handled well in their organisation.

A number of countries, such as Australia, have seen significant legislative and regulatory action to address these risks, particularly since the release in June 2021 of ISO 45003:2021: *Occupational health and safety management – psychosocial health and safety at work – Guidelines for managing psychosocial risk (ISO 45003)* about managing psychological health in the workplace.

This Report

Our Global Workplace Health and Safety team has been observing this shift, and wanted to better understand how businesses were assessing these psychological health risks and responding to them. The results of our inaugural Global Survey demonstrate that businesses are aware of the issues – but they are at very different stages and some at quite early stages, of their journey in addressing psychological health as a ‘safety’ issue. Adoption of a systems based approach, with psychological health being a shared responsibility of Safety, HR, Legal and Business teams, has been reached by only a few industries.

The results of our inaugural Global Survey demonstrate that businesses are aware of the issues – but they are at very different stages, and some at quite early stages, of their journey in addressing psychological health as a ‘safety’ issue.

Of all industries and regions amongst the respondents to our Survey, our findings show that the Australian Public Sector (APS) is the most progressed in its approach to managing psychosocial and psychological risk in the workplace, although there is still room for development. The APS also had more respondents than other sectors indicating a prevalence of many of [SafeWork Australia’s 14 psychosocial hazards](#) in their workplaces. This included over 64% of APS respondents indicating poor organisational change management, nearly 54% of APS respondents indicating conflict or poor workplace relations and nearly 43% of APS respondents indicating violence and aggression.

In contrast, the Finance sector globally (including Financial Services and Investment sectors) seems yet to develop a

coordinated approach to identify and manage these risks. This may be explained in part by the fact that respondents in the Finance sector tend to employ fewer workers than other sectors surveyed, and more of their workers are in office based environments than other sectors surveyed, such as the Public Sector, Mining/Natural Resources and Professional Services sectors.

We also found regional differences in our results, most notably that the phrase “psychosocial risk” is little used outside of Australia, where 70% of respondents use the phrase in their organisation compared to only 2.5% of respondents in the UK. Our Survey findings also show that these two jurisdictions position psychosocial and psychological issues as the responsibility of different departments within an organisation. In Australia, psychosocial and psychological issues are considered by 80% of respondents to be a safety issue, whereas in the UK, only 25% of respondents considered these to be a safety issue, with the majority considering them to be an HR issue.

Across all regions there seems to be an inconsistent (or even no) use of definitions of the terms, “psychosocial risk” in Australia and “mental wellbeing” in the UK. This may reflect the fact that different legislation has adopted different definitions, as organisations with workers in multiple countries grapple with how to match these definitions in global or regional policies.

However, the foundational issues remain: if you can’t consistently define an issue, how do you identify, control and measure it?

We hope you find our Survey findings valuable in reviewing and developing your organisation’s approach to managing psychosocial and psychological risk in the workplace.

We welcome your feedback about our Report.

Lea Constantine
Partner

Head of Global Workplace Health and Safety

About our Survey

We conducted our inaugural Survey to identify trends across industries, regions, and globally, to help our clients review and plan their organisation’s approach to managing psychosocial and psychological risks in the workplace.

We used two survey tools to conduct our Survey, phrased to reflect the language of the region. Our Australian Survey used the term “psychosocial risk”. Our rest of world Survey used the term “psychological and mental health risk”.

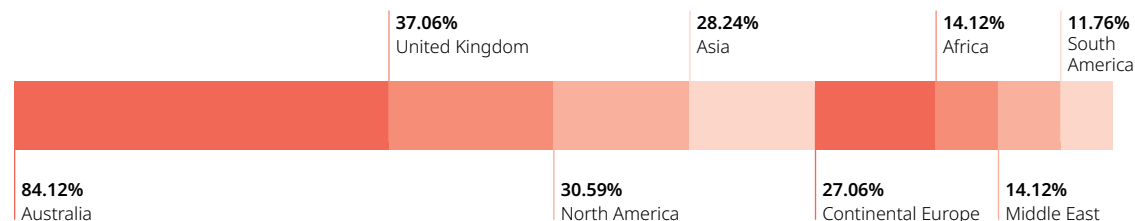
In this Report, we use the phrase “psychosocial risk” to refer to both psychosocial and psychological/mental health risk.

