

Leadership Management of Psychosocial Wellbeing in Public Sector Workplaces: *summary report*



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About the Research

In 2024, the Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) engaged the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) to conduct research into how to *improve leadership awareness and capabilities for managing psychosocial wellbeing in public sector workplaces*.

This research was commissioned under ANZSOG's Research Grants Program, with the former Public Service Commission (PSC) as the sponsor agency. Following a Machinery of Government change, this was transferred from the PSC to the NSW Premier's Department. The UTS research commenced in September 2024 and concluded in November 2025.

Research Background

Workplace psychosocial wellbeing (PSW) has gained increasing prominence in public policy debates globally, with research consistently demonstrating the substantial human and economic costs of psychosocial harm in the workforceⁱ.

Strong evidence from decades of research demonstrates the influence of the psychosocial work environment on a person's health and wellbeingⁱⁱ, as well as on workplace productivity, attendance and retention. Broadly, the psychosocial work environment refers to the connections between workplace structures, working conditions, and the psychological and physiological processes that impact employees' wellbeingⁱⁱⁱ. This is impacted by various job variables, including^{iv}:

- Type of work/job demands
- Workload
- Available resources and support
- Worker autonomy and ability to exercise discretion over decision making
- Opportunities to develop and apply skills

Research demonstrates that the conditions of a "positive work environment" can improve employee psychosocial wellbeing^v, while harmful or poor working conditions can increase the risk of developing or worsening symptoms of psychological conditions^{vi}. Table 1 lists conditions commonly associated with both positive and negative work environments.

Table 1: Common conditions of positive and poor working environments

Positive working environment	Poor working environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Meaningful work ○ Supportive organisational culture ○ Supportive management and working relationships ○ Organisational justice ○ Effective resourcing ○ Manageable job demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ High job demands ○ High emotional demands ○ Low decision-making authority ○ Perceived or actual imbalances between effort and reward ○ Low perceptions of fairness at work (organisational injustice)

Source: LaMontagne et al. 2014; Modini et al. 2016; López Gómez et al. 2019; van der Molen et al. 2020; World Health Organization 2022.

Further, the evidence indicates that cumulative exposure to poor working conditions over time has a ‘compounding effect’, and has been associated with increased risk of psychosocial distress and injury amongst individuals with longer tenure or working in high-risk environments (e.g., frontline workers).^{vii}

Definitions

In this research:

- **Psychosocial wellbeing¹** (PSW) refers to an employees’ overall psychological, social, physical, mental, and emotional health. In the workplace, the concept is often associated with an employee’s sense of safety and capabilities in functioning at work, coping with challenges, and managing workplace stressors.
- **‘Stressor’** refers to any event, condition or demand that an employee may experience as challenging or distressing (sometimes referred to as psychosocial hazards²).
- **‘Leaders’** refers to any public sector employee with supervising responsibilities or who otherwise has substantive influence over the PSW of other employees.
- **‘Non-supervisors’** refers to public sector employees who do not have formal supervising responsibilities.
- **PPR** refers to ‘Promote – Protect – Respond. These three overarching workplaces strategies derive from the National Mental Health Commission’s [Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces](#) publication that informed the UTS research.

Methodology

The UTS research investigated three Key Research Questions (KRQ) detailed below.

A mixed methodology was deployed comprising a targeted desktop research, employee engagement in eight case study workplaces within the NSW public sector, plus advice from the ANZSOG-convened Steering Committee (see Attachment for further details).

¹ NSW Health. (2020). NSW Aboriginal Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2025.

² SafeWork NSW. (2021). Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work. May 2021.

Research Findings

KRQ1: What are the key stressors, profiles, and prevalence rates of public sector psychosocial risk?

Available data and case study employee feedback indicate that a significant proportion of public sector employees are experiencing and being impacted by psychosocial stressors in the workplace. For example, an overwhelming majority of survey respondents (99.5%) across the eight public sector workplaces reported experiencing at least one listed stressor in the past 12 months. Significantly, the vast majority of these (93%) reported that their PSW had been negatively impacted by at least one stressor, with almost three-quarters (73%) reporting that the impacts were significant.

