



Addressing Psychosocial Risks and Work Design Deficiencies in the Workplace

A SUPERFRIEND WORKSHOP SUMMARY REPORT



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Introduction

On August 19, 2024, SuperFriend and Comcare hosted a workshop at a two-day Comcare event in Canberra, focusing on work design and psychosocial risks and hazards.

Attendees were divided into groups and tasked with analysing a hypothetical scenario involving an employee named Sara. The goal was to develop potential solutions for issues Sara was facing from the perspectives of the Employee (Sara), Direct Supervisor, or Management/Employer. At the end of the session, participants were asked to apply the SMART work design model to their proposed solutions to assess the framework as a potential tool for good work design.

The aim of this Think Tank was to explore the application of work design thinking, assessing how useful it is and which aspects of it are most challenging for people to apply. This information will be used to guide future efforts to develop resources and guidance materials for organisations and individuals looking to improve work design in their workplace.

The scenario presented was hypothetical, and participants were given written information with limited time to consider it. It was not a requirement of the session that participants were familiar with the type of work in question, nor was any experience in work design required. Attendees were encouraged to discuss the challenges presented in the scenario, rather than aiming for a “correct” approach. As a result, the information in this report is a basis for discussion around the challenges inherent in work design, and not a definitive guide.

The **SMART work design model** is a framework that can be used to identify and change workplace challenges to foster motivation, wellbeing, and performance at work. Practices that align with SMART work design can:

- protect individuals from harm by eliminating or minimising the risk of physical and psychological harm before it occurs
- enhance wellbeing and a sense of thriving, linked to more commitment, creativity, engagement, higher performance and more innovation
- increase productivity through both cost savings and productivity gains
- help people to adapt and change, which is important for a successful digital future.



Work design considers ‘the content and organisation of people’s tasks, activities, relationships and responsibilities’. It looks at the physical, biomechanical, cognitive and psychosocial characteristics of jobs and identifies what is required for optimal outcomes, job satisfaction and productivity. It considers individual differences and is tailored to specific work situations. Good work design ensures that hazards and risks are eliminated or minimised so far as is reasonably practicable. For more information on good work design see [Good work design | Comcare](#)

Workshop Scenario

Sara works in a demanding customer service role at a large organisation. While not working she is a single mother of young children having recently returned to work (7 months ago) following her separation. She plays a minor caring role for her parents as well.