We define “Psychosocial risk” to be a risk to the health and safety of a worker arising from a psychosocial hazard. A psychosocial hazard, in turn, is a hazard that arises from or relates to the design or management of work, a work environment, plant at a workplace, or workplace interactions or behaviours that may cause psychological harm, whether or not it may also cause physical harm. This is a broader concept than has historically been considered when examining psychological health in the workplace, which has traditionally focussed on workplace stress and anxiety, and employers promoting mental health and wellbeing generally (rather than examining the workplace hazards to psychological risks).

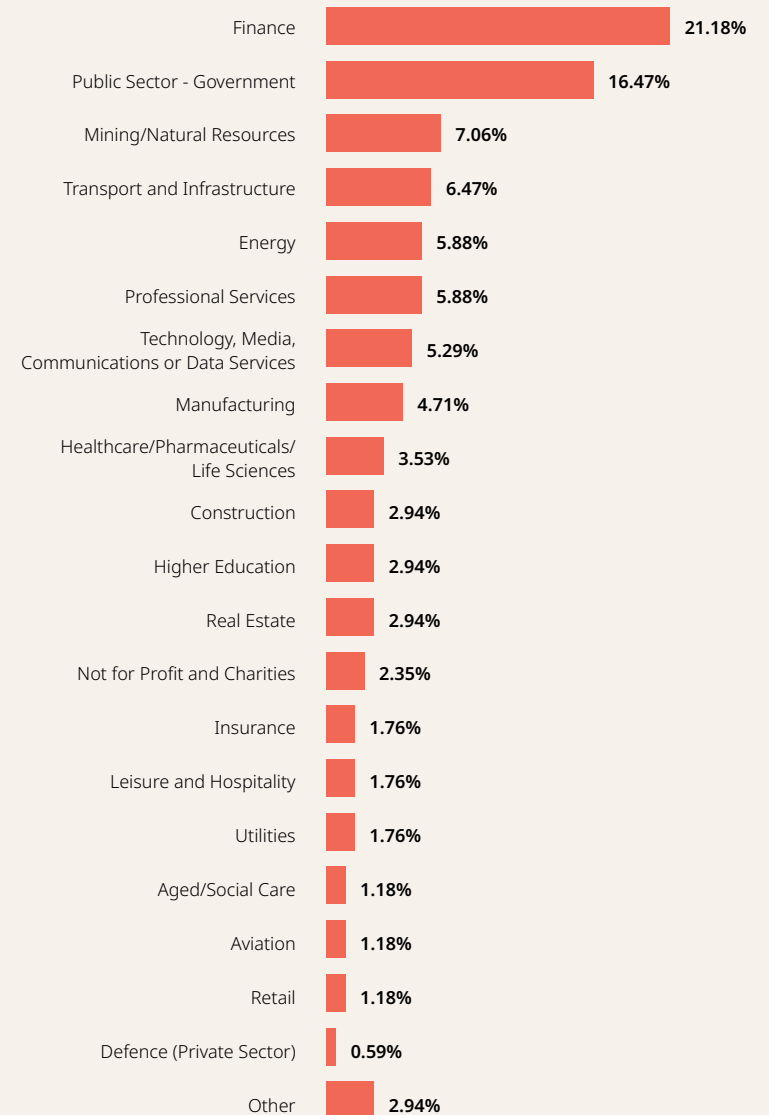
We asked 20 questions (with some follow up questions) about each respondent’s level of awareness of, concern about and responses to psychosocial risks in the workplace.