Many public sector employees appear to be impacted by psychosocial risk

The types of stressors experienced, and their impacts, vary depending on the employee's role, the psychosocial conditions of their work and workplace, and their personal situation and needs. Across the case study workplaces, the most common stressors reported to have significantly impacted respondent PSW were:

- High workloads and work pressure (40%)
- Dealing with difficult colleagues and unpleasant ways of communicating (32%)
- Lack of recognition or a sense of being undervalued (30%)
- Insufficient support or direction provided by a supervisor/manager (30%)
- Lack of clarity about responsibilities and what is expected (25%).

Type and impact of workplace stressors vary

Several key workplace stressors were also reported to compound the presence and negative impacts of other stressors, and reduce the ability or motivation of employees to engage with available PSW supports and protective practices (e.g., taking breaks and leave). Notably: high workloads, as well as poor people management practices and PSW approaches.

Both the literature and respondent feedback revealed that many leaders also experience similar stressors, plus compounding or additional stressors such as:

- Stressors related to their PSW management responsibilities including:
 - Vicarious stress
 - Navigating sensitive or unclear boundaries
 - Negotiating or balancing the needs of different employees
 - Administrative complexities and additional workload associated with responding to individual employee PSW issues.
- Role conflict and feeling “sandwiched” between the demands of Ministers/senior management and the needs of employees and clients.
- Managing expectations while delivering essential, though complex, services often within resource-constrained environments.

Leaders face compounding workplace stressors

The literature, existing data and respondent feedback highlighted the negative impact of workplace stressors on job performance and attendance. For example:

- Two-thirds (67%) of respondents reported that the impact of stressors in their workplace had a negative effect on their ability to perform their role, including 12% reporting significant negative effects.
- Almost one-quarter (23%) reported taking time off due to the impact of workplace stressors.
- More than half (51%) of those who did not take time off reported wanting to but not doing so due to workload (37%), or discomfort asking their supervisor for leave (26%).

Workplace stressors negatively impact employee performance and attendance

KRQ2: What are public sector leaders, managers and employees' perceptions of current leadership awareness, capabilities and practices regarding psychosocial issues in the workplace?

While the literature indicates that leaders can have a significant influence on workplace PSW, there is only emerging evidence of what comprises best practice leadership capabilities for supporting workplace PSW. As such, the UTS research team adapted research related to mental health in the workplace to assess perceptions of current leadership awareness, capabilities and practices related to PSW. In particular, the three practice areas outlined in the [Mentally Healthy Workplaces framework](#) (2024)³ and adopted in the National Mental Health Commission's [Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces](#)⁴:

'Protect' – 'Promote' – 'Respond' (PPR) provides a useful framework to assess and build leaders' PSW practices and capabilities

- **'Promote'** (P): Create a positive PSW culture reduces stigma and normalises help-seeking behaviours, and enhance aspects of work that contribute to positive PSW.
- **'Protect'** (P): Identify and manage workplace psychosocial risks to prevent and minimise employee exposure to harm.
- **'Respond'** (R): Identify and respond to instances of psychosocial distress to support recovery.

Building on available literature, and subject matter expertise in the UTS research team and Project Steering Committee, core leadership capabilities were identified under each Promote-Protect-Respond (PPR) pillar. These were then used to assess perceptions within the eight case study workplaces.

Mixed feedback provided on leaders' understanding of their PSW responsibilities

³ Deady, M., Sanatkar, S., Tan, L., Glozier, N., Gayed, A., Petrie, K., Dalgaard, V. L., Stratton, E., LaMontagne, A. D., & Harvey, S. B. (2024). A mentally healthy framework to guide employers and policy makers. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 1430540

⁴ National Mental Health Commission 2024, *Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces* – Release 3, December 2024

The feedback indicates that while some leaders reported they were confident in their understanding of workplace PSW (24%), the majority were not entirely clear on the boundaries of their responsibilities (61% 'somewhat clear' and 15% 'not at all clear'). Further, some reported feeling "overwhelmed" by the PSW issues raised by some employees.

Non-supervisors' perceptions of their leaders' understanding of PSW was mixed. Whilst some reported their leaders' understanding was limited, or that they did not prioritise PSW in the workplace, others reported that their leaders seemed to understand PSW issues but that this did not consistently translate into practice.