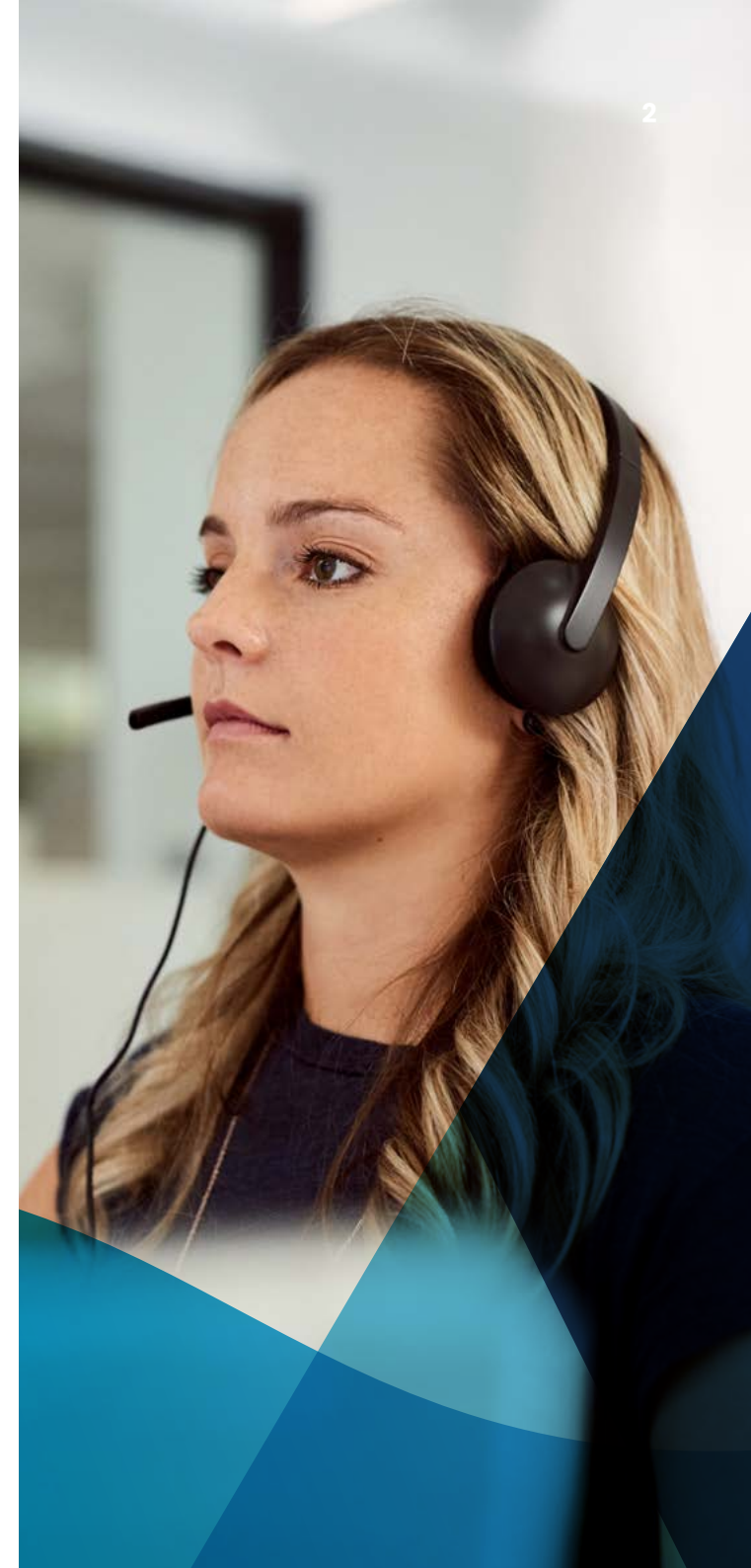
Her rostering system allows some level of negotiation a few weeks prior but does not easily accommodate unexpected absences. As a result, Sara is anxious about the possibility of being performance managed and losing her job due to ongoing frequent requests for carer's leave.

Employees in Sara's role report a strong focus on customer outcomes and KPIs, such as timeliness. High team turnover also means remaining staff juggle higher workloads which can impact response times, sometimes resulting in customer complaints. Within her role, the work tasks also frequently change.

There is support in the form of training and coaching sessions, but Sara feels like the job is constantly changing, making it hard to provide the standard of service she would like to. Sara gets satisfaction from helping customers but admits that dealing with challenging and sometimes abusive clients is exhausting.

Sometimes there is a lot of interpersonal tension within teams, particularly when the workload is high. While Sara feels that she can approach her direct manager regarding taking time off, in general she finds it very hard to speak about her concerns at work or her personal circumstances. This is particularly true when things are busy.

Sara is concerned about making things harder for her team at work. She feels there aren't many chances to get to know other people outside of her team, as time off phones is usually limited to training, team meetings or short breaks timed to ensure phones are always answered.



Identifying psychosocial hazards and design flaws

All groups managed to list the probable hazards, with those looking from Sara's side being able to identify and describe a greater number of these, making their discussions the most comprehensive of the three perspectives.

While attendees did label the hazards, there was limited discussion around why these were risks for Sara and how they could be impacting her well-being. A deeper discussion of the issues present could have helped with developing solutions that could address multiple problems simultaneously.

For some, Sara appeared to be underperforming. While she was struggling with some aspects of her work, like high job demands and interpersonal tensions, there was no mention of her performance.