Our 170 Survey respondents are amongst the FTSE 100 Index, Australia’s Top 200 ASX listed companies and major Government agencies and departments. They range in size with the majority of respondents having more than 1,000 workers (employees and contractors). Most respondents have operations in Australia.

Location of respondent operations



Respondents by industry sector



Global Finding 1

Most senior management teams and boards are not getting the data they need to manage psychosocial risks

Early detection of psychosocial risks in the workplace is crucial to the management of these risks.

ISO 45003 calls out general contributors to psychosocial risks in workplaces, including societal factors (such as lack of support from supervisors and co-workers), environmental factors (such as poor workplace conditions) and organisational factors (such as role ambiguity). However, those responsible for the management of psychosocial risk within a business need to identify and understand the contributing factors unique to their workplace in order to establish, implement and maintain effective prevention controls and management systems.

Crucial to becoming informed, and staying informed, is access to sufficient information regarding underlying sources of psychosocial harm in a workplace.

Our Survey shows that only 30% of respondents rank psychosocial risk in their top 10 organisation risks. This rate was as low as 11% for respondents in the Finance Sector, but reached a high of 57% for respondents in the APS and 40% of respondents in Professional Services.

Further, and of most concern of all our Survey results, nearly 29% of respondents indicated that their organisation does not report in any way to their senior management or board about psychosocial risk. This rate rose to 60% of respondents in Professional Services, showing that there is not necessarily a correlation between recognising psychosocial risk as a Top 10 risk, and reporting about this risk to senior management

and the board. These results suggest that officers are not always being kept sufficiently informed to be able to take a proactive approach to work health and safety duties, particularly in Australia where officer due diligence is a specific duty under the legislation.

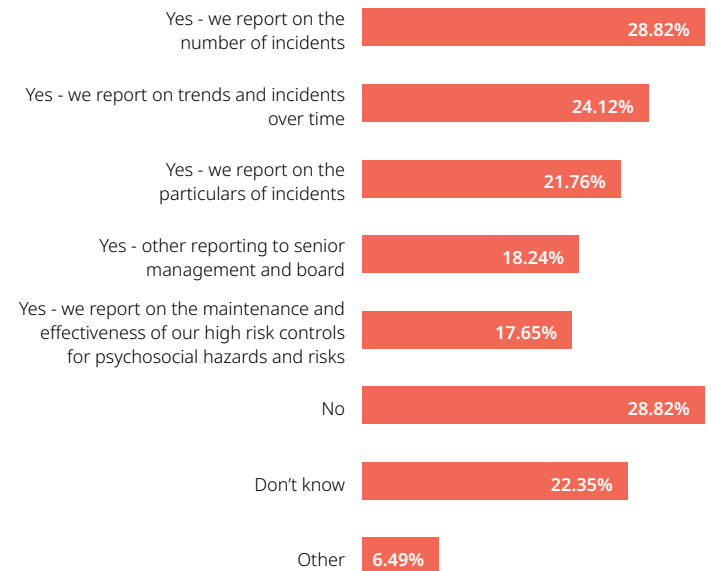
By way of contrast, only 3.57% of respondents from the APS indicated that they do not report to their senior management or board about psychosocial risk.

Nearly 29% of respondents indicated that their organisation does not report in any way to their senior management or board about psychosocial risk.

Where respondents to our Survey do report to their senior management team and board about psychosocial risk, the least reported information is about the maintenance and effectiveness of high risk controls for psychosocial hazards and risks. Reporting seems to be limited to the number of incidents, trends over time and particulars of incidents, not about preventative or responsive measures for those risks.

These findings suggest that many organisations are falling at the first hurdle of risk management: risk identification and reporting to those in positions with the capacity and accountability to drive effective organisational change.

Does your organisation report on the management of psychosocial risk to its senior management team and board?