Disconnect between leader and non-supervisor reports on PSW capabilities

Across both leader and non-supervisor feedback, leaders' PSW capabilities were more often rated positively than negatively. However, in general, leaders rated themselves as substantially more capable than they were rated by non-supervisors. While the self-ratings of leaders cannot be directly linked and compared to the ratings provided by their supervisees, the finding nonetheless suggests an inconsistency in perceptions, and the potential need for more 360-degree feedback regarding PSW capabilities. In general, both leaders and non-supervisors reported higher rating to their 'Promote' capabilities, compared to 'Respond'; the lowest ratings from both cohorts was in relation to 'Respond'.

Variations in reports of leader capabilities within and between case study workplaces

The research found there was significant variation in perceptions of leadership capabilities both within and between the case study workplaces. While some respondents reported positive leader PSW practices, common criticisms included:

- Approaches that felt "performative", "tokenistic" or solely "compliance-driven".
- Leaders lacking the "soft" skills – such as emotional intelligence, communication and emotional regulation – needed to manage PSW matters well.
- Leaders who appeared to overtly prioritise organisational objectives and key performance indicators over employee PSW, even when the impacts were well known and openly discussed.
- "Disconnect" between different levels of leadership, particularly between senior leaders and immediate supervisors, at times undermining effective PSW prioritisation and responses.

Critiques of leaders included shortcomings in their 'soft skills', and emphasis on organisational objectives despite potential PSW impacts on employees

KRQ 3: What evidence-based leadership initiatives and management capability uplift activities will best support psychosocial wellbeing in public sector workplaces?

The literature and respondent feedback on future uplift opportunities revealed that there was no silver bullet, nor “one-size-fits-all” solution that would deliver improvements across the public sector, or even across specific portfolios. Instead, improved PSW management will work best if tailored to specific stressors and workplace factors. Further, good practice requires ongoing, collaborative discussions and problem-solving involving leaders and employees at all levels.

PSW management uplift needs to be tailored to the workplace, collaborative and multi-pronged

The research also revealed that lasting improvements to PSW management must extend beyond improving individual leader capabilities and include reforms at the macro, meso and micro levels within organisations, as well as across the wider public sector ecosystem.

Public sector workplaces must provide an enabling environment for leader action by improving the broader systemic and policy settings that impact employee PSW⁵, at the same time as empowering leaders to recognise and protect their own PSW given its importance to supporting wider workplace PSW⁶.

Leadership uplift requires an ecosystem response, embedding PSW at macro, meso and micro level across the public service

Most leader respondents reported that more resources and guidance is needed to adequately manage PSW in their workplace. While types of support varied within and between workplaces, common suggestions included:

- Additional resources, policies and procedures, including tailored guidance on how to manage the specific stressors impacting different types of employees and different types of workplaces
- Ongoing professional learning opportunities to enhance their proactive and reactive PSW options and skills, as well as improve their people management and communication skills. Respondents commonly requested that this be sector-specific and include in-person, practice-based, workshop-style options.

Further findings related to KRQ 3 are captured in the conclusions and options below.

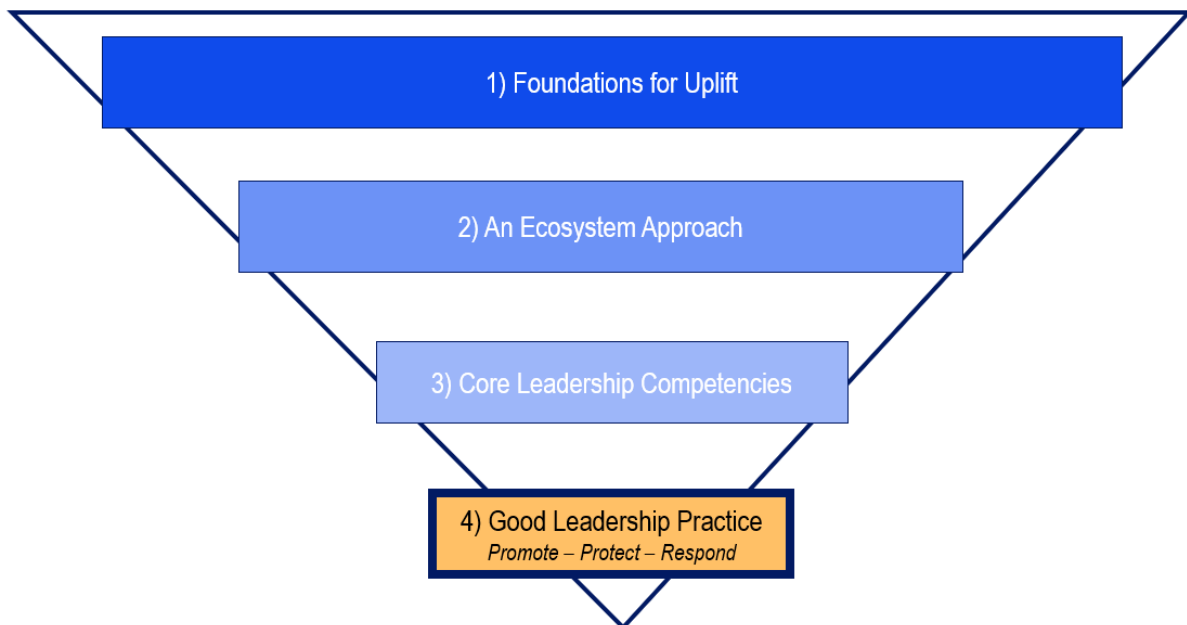
⁵ St-Hilaire and Gilbert (2019), “What do leaders need to know about managers’ mental health?”, in *Organisational Dynamics*, vol. 48 p. 86