The hazard of inadequate reward and recognition was largely overlooked by most groups. However, some participants hinted that Sara's perception of her own work might be skewed due to a lack of feedback from management.

Learnings

The employee's perspective matters at all stages of the work design process. The further people are removed from the actual role (such as managers and executives), the more difficult it is for them to identify with the employee, determine hazards and propose suitable solutions. Taking the time to thoroughly identify issues and consult with employees ensures that the solutions are tailored to their needs and effectively address the problems. To help with this process ask about SuperFriend's **Psychosocial Hazards THINK Workbook** – a practical, interactive e-book to identify and manage psychosocial hazards in the workplace: [Contact SuperFriend](#).

Examining work design is an opportunity to help every employee to meet the demands of their roles and work at their best, regardless of perceptions about performance. Underperformance can be a symptom of poor work design, but work design is not restricted to employees that are underperforming in their role.

Inadequate reward and recognition may include:

- Receiving insufficient or unfair feedback
- A lack of or limited performance discussions or development opportunities
- Unfair, biased, or inequitable or insufficient recognition and rewards
- Not recognising workers' skills.

Proposing solutions

The attendees offered a range of solutions, but many of these suggestions extended beyond the scope of their assigned role's authority. For example, several groups suggested that Sara take proactive steps by becoming a "champion" for her team or even building a business case to advocate for better work design.

Surprisingly, there were multiple mentions that Sara's best option to improve her situation was to quit. While some participants stopped short of suggesting this, they recommended that Sara "take a holiday" to improve her well-being. These options, however, did not address the underlying issues of work design.

Learnings

In some roles, individuals have only limited control over the design of their work. While some employees may be driven to enact a wider change within the company, psychosocial hazards and work design deficiencies are organisation-wide problems.

Work design can be a challenging process, but as an organisation it needs to be done to ensure mental health and wellbeing of the employees. Solutions to the problems do not need to be complex. Small steps like job crafting can be enough to make a meaningful change.

For further information about job crafting and how to use it in your workplace visit [**What are the different types of job crafting? – Tailored Thinking | Make Work Better, Make Better Work.**](#)

Some participants admitted they struggled to relate to Sara's challenges due to their seniority and positions at work. Work design should be a collaborative effort between all the parties involved, especially the employee because they have the best understanding of the job, its challenges and the likely impact of proposed solutions.

Job crafting is a self-initiated, proactive strategy to change the work characteristics in a job to better align the job with an individual's personal needs, goals, and skills. Job crafting can be done in different ways. For example, by seeking new job resources or challenges, or by modifying or reframing existing work.

SMART framework for work design

Overall, the groups found the SMART framework valuable, as it made the task more concise and helped to identify gaps in their thinking while developing solutions. However, some participants felt that it could be too restrictive and limited to the letters in the framework when exploring the issue.

Notably, 'Stimulating' and 'Relational' were the two main aspects of the framework that were underdeveloped during the group discussions. Some attendees argued that the nature of the call centre work environment inherently limited the presence of these aspects of work design.

Learnings

The concept of work design has evolved significantly over the years. Applying work design models and processes, such as the SMART framework, provides a structured method to focus the analysis of a role and propose solutions. There are opportunities to apply the framework after an initial analysis (i.e. use the framework to ensure the approach has been comprehensive) or guide the analysis from the beginning. **For more information visit [S.M.A.R.T Work model - Resources](#)**

S	M	A	R	T
Stimulating	Mastery	Agency	Relational	Tolerable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill variety • Task variety • Problem solving demands • Using & developing skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role clarity • Feedback • Task identity (doing a whole piece of work) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control over work methods & schedule • Decision making autonomy • Participative decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social contact • Supervisor support • Support from peers • Social worth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manageable time pressure, work hours, emotional demands etc. • Consistent role expectations • Justice & change mgt
Example Psychosocial Hazards				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low variety / high repetition • Low task significance • Poor skill utilisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role ambiguity • Low reward and recognition • Excessive monitoring • Inadequate recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low Job control • Rigid and Inflexible processes • No opportunity to influence decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor support • Poor workplace relationships (bullying, harassment, etc) • Isolation and remoteness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor environmental conditions • Excessive demands/pressures • Injustice • Role conflict • Badly managed change

What does good work design look like in this scenario? SuperFriend and Comcare are committed to supplementing this report with a real-world example of successful work design that addresses many of the challenges discussed.