Global Finding 2

Traditional responses to sexual harassment are prevailing despite the fact that they have proved to be largely ineffective

Sexual harassment in the workplace is sadly still a prevalent psychosocial risk. 26% of all respondents with operations in Australia indicated that 'harassment, including sexual harassment' is a prevalent risk factor in their workplace. 23% of all respondents with operations in the UK indicated that they intend to prioritise the management of 'harassment, including sexual harassment', in the next 12 months.

However, most respondents indicated that they are still relying on traditional (and largely ineffective) control measures to try and prevent this conduct with 59% of respondents using policy reviews, 52% of respondents training staff in resilient work practices and only 29% of respondents undertaking risk assessments for psychological risks associated with sexual harassment. The 2020 [Respect@Work Report](#) by the Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner into the effectiveness of Australian laws dealing with sexual harassment, recommended that improving workplace prevention and responses requires a new and more holistic approach that looks beyond policies, training and complaint handling procedures.

The clear frontrunners at addressing the risks in this area amongst our Survey respondents are the APS and the Mining/ Natural Resources sector. In each of these sectors 50% of respondents indicated that they have undertaken risk assessments for psychological risks associated with sexual harassment.

Of note, the Mining/Natural Resources sector in Australia also recorded a significantly higher proportion of respondents indicating 'harassment, including sexual harassment' as a prevalent risk factor (58% of sector respondents compared to 26% of respondents in all sectors). This is consistent with the findings of the 2022 [Enough is Enough](#) report into sexual

harassment against women in the FIFO industry commissioned by the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Government of Western Australia.

Since December 2022, in Australia there has been a legislative positive duty on employers and persons conducting a business or undertaking (**PCBU**) to take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate, as far as possible, sexual harassment (amongst other things). The Australian Human Rights Commission subsequently published [Guidelines](#) for complying with the new positive duty by reference to seven standards and four 'guiding principles'. The Commission has indicated that it will use these Guidelines when assessing an organisation's compliance with the new positive duty. Employer reliance on policies and training will not meet the new positive duty to prevent sexual harassment in Australia.

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We are seeing similar developments in the UK where the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 has recently received Royal Assent. This Act will come into force in October 2024 and will require employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of their employees. Where an employer has not taken reasonable steps, the Equality and Human Rights Commission will be able to take enforcement action and an employment tribunal will be able to uplift any compensation awarded by up to 25%.

What steps has your organisation taken to manage psychosocial risks associated with sexual harassment?



Global Finding 3

Many respondents have taken no steps to address psychosocial risks in workplace investigations

The manner in which a workplace investigation is conducted can potentially harm the psychological health of a participant – including by re-traumatising the employee who has made a complaint about the workplace conduct being investigated. Factors such as a lack of procedural fairness and transparency, a ‘one size fits all’ approach to workplace investigations and a time-lag between receipt of the complaint and completion of an investigation can all give rise to psychosocial risk. The need for sensitive and trauma informed workplace investigation processes is therefore important in not exacerbating psychological harm.

When asked what steps their organisation has taken to eliminate or mitigate as far as possible the risks associated with misconduct and safety investigations, nearly 30% of respondents indicated that they ‘don’t know’ what steps have been taken by their organisation, and almost 22% indicated that their organisation has taken no steps. Our Survey suggests that organisations still heavily rely on workers themselves to manage psychosocial risk in workplace investigations, with 32% of respondents indicating that they rely on the training of staff in resilient work practices.

Our Survey findings also suggest that organisations are more likely to engage internal investigative teams as opposed to external investigators trained in trauma informed investigation techniques. 11% of respondents indicated that they only use external investigators trained in trauma informed approaches and nearly 19% of participants indicated that they use internal investigators trained in trauma informed approaches.

Our Survey findings also suggest that the APS and the Mining/Natural Resources sector are leading in relation to workplace investigations, with the number of respondents for each response significantly exceeding those for all other sectors. In particular, 58% of respondents in the Mining/Natural Resources sector indicated that they have trained internal investigators in trauma informed investigation approaches, compared to only 19% of respondents in all sectors. Just over 16% of respondents in the Mining/Natural Resources sector indicated that they use external investigators trained in trauma informed approaches.