⁶ Dextras-Gauthier, Gilbert, Dima and Adou (2023), “Organisational culture and leadership behaviours: is manager’s psychological health the missing piece”, in *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14 p. 1 - 4

Conclusions and Options Arising

The UTS research found that an uplift in leader management for PSW in public sector workplaces will require a combination of institutional (macro), organisational (meso) and individual (micro) strategies, as summarised in Figure 1, and expanded on below.

Figure 1: UTS Agenda for PSW Leadership uplift



Source: UTS Research Team, September 2025

1] Foundations for Uplift

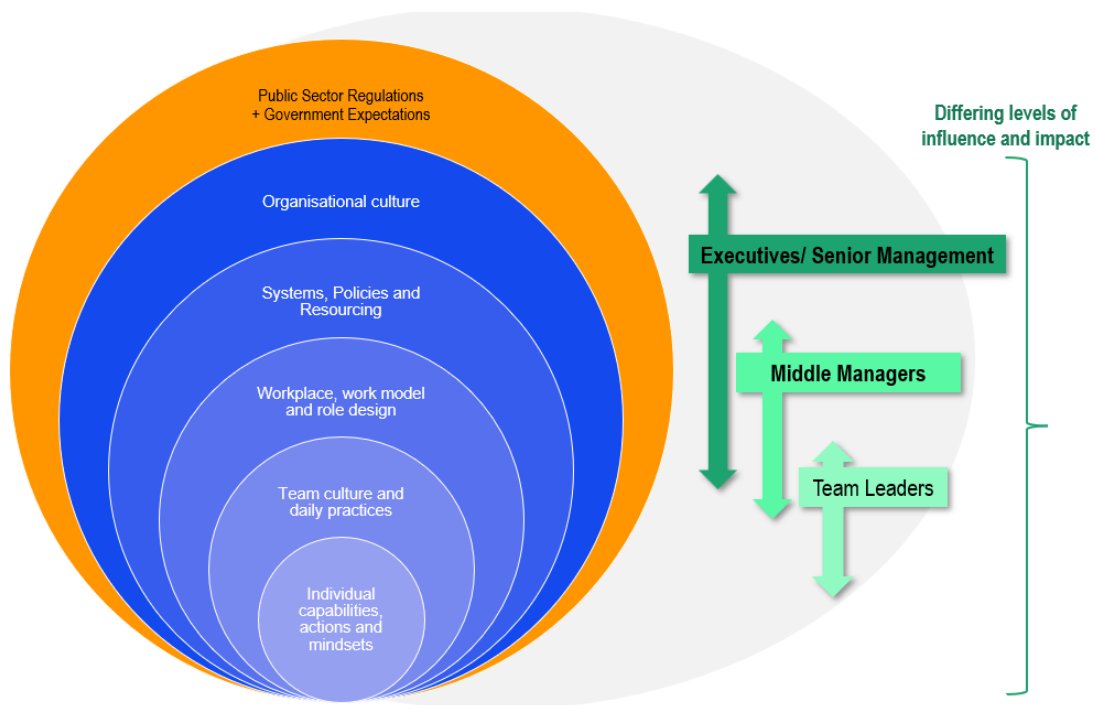
At a macro level, the research identified five broad areas or 'foundations' for uplift. These were identified as critical starting points for enabling effective leader responses to manage PSW in public sector workplaces. They comprise:

- 1) Manage workloads and job demands consistent with broader employment commitments
- 2) Promote and recognise the public sector's important role and the value of individual employees
- 3) Reframe and embed PSW as a core public sector priority and performance enabler
- 4) Clarify boundaries and options for workplace PSW responsibilities
- 5) Establish a balance between PSW compliance reporting and quality uplift measures.

2] An ecosystem approach to PSW

Secondly, and as summarised in Figure 2, the research revealed that changes need to occur across the public sector ecosystem to provide leaders with an enabling environment to fulfill their PSW responsibilities with employees.

Figure 2: An Ecosystem Approach to PSW



Source: UTS Research Team, September 2025

Key measures that reflect this layered and integrated approach include:

- Better positioning PSW as a positive priority and key enabler of success
- Building trust in public sector leadership and willingness to engage with PSW initiatives
- Supporting agencies to assess and improve their psychosocial working conditions
- Continuously updating the suite of PSW resources available
- Promoting quality ongoing PSW professional learning opportunities
- Providing funding for PSW research, resource development and uplift activities
- Incorporating PSW competencies into leadership roles, recruitment and training design (expanded on at 3 below)
- Requiring ongoing, proactive leadership uplift activities, including 360-degree feedback models
- Regularly assessing and improving components of the wider public sector ecosystem.

3] Core Leadership Competencies

The research pointed to a common set of leadership qualities, or competencies, needed to successfully manage PSW in the workplace. These competencies should be further refined and then embedded into standard recruitment, onboarding, professional development, as well as review and support systems for all leaders – from junior team leaders through to Senior Executives and above.

Importantly, all competencies stem from the first: Leaders must be champions of a safe and healthy workplace environment and culture in order to deliver on their PSW responsibilities:

1) Champions a healthy workplace environment and culture that prioritises safety, wellbeing and respect as core values.

2) Designs and implements effective, tailored wellbeing strategies in collaboration with employees.

3) Demonstrates advanced people management skills including superior communication and emotional intelligence.

4) Cultivates a positive, collaborative team environment and establishes effective feedback loops.

5) Manages workload and resources strategically to mitigate negative impacts and optimise performance.

6) Ensures equitable wellbeing practices: guaranteeing fair and consistent application of PSW procedures.

7) Drives continuous improvement in PSW: proactively monitors PSW risks and implements improvements.

8) Commits to personal and team capability development through training, self-assessment and 360-degree feedback.

9) Models and rewards healthy workplace behaviour, including work-life balance and positive PSW practices.

4] **Good Leadership Practice: Promote – Protect – Respond**

Lastly, the UTS research identified various good leadership practices that could be deployed in individual workplaces to improve the PSW of the workplace, as well as individual employees therein.

These are organised under three core leadership responsibilities – to Promote, Protect and Respond to PSW matters – drawing from the earlier reference [Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces](#) (2024).

1) PROMOTE	Communicate that PSW is an organisational priority, normalise help-seeking and contribute to positive workplace PSW.
PM 1	Continuously enhance your PSW understanding and capabilities.
PM 2	Authentically communicate in ways that reinforces the importance of PSW.
PM 3	Regularly promote available PSW options, supports and pathways to employees.
PM 4	Model healthy work behaviour, positive PSW practices and work-life balance.
PM 5	Recognise your limits and when formal support or expert advice is needed.
PM 6	Proactively shape and contribute to improving PSW across the wider workplace ecosystem.
PM 7	Use the PSW Leadership Competencies (see above) to recruit, train and assess leaders.
PM 8	Value and treat all employees with respect regardless of their role or 'rank'.
PM 9	Respect and respond to employee feedback and suggestion to improve workplace operations.
PM 10	Invest in positive workplace engagement and connections with colleagues.

