

Introduction to psychosocial hazards: understand

IOSH guides

This free *Introduction to psychosocial hazards: understand* is part of a series from IOSH aimed at workers, supervisors and managers (including senior managers) and links to the competency framework theme identified on the next page. The series provides general information on a range of important occupational safety and health (OSH) topics, helping the reader to understand better the role they can play in ensuring that OSH risks are well-managed.

For other titles in this Introduction series, search for 'IOSH guides'.

Readers who are IOSH members can access more in-depth information in a parallel set of guides, which include the principles underpinning various topics, with practical examples and case studies. These guides cover all competencies specified in IOSH's competency framework and can be downloaded from our [members' resources page](#).

Join us

For a modest fee, non-members can join IOSH to gain access to all the information contained in these indispensable guides, as well as:

- industry recognition, by meeting standards of competence
- technical advice
- invaluable networking opportunities
- a voice in the global movement for change.

Visit our [website](#) to join now.

To deepen your knowledge and develop your skills, sign up for an [IOSH training course](#).

The IOSH competency framework

The framework covers all the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed by occupational safety and health professionals. It has 69 competencies, divided into 12 areas which together make up three categories:

- 1 technical
- 2 core
- 3 behavioural.

These guides align with the framework with four levels:

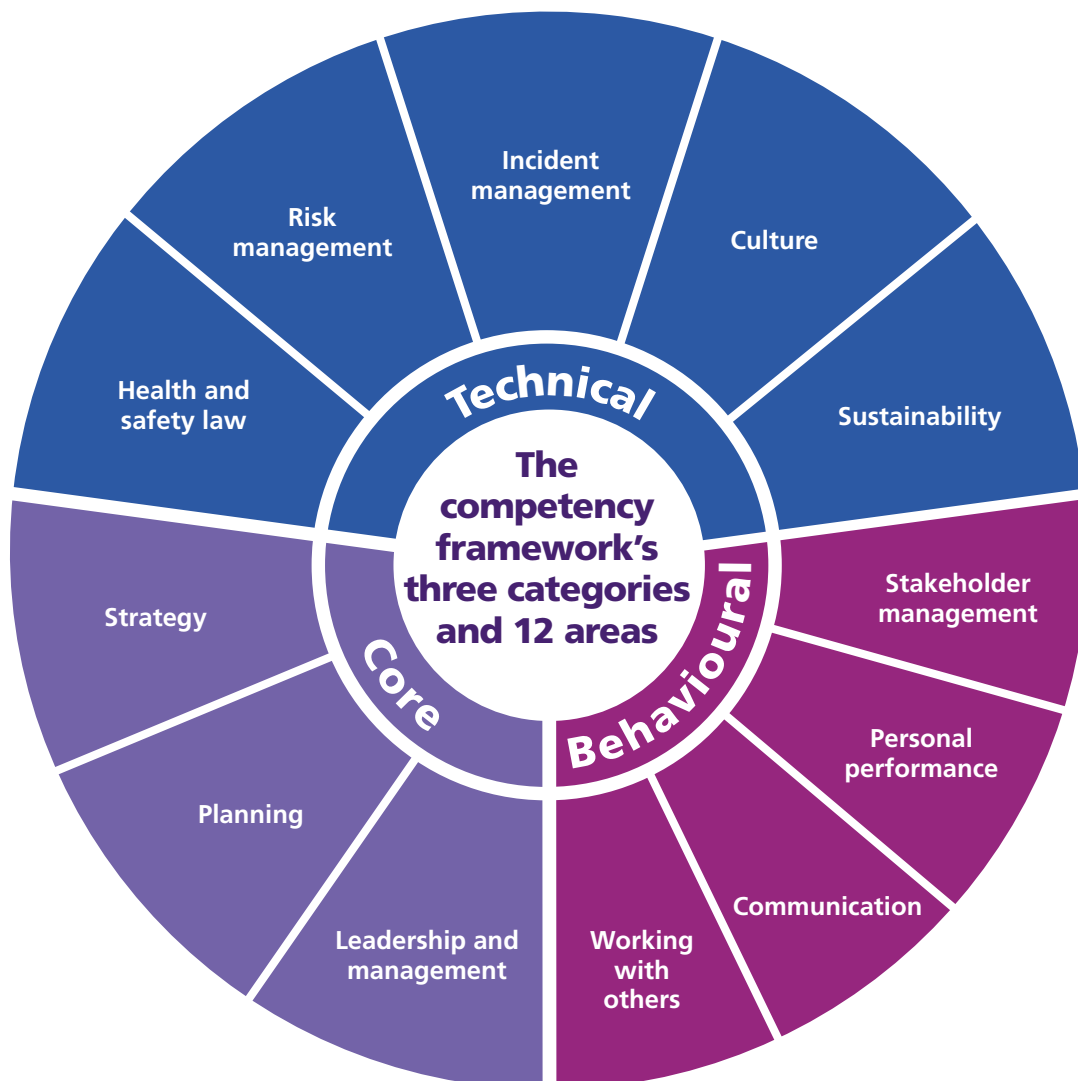
- 1 understand
- 2 implement
- 3 lead
- 4 innovate.

Some guides are aligned to multiple levels. The levels indicate your career stage and your experience as an OSH professional.

[Find out more about the competency framework.](#)

This guide aligns to the following technical competencies:

- occupational health and wellbeing: understand level
- understanding of worker wellbeing: understand level.



Psychosocial hazards

The term 'psychosocial' refers to the inter-relationships between individuals' thoughts and behaviours and the social environment.¹ This term can be interpreted differently but in OSH, psychosocial hazards refer only to hazards created by work and the working environment.