Organisations still heavily rely on workers themselves to manage psychosocial risk in workplace investigations.

Overall, the responses suggest that most organisations are still at an early stage in the development of wholistic approaches to managing psychological well-being associated with workplace investigations.

Almost **22%** of respondents indicated that their organisation has taken no steps.

What steps has your organisation taken to eliminate or mitigate psychosocial risks in workplace investigations?



Global Finding 4

There is still significant scope for use of psychosocial risk assessments in workplaces

Our Survey findings suggest that many organisations are yet to implement risk assessments to manage and prevent psychosocial risk. Nearly 39% of respondents in all sectors indicated that they have completed and recorded a risk assessment which includes both physical and psychosocial risk, with the responses from the APS (50% of respondents) significantly exceeding those in the Finance Sector (11% of respondents). The Mining/Natural Resources sector also continues to lead the way in this regard, with 42% of respondents in this sector indicating that they had completed and recorded a risk assessment which includes both physical and psychological risks.

In relation to managing the risk of sexual harassment in the workplace, our Survey findings suggest that organisations are less likely to have a policy which specifically deals with the psychological risks associated with sexual harassment. Only 29% of respondents indicated that their organisation has performed a targeted risk assessment for mental health outcomes associated with sexual harassment.

However, 50% of respondents in both the Mining/Natural Resources sector and the APS indicated that they have completed a risk assessment specifically designed to address the consequences of sexual harassment. This incidence drops to 5.5% in the Finance Sector.

These numbers are consistent with an [external review](#) which suggests that work health and safety policies across Australian workplaces have poor inclusion of risk assessments for mental health outcomes (Potter et al, "Analytical Review of the Australian Policy Context for Work-Related Psychological Health and Psychosocial Risks", 2019).



Global Finding 5

Safety regulators globally are investigating and litigating psychosocial safety risks, not just physical safety risks

All organisations are required to manage psychosocial risks as well as physical risks to their employees and other workers. Psychosocial risk has become subject to increased focus for regulators, particularly in Australia, with various Australian work health and safety regulators identifying psychological safety as a regulatory focus area for 2023.

In the UK, stress in the workplace is one of the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) three strategic priorities. The HSE is looking to achieve a significant increase in the number of employers taking a preventative rather than reactive approach to managing work-related stress, and have warned that, as with any other workplace hazard, if employers fail to adequately protect employees from work-related stress, the HSE could investigate and take enforcement action if appropriate.

Our Survey findings show that 8.8% of respondents have been investigated or have been a party to litigation, threatened litigation or an enforceable undertaking for a psychosocial or mental wellbeing safety matter in the last two years.

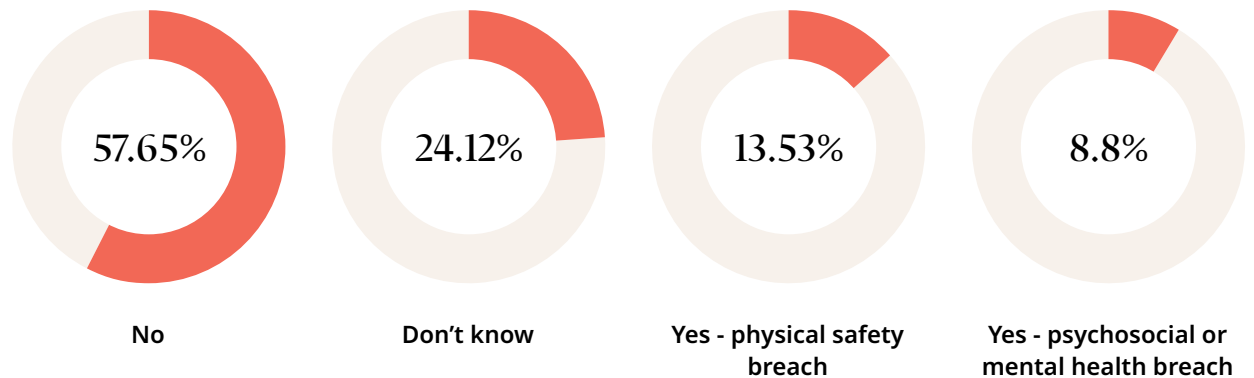
This is compared to 13.5% of respondents who indicated they had been subject to investigation, actual or threatened litigation or an enforceable undertaking in respect of a physical safety breach in the last two years.