Follow SuperFriend and subscribe to our news to hear more about part two!

Looking for further support for your workplace or industry?

SuperFriend offer a variety of mental health resources for workplaces and industries including:

- **Psychosocial Hazards THINK Workbook:** support leaders in their legal duty to provide a psychologically safe environment with this practical, interactive guide.
- **Thriving Workplace Index:** discover employee experiences, assess workplace mental health, and gain actionable steps for improvement with our comprehensive diagnostic tool.
- **SuperFriend Think Tank:** address workplace challenges, exchange insights and foster collaboration. Each event generates a qualitative report with clinical expertise and actionable mental health strategies.


For information or support on good work design see [Comcare's Good Work Design resources](#) for managers and teams or contact: goodworkdesign@comcare.gov.au.

Contact us today

The SuperFriend team would be happy to chat with you about navigating your workplace's wellbeing and explore how we can support you.


Scan the QR code and book a chat with us today!



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Who is SuperFriend?

SuperFriend is a leading workplace mental health and wellbeing not-for-profit, with a vision for all Australian workplaces to be mentally healthy.

With the support of our Partners, we work towards this vision by:

- helping organisations navigate their workplace wellbeing journey by providing research, data, evidence informed strategic support and resources
- advocating for policy, regulation and workplace system change through strategic alliances.
- providing insights to industry, government and workplaces by analysing industry trends and data and conducting Australia's largest annual national workplace mental health survey, the Indicators of a Thriving Workplace.



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Comcare

Who is Comcare?

Comcare is the national authority for work health and safety, and workers' compensation. We understand and promote the health benefits of good work.

Comcare is established under the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 (SRC Act) and is the national authority for work health and safety and workers' compensation. We have functions and responsibilities under both the SRC Act and the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (WHS Act), which includes regulatory functions and compliance and enforcement powers.

Our purpose is to promote and enable safe and healthy work. Our purpose brings together our business and engages our clients and stakeholders around physical and psychological injury prevention, early intervention, injury recovery, return to work and work health and safety regulation.

We have several important core roles as a regulator, scheme manager, insurer and claims manager.

We also have essential enabling roles, focused on supporting education, engagement and better practice approaches to health and safety across our scheme and the capability and capacity of our own workforce.



Appendix

Methodology

The purpose of this exercise was to describe how a group of individuals with an interest in the topic of work design assessed the challenges in a hypothetical scenario. Participants were attendees at the Comcare National Conference (August 2024) who registered for the session. Numbers were capped at 50 participants, and the entire session ran for 80 minutes. After a short presentation on the principles of work design and its potential impact on employee productivity, participants were divided into small groups of up to 10 people. The discussion was focused on a hypothetical case scenario involving Sara, a worker in a customer service role in a large organisation. Each group was asked to answer the following questions from the perspective of Sara (the employee), Sara's Direct Supervisor or Management of the organisation:

1. Task 1: Consider the case study and identify:

- a. Psychosocial factors, including hazards that may pose a risk to Sara and others in the team.
- b. Possible deficiencies in the work design.

2. Task 2: Develop an action plan:

- a. As a group, brainstorm possible solutions that might improve Sara's work design.

3. Task 3: Work through the SMART framework

- a. Talk through each letter and any impact having the framework to work through has on your proposed action plan.

The discussion in each group was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The findings were compared to an example analysis to identify the depth of exploration of the scenario. Common themes across the discussion were identified and form the basis of this report.





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