Psychosocial hazards are anything in the design or management of the work or the working environment that could increase the risk of an adverse reaction, which can lead to work-related stress, exacerbates non-work-related stress or affects workers' health and wellbeing.

OSH management methods can be used to manage the more specific needs in the case of psychosocial hazards.

Workers are likely to be exposed to a combination of psychosocial hazards. Some are always present, while others only occasionally. The terms 'psychosocial hazard' and 'psychosocial risk' are sometimes used interchangeably, and stress is often defined as a psychosocial hazard instead of a consequence of the hazard.

Psychosocial hazards

Definitions

This table explains some of the common words found in the subject of psychosocial hazards.

Table 1: Terminology translation table

Psychosocial	Relating to the interaction between social and psychological factors. ²
Psychosocial hazard	An occupational hazard that affects the psychosocial wellbeing of workers, including their ability to participate in a work environment among other people. ³
Psychosocial risk	The likelihood of factors arising from poor work design, organisation and management which is combined with poor social context of work, that could result in a negative effect on workers' health including psychological, physical or social issues such as, work-related stress, depression or burnout. ⁴
Psychosocial risk factor	Psychosocial risk factors are organisational factors that have an impact on the psychological safety and health of workers. These factors include the way work is carried out and the context in which work occurs. Psychosocial risk factors can affect workers' mental responses to work and cause mental health problems.

Common psychosocial hazards

Some of the most common psychosocial hazards in the workplace are listed here.

- **Work demands** – these may have a positive or negative experience, depending on the individual's ability to cope with them, alongside the level of support provided by the organisation to help them manage the demands.
- **Job insecurity, organisational changes and restructuring** – all organisations undergo change, but even if it is positive, it can still increase instability and pressure on workers. This can create anxiety and concerns over job security, leading to issues such as increased levels of presenteeism and increased likelihood of negative mental ill health.
- **Relationships at work** – work can create a feeling of belonging and a social cohesion through work relationships. This is an important aspect of psychosocial health. If this breaks down or isn't present in the workplace it can lead to health issues. Relationships at work can be affected by a lack of social support or interpersonal conflict.
- **Work-related violence or trauma** – including adverse social behaviours, including workplace bullying and harassment) – these could arise from violence by third parties such as customers and patients.

Psychosocial hazards

Effective measures to tackle psychosocial hazards

When tackling any health and safety subjects or issues, it's important that the senior management of the organisation is engaged and committed to tackling them and provides resources to control and deal with them. Senior managers should take time to understand all levels of the organisation by engaging with the workforce. This will also make workers feel more valued. Setting up health and safety sub-groups or committees with representatives from various departments can be an effective way of gathering information and passing on any updates to workers.

Psychosocial hazards can be tackled in the same way as any physical hazard or risk – the elements are the same. Using systems such as the plan, do, check, act method will assist in planning how to tackle them.

Reducing psychosocial hazards in the workplace

In the UK, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has developed six areas of work design that can help to manage stress. These can also be used to manage psychosocial hazards.

- **Demands** – including issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment
- **Control** – how much say the person has in the way they do their work
- **Support** – this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
- **Relationships** – this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- **Role** – workers' understanding of their role in the organisation; and the organisation's responsibility to ensure that they do not have conflicting roles
- **Change** – how organisational change, large or small, is managed and communicated in the organisation.

References






- 1 OHS Body of Knowledge. 2012. Psychosocial Hazards and Occupational Stress. [online] Available at: <https://www.ohsbok.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/19-Hazard-Psychosocial.pdf>. [Accessed 13 September 2019].
- 2 Dictionary.com. 2020. Available at: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/psychosocial>. [Accessed 30 June 2020].
- 3 European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. 2020. Management of psychosocial risks at work. [online] Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/management-psychosocial-risks-work-analysis-findings-european-survey-enterprises-new>. [accessed 30 June 2020].
- 4 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LABOUR RESEARCH. (n.d.). [online] Available at: http://www.oit.org/wcm/5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_551796.pdf#:~:text=Director%2C%20Bureau%20for%20Workers%E2%80%99%20Activities%20%28ACTRAV%29%2C%20ILO%20Psychosocial. [Accessed 10 Aug. 2022].
- 5 Dictionary.com. 2020. Available at: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/psychosocial>. [Accessed 30 June 2020].
- 6 European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. 2020. Management of psychosocial risks at work. [online] Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/management-psychosocial-risks-work-analysis-findings-european-survey-enterprises-new>. [accessed 30 June 2020].
- 7 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LABOUR RESEARCH. (n.d.). [online] Available at: http://www.oit.org/wcm/5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_551796.pdf#:~:text=Director%2C%20Bureau%20for%20Workers%E2%80%99%20Activities%20%28ACTRAV%29%2C%20ILO%20Psychosocial. [Accessed 10 Aug. 2022]

IOSH is the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. With over 50,000 members in more than 130 countries, we're the world's largest professional health and safety organisation.

We set standards and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We're the voice of the profession and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

IOSH was founded in 1945 and is a registered charity with international NGO status.

IOSH
The Grange
Highfield Drive
Wigston
Leicestershire
LE18 1NN
UK

 twitter.com/IOSH_tweets
 facebook.com/IOSHofficial
 tinyurl.com/IOSH-linkedin
 youtube.com/IOSHchannel
 instagram.com/ioshofficial

+44 (0)116 350 0700
www.iosh.com

Institution of Occupational Safety and Health
Founded 1945
Incorporated by Royal Charter 2003
Registered charity in England and Wales No. 1096790
Registered charity in Scotland No. SC043254