We anticipate that the frequency of psychosocial risk-related prosecutions and investigations will increase, given the heightened focus of health and safety regulators on protecting psychological health in the workplace.



8.8% of respondents have been subject to regulatory action for a psychosocial breach in the last two years.

Has your organisation been investigated or been party to litigation, threatened litigation or an enforceable undertaking for any safety breaches in the last 2 years?



Global Finding 6

Most organisations are not measuring the impact of psychosocial risk or using data analytics to do so

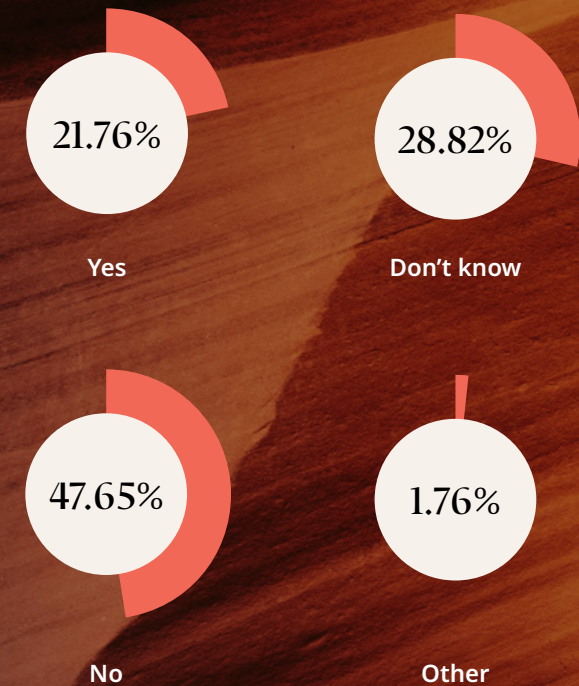
Modern workplaces constantly and rapidly grow, change and evolve. Traditional workspaces are no longer the norm, with workers often performing their jobs remotely and in different jurisdictions. This means that businesses are required to continually evaluate the impact of psychosocial risks in often novel working conditions and that traditional information gathering methods, such as surveys, may no longer be the gold standard in efficient data collection.

Despite this, our Survey shows that only 22% of respondents measure the impact of psychosocial risk, and surveys are the primary measurement tool used. Other measurement tools used by some respondents include exit interviews, analysis of workers' compensation data, focus groups, Employee Assistance Program reporting, risk assessments and leave absences. However, only 12% of respondents indicated that they use data analytics and technology to manage psychosocial risk. This suggests that most organisations are not getting maximum value and insights from their available data, and are not aggregating data to identify trends and patterns.

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Interestingly, the Mining/Natural Resources sector and APS showed the greatest use of data analytics to measure psychosocial risk, with 25% of respondents in each sector indicating that they use data analytics for this purpose.

Does your organisation measure the impact of psychosocial risk in its workplace?



Global Finding 7

Designated Mental Health Officer type roles are becoming more common

Implementing a Mental Health Officer or a similar type of role is not expressly required by ISO 45003 or by legislation or codes of practice in Australia or the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, many organisations are choosing to proactively introduce such roles as a control measure to manage psychosocial risks in the workplace.

