

Impact Case Study

AMWU and workforce mental health



Introduction



Under the Victorian *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004*, “employers must provide and maintain a working environment for their employees, including contractors, that is safe and without risks to health [including psychological health], so far as reasonably practicable”.

In 2021, The Black Dog Institute released a white paper, *Modern Work: How Changes to the Way We Work Are Impacting Australians’ Mental Health*. The report found that Australian workers, particularly those under 25 years old, were experiencing increased mental health symptoms – a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also found these mental health issues were increasingly complex and workers were taking longer to recover.

The report also noted, however, that “there is good evidence to support specific policy and practice initiatives to improve workplace mental health” and called on Australian businesses and governments to act.

Background

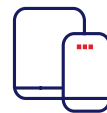


The Australian Manufacturers Workers’ Union (AMWU) wanted to investigate and improve the mental health and wellbeing of its members and find ways to prevent mental illness and the incidence of mental injury amongst workers in manufacturing workplaces across Victoria. The AMWU represents a male-dominated, largely blue-collar workforce, most of whom continued to go to work in person, often under difficult conditions, during the pandemic.



The AMWU worked with members from the Centre for Organisations and Social Change (COSC) on the *Collaboration Delivers Wellbeing in Manufacturing* project. The project aimed to reduce or remove psychosocial hazards at work by increasing understanding within partner organisations and amongst union delegates of workplace mental health. It also aimed to create policies and practices to eliminate or reduce workplace mental health risks.

The Research



COSC members interviewed and surveyed workers in four key AMWU sectors – metal and engineering manufacturing; printing, design and packaging; food and confectionary manufacturing; and automotive manufacturing – and from both urban and regional sites.

The project was significant in building active collaboration between enterprise managers and the union. The goal was for management, employees, and the union to work collaboratively to prevent or minimise the work-related factors that contribute to mental ill-health or psychological injury. They did this by encouraging actions that supported workers’ mental health and wellbeing, primarily by identifying and then reducing or removing workplace psychosocial hazards.

Funding support and/or institutional support



The *Collaboration Delivers Wellbeing in Manufacturing* project was supported and funded by Worksafe Victoria's WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund (MHIF).

The MHIF "provides large scale investment for workplaces to promote mental health and wellbeing along with prevention of mental injury" and aims to support Victorian workers identified at greater risk of mental injury.

- <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/workwell-mental-health-improvement-fund>

Project outcomes



The final evaluation report to the AMWU, *Collaboration Delivers Wellbeing in Manufacturing Project Report to the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) Victorian Branch: Evaluation of the project and key recommendations for future action*, was delivered in November 2022. Reports on the project can be found at <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/workwell-mhif-collaboration-delivers-wellbeing-manufacturing>

AMWU material

AMWU has developed a work wellbeing website at: <https://www.amwu.org.au/workwell> to share information and initiatives with AMWU members.

The *Don't Bottle Up Workplace Mental Health* poster, available at <https://www.amwu.org.au/workwell-resources>, outlines 11 work-related factors that affect mental health and provided a number where employees could seek assistance. The poster is used to support awareness-raising and provide information about further support on manufacturing sites across Victoria.

The *Understanding Mental Health in the Workplace Tipsheet* was created for general use to help raise awareness of workplace mental health, work stress and early warning signs, and provide advice on taking action.

Conferences

- The *Collaboration Delivers Wellbeing in Manufacturing* project evaluation was delivered in December 2022 following the Managing Psychological Risks in Manufacturing Conference (Forum Two). It included an assessment of the extent to which the recommendations from the first Forum in 2021 were acted on, and identified potential strategies to enable the AMWU to raise awareness, capability and achieve broader participation in managing psychological health across the sector.

- Professor Johanna Macneil presented the work on behalf of the COSC project team at the International Labor and Employment Relations Association (ILERA) conference in Europe in September 2022. She also presented the work at the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ) Conference in February 2023.

Overview of the impact

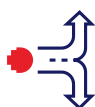


The project was successful in changing people's understanding of mental health as a collective workplace challenge. The project steering committee said about the impact that:

"Management ... have a stronger commitment to ... the cultural issues in the workplaces that are associated with mental health, and the importance of the issues. They have a stronger understanding that collaboration with the workforce and with the representatives of the workforce through the union can assist that and can be positive."

This project represents important preparation for increasing community expectations about the duty of employers to prevent psychological injury in the workplace, which are expected to be reflected in upcoming changes to the Victorian OHS Regulations.

Next Steps



The AMWU's next steps will be in focusing on using resources and relationships to build greater awareness amongst members, workforce, supervisors and managers, to help identify and reduce psychosocial hazards.

At RMIT, researchers from COSC continue their work on control of psychosocial hazards, including projects that address burnout and workplace sexual harassment, and building effective lived experience workforces.

COSC Research Theme

- Health, wellbeing and organisations

This theme explores how organisations can promote and improve health and wellbeing as well as organisational responses to health and social problems.