2) PROTECT	Identify and manage workplace psychosocial risks, minimising employee exposure to harm.
PR 1	Design work models and jobs to minimise stressors and provide early intervention.
PR 2	Proactively identify and monitor workplace PSW risks.
PR 3	Build a workplace culture that enables PSW issues to be openly and comfortably discussed.
PR 4	Act to develop tailored, collaborative solutions to prevent and/or mediate PSW risks.
PR 5	Adopt a zero-tolerance approach to inappropriate workplace conduct, bullying and harassment.
PR 6	Avoid personal disclosures that may discourage employee help-seeking or add to their stress.
PR 7	Embed PSW protections into change management design and implementation.

3) RESPOND	Identify and respond to instances of PSW distress or exposure, address and redress harm, and support recovery.
R 1	Establish clear, confidential channels for reporting psychosocial issues and distress.
R 2	Identify and reduce barriers to employees accessing effective PSW supports.
R 3	Identify and check-in with employees exhibiting signs of psychosocial issues and distress.
R 4	Proactively connect employees to timely, fit-for-purpose supports and review effectiveness.
R 5	Collaborate with employees to design tailored solutions to support recovery.
R 6	Follow-up with impacted employees, in accordance with their preferences.
R 7	Remain cognisant of preconceptions and check personal biases during all PSW discussions.

Further details on all of the above, including good practice tips and examples, can be found in the full UTS report.

Next Steps

While the UTS research findings and the above options arising are a significant and robust contribution to the important topic of managing PSW in the public sector, it should not be regarded as definitive given resourcing and time constraints, as well as the complex nature of the topic area.

As such, UTS recommends a number of follow-on initiatives be actioned by ANZSOG, its jurisdiction members, and/or relevant Australian and New Zealand central agencies and regulators:

1. Using a similar three KRQ and mixed methodology approach to UTS, commission supplementary research in other jurisdictions, portfolios, and workplaces to those used for NSW.
2. Invest in further research to identify evidence-based approaches to priority leadership challenges regarding PSW.
3. Document good-fit solutions and practice options on specific topics identified in the UTS research.
4. Develop and pilot a Public Sector Leadership PSW Toolkit and professional learning uplift suite based on PPR.
5. Research and promote good practice engagement mechanisms and feedback loops involving leaders and employees aimed at continuous improvements across PPR.
6. Establish regular leadership forums and exchanges to promote good practice and discuss PSW management issues and challenges in public sector workplaces.

Attachment: About the UTS Research

The UTS research team was drawn from:

- [Institute for Public Policy and Governance](#)
- [UTS Graduate School of Health](#)
- [UTS Business School](#).

The mixed methods used are summarised below:

Method	Detail
Desktop research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An investigation of research on workplace PSW and psychosocial risks, including best-practice management approaches. • An overview of the Australian and New Zealand public sector, with a focus on NSW and available PSW data. • Analysis of case study organisation procedures, training and other resources related to workplace PSW and leadership.
Public sector engagement	<p>Eight workplaces volunteered to participate in response to an invitation issued by the research sponsor, NSW Premier's Department. These mapped across three portfolio areas: Health (3), Transport (3) and Justice (2). The names of participant agencies and individual respondents are not being made public.</p> <p>Stakeholders in each workplace were engaged via:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymous online survey: 324 responses from a combined distribution pool of 3,746. Due to significant variations in the response rates of each workplace, the survey data was weighted to ensure findings are not unduly influenced by specific workplaces or portfolios. • Focus groups: 29 volunteer participants, over 10 sessions. • In-depth leader interviews: 13 executive leaders (Senior Manager+) participants from across the eight case study workplaces.
Steering Committee input	<p>Advice was provided throughout the course of the project by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UTS Subject Matter Experts from the UTS Graduate School of Health and the UTS Business School. • Project sponsors and other external advisors, including Senior representatives from ANZSOG and the NSW Premier's Department, as well as Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University, in the initial stages.

Given the time and budget constraints of this research, and the limited number of self-selecting workplaces and respondents, care should be taken in generalising the findings. As noted under Next Steps, the UTS researchers strongly recommend additional research be conducted, building on the evidence and directions outlined in the full report.

Endnotes

- ⁱ World Health Organization. (2022). Guidelines on mental health at work. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240053052>; Boot, C. R., LaMontagne, A. D., & Madsen, I. E. (2024). Fifty years of research on psychosocial working conditions and health: From promise to practice. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 50(6), 395–405. <https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.4180>
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