This is consistent with the guidance in ISO 45003, which provides that top management should “determine the resources needed and make them available in a timely and efficient manner” (at 5(c)).

Our Survey findings show that 30% of organisations already have in place a designated Mental Health Officer, Well-Being Officer, Psychosocial Risk Manager, or similar role. The most prevalent name for this role amongst our Survey respondents was ‘Mental Health First Aider’ or ‘First Aider’.

However, 56% of respondents do not have a designated Mental Health Officer or similar role (with the remaining respondents unsure or indicating that they used other roles or external services to fulfil that function).

When broken down by sector, 54% of respondents from the APS and 42% of respondents from the Mining/Natural Resources sector indicated that they have such a role, whereas only 28% and 20% respectively of respondents from the Finance and Professional Services sectors indicated that they have such a role.



30%

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designated Mental Health
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Psychosocial Risk Manager,
or similar role.

Global Finding 8

There is a need for far greater collaboration and communication between HR and Safety teams

When asked to select all categories that apply, over 80% of respondents with primary operations in Australia categorised psychosocial risk as a Safety issue, compared to 53% who categorised it as an HR issue. The results were the opposite for respondents with primary operations in the United Kingdom; only 26% categorised this as a Safety issue whereas 59% categorised it as an HR issue.

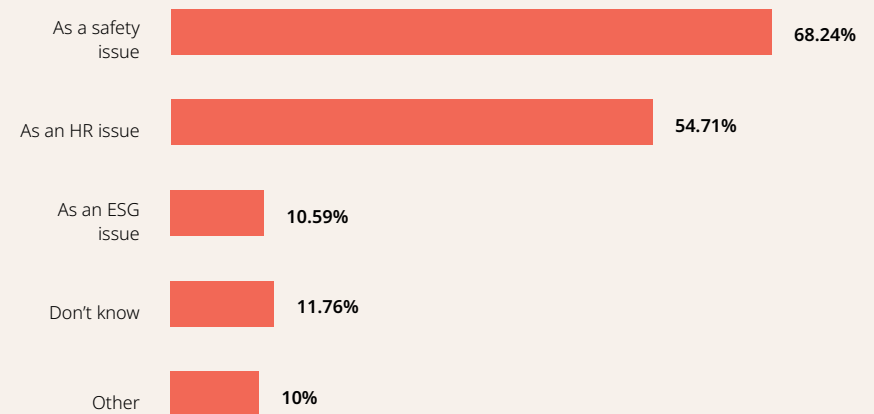
Regional differences also emerged about whether HR and Safety teams routinely work together in the management of psychosocial risk, with nearly 56% of respondents with primary operations in Australia indicating yes, but not even 21% of respondents with primary operations in the United Kingdom indicated yes.

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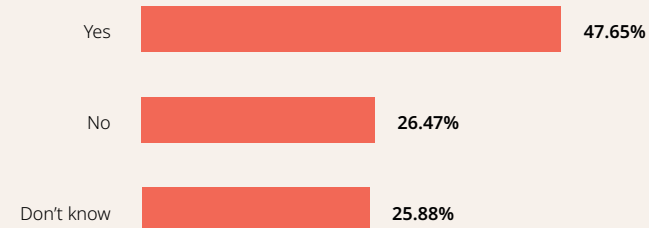
Only 20% of respondents from both Australia and the UK in the Finance sector indicated that their HR and Safety teams worked together on this issue, compared to 60% of respondents from Professional Services, 58% of respondents from the Mining/Natural Resources sector and nearly 48% of respondents from all sectors.

Given commentary, such as in the [Respect@Work Report](#), that there is a need for shared responsibility for psychological well-being across Safety, HR, Legal and Business teams, these results suggest there is a need for far greater collaboration and communication between HR and Safety teams in most organisations in all sectors and all locations.

How does your organisation categorise psychosocial risk?



Do your HR and Safety teams routinely work together in the management of psychosocial risks?



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Design Ref: R010515 Dec 23

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