



A Perspective of the HFESA

Managing Work During the Pandemic

**Human Factors & Ergonomics
Society of Australia Inc.**

MANAGING WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC

Pandemic management brings significant challenges to pivot operations; leverage technology; and remain agile, resilient, and connected at work. **The psychosocial health and wellbeing of workers become heightened needs** during such times. It is a significant challenge to imbue culture and brand identity of an organisation when workspaces and practices are widely distributed, and change is constant. Australian businesses, and those around the world, have been tested in an extreme manner during the COVID-19 pandemic. **A work-from-anywhere phenomenon** has taken precedence for most white-collar workers, and a work-with-exposure-risk contingency is the reality for several blue-collar and lower-income or casual workers, accentuating the gaps in social equity.¹ International border closures and interstate or city-based lockdowns have meant that most businesses have had to operate in new ways and withstand curtailed sales or service delivery. Globally, this has translated into the largest financial crisis in a generation, with an economic contraction of more than four percent in 2020.^{2, 3} There are fears expressed as social unrest and anxieties are arising from the perceived risks of infectious exposure as well as the possible complications from vaccination.⁴

Those most susceptible to the virus and its adverse effects are the elderly or those with medical complications and comorbidities.⁵ However, there are ongoing exposure risks for the workers deemed to be authorised⁶ or essential. The effects of lockdown and geographic isolation are significant too, resulting in unemployment, under employment, or significant psychological duress. This phenomenon disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, such as women,^{7, 8} single parents,⁹ single-dwelling or dual-custody families, immigrants, the elderly, people subject to domestic abuse, people with disabilities, those in poverty, and members of lower-socioeconomic communities.¹⁰ The labour market impacts of the pandemic have fallen inordinately on vulnerable workers who are engaged in precarious employment, affecting people who were typically less likely to report job satisfaction yet have more dependency on their work¹¹ than their more affluent professional counterparts in the community. That said, the health and wellbeing of white-collar professional workers has been a concern to business and welfare services too. While some people benefit from the flexibility of an at-home or from-anywhere style of remote working, others are adversely affected by the isolation, lack of established routines, contracted opportunities for social relations or physical activity, blurred boundaries of home life (are we working from home or living at work?),¹² and lack of appropriate, dedicated office working space. For organisations, short-term reports of pandemic productivity gains or the foreseeable opportunities for reduced overhead expenses may be misleading: what will be the effects of leave accruals and the reduced real-estate footprint when we have not yet managed the technological, psychosocial, and emotional support needs of our workers who have family care obligations or who may find themselves in a fractured living situation with the increasing constraints of housing availability?

The Role of an Organisational Ergonomist

A human factors specialist and certified professional ergonomist specialising in organisational and psychosocial/neurological/cognitive ergonomics can help businesses address these difficult decisions, accommodations, opportunities, risks, and trade-offs. Job design is an essential part of these professional services and is a specialty of macro- (or “big picture” and “systems-thinking”) ergonomics.¹³ Effective job design can alleviate anxiety, duress, work dissatisfaction, and general psychosocial work hazards.^{14,15, 16} We might have had some generalised awareness of essential workers comprised of those in urban utilities, health care, police, fire, waste management, agricultural, or food production services. However, when was it common to consider the grocery store retail assistant as an essential worker? Given the frenzied state of hoarding groceries that has occurred during the pandemic, driven by the fear of missing out, that categorisation of essential worker is now recognisable: that sales assistant had best be in place to sell the goods that we require. Yet what are the protections for this worker? A plastic sneeze shield around the register that dampens the acoustics and leads to users awkwardly leaning beneath, to the side, or above the shield, forgoing the physical barrier? And what consideration has been given to the demands for more work hours during times of low staff availability? This is just one example of the unique and contemporary in-demand worker role that could benefit from human-centred approaches to work and job design.

The human factors specialist and certified professional ergonomist can assist businesses analyse workload and design jobs for effective performance at different life stages. This can mitigate psychosocial hazards and construct better health and work performance.¹⁷ There is an ongoing need for this type of examination during the pandemic and changing world of work. Workload analysis and job design requires:

- The analysis of tasks, including the time-based countable number and type of activities required;
- Assessment of worker perception of their workload¹⁸ contrasted with that of others;¹⁹
- Analysis of perception of “what is” versus “what should be” or “what can be imagined” for improved capability;
- Assessment of work satisfaction and work-related psychological symptoms;²⁰
- Evaluation of acute and cumulative risk factors for work-related mental health disorders (WMHDs); and
- Examination of the lag indicators of job dissatisfaction, such as turn-over or employee absenteeism, for example.

There are important contributions that can be made from the expertise and practices of organisational ergonomics to help business, industry, government, and public health needs if leveraged, including:

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- Knowing the sources of truth – deciphering the information to determine what is well-evidenced and propped by science
- Helping to identify vulnerable workers and define essential workers while developing protective health strategies to support these workers and their work systems
- Workload analysis; psychosocial work factor identification; risk analysis, evaluation, and intervention planning; and effective job design
- Facilitating an effective return-to-work strategy for workers transitioning from at-home or from-anywhere workspace to a designated and dedicated shared geographic workspace²¹
- Helping organisations determine design strategies to reduce the risk of infection transmission in the workplace²² or among employees with work-from-anywhere arrangements
- Supporting organisations to design education and support programs for workers who have been infected, possibly been a source of exposure, or whose friends or family members have been infected, accompanied by the sensitivity training that may be required for their workmates
- Purpose-place-and-space analysis to determine the best strategies to protect and promote health and wellbeing at work and in-transit to work, including the interface with other businesses in multi-use complexes, or ‘shared leadership’ in the ecosystem of work relations²³
- Facilitating the design of pandemic-specific call centres to support first-responders²⁴
- Supporting the adoption of new technologies and the interface of new technologies for technology-enhanced work design²⁵ (everything from the webinar meeting technology to those which augment, model, simulate, virtually create, or animate our activities)
- Developing systems for transparent and complex decision making and disclosures, using multi-criteria methods, helping to determine actions against trade-offs
- Determining health and wellbeing consequences of work design strategies
- Addressing gender inequities²⁶
- Examining and leveraging opportunities that present when the design of work might change
- Administering effective communication methods to the right audience in need (Case in point: the pandemic and public health messages in New South Wales to their public could likely have been delivered differently to those communities where literacy was lower²⁷)
- Facilitating situational leadership strategies and examining how that might shift during remote and distributed work arrangements
- Supporting continuous iteration, learning, and innovation by promoting reflection activities and learning teams so that the effects of changes are constructively captured, and growth opportunities can arise
- Championing workplaces to develop and implement evidence-based well-being strategies that are tailored to the needs of managers and staff; they should be useful, manageable, meaningful, and sustainable.

To connect with a certified professional ergonomist, contact HFESA:

<https://www.ergonomics.org.au/>

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