



# Under Pressure: The Hidden Cost of Retail

A 5-Point Plan for Safe Staffing  
and Reducing Psychosocial Risks

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## Executive summary

Rising psychosocial risks in retail demand action. The SDA's 5-Point Plan offers a clear framework to ensure safe staffing, sustainable workloads, worker support, and consultation for a protected, adaptable workforce.

Psychosocial hazards compromise both worker wellbeing and business productivity. Without urgent action, these risks will continue to rise, putting both workers and businesses under increasing pressure. This report lays out a 5-Point Plan to mitigate the specific psychosocial hazards faced by Australian retail workers – particularly the foundational issue of safe staffing levels, which is essential to reducing these risks.

The retail industry is Australia's second largest industry employer, employing approximately 10% of the nation's labour force.<sup>1</sup> Retail workers face a range of challenges in the workplace, including excessive workloads, understaffing, high levels of customer abuse and violence, low job control, and inadequate managerial support. These issues are exacerbated by significant changes in technologies and processes without adequate consultation, explanation or training which then impose unrealistic and unsustainable expectations.

The result is a volatile work environment where stress, burnout, and customer aggression are common, undermining both employee safety and organisational performance.

The prevalence and costs of workplace-related mental health issues in Australia are escalating, with worker mental health conditions costing the Australian economy \$12.8 billion per year.<sup>2</sup> These costs, which continue to grow year-on-year, are fuelled by rising rates of absenteeism, high staff turnover rates, a surge in workers' compensation claims, and a long-term threat to overall productivity.

Under Australian Work Health and Safety (WHS) legislation, employers are legally obligated to address the psychosocial risks facing Australia's retail workforce.<sup>3</sup> Fulfilling this responsibility requires proactive risk identification, consultation with workers, and implementing sustainable solutions to eliminate or minimise hazards, including psychosocial hazards such as excessive workloads and unsafe staffing levels.



Extensive research conducted by the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) with their members reveals a concerning picture of the retail workforce's mental health, with 72% reporting burnout and 58% experiencing very low wellbeing. Two-thirds of workers also indicated that their workload negatively impacts their ability to perform their work in a safe manner.<sup>4</sup>

The SDA's psychological risk assessment found that the overall risk exposure score for all surveyed workers was 69 out of 100, indicating a very high risk of harm. In addition, this research has identified the 10 most common psychosocial hazards in retail.

In collaboration with the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the SDA has also developed work-redesign strategies to address and reduce the risk of exposure to these key psychosocial hazards.<sup>5</sup> This work is predicated on the acknowledgement that any lasting solution to retail psychosocial hazards must first address the key risk of unsafe staffing levels. Achieving safe staffing levels is a factor largely within an employer's control and would have the most impact on mitigating the top 10 hazards identified above. Inadequate staffing had by far the highest risk exposure score across all sub-sectors in SDA's survey research, making it the number one psychosocial hazard retail workers face.<sup>6</sup>

Safe staffing levels have traditionally been treated by industrial tribunals as an area of managerial prerogative. However, with the recognition of psychosocial hazards as a WHS issue comes an obligation on employers to ensure staffing levels that are sufficient to ensure workers' health and safety. The concept of 'safe staffing levels' includes the number of hours allocated, the skillsets of rostered workers, and coverage solutions at peak times or when rostered workers are absent.

**The 10 most common psychosocial hazards in retail:**

- 1.** inadequate staffing
- 2.** work overload
- 3.** low job control
- 4.** poor change management
- 5.** low leader/supervisor support
- 6.** dangerous tasks
- 7.** customer aggression and violence
- 8.** poor decision-making input
- 9.** working hours and schedule
- 10.** role conflict

## Proactive action is essential to meet WHS obligations, enhance productivity, and foster sustainable work environments that benefit both workers and employers.

The findings of SDA's extensive research underpin the development of their 5-Point Plan, which proposes the following evidence-based strategies for the promotion of psychosocial safety:

- 1. Safe staffing levels.** This requires allocating sufficient hours of labour to enough workers with the right skills, to safely complete the tasks required to the level of service expected by the employer across the working week.
- 2. Sustainable workloads.** Workloads must be sustainable and realistic. Technology should augment workers ability and make work easier, not more intense. Employers must ensure the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), software and algorithmic scheduling tools are based on realistic, repeatable and long-term sustainable measurements of work; do not create unsafe workloads; factor in required break times; and do not allocate work on discriminatory attributes. Legislators and regulators should update regulations to reflect these requirements.
- 3. Support for frontline workers.** Shop workers, including managers, need strong proactive support in dynamic workplaces to manage workloads, resolve role conflicts, and handle customer abuse. Employers must provide managers with proper training. Managers must then:
  - have the authority to manage workloads and adjust tasks in store when understaffed;
  - clearly communicate on realistic or changed workload expectations;
  - ensure all workers receive their proper rest and meal breaks;
- provide guidance to workers on role conflicts and competing priorities;
- support workers during and after customer abuse incidents;
- monitor for stress and burnout, with workload adjustments and offering access to counselling if needed.
- 4. Consultation on workplace change.** Employers should engage workers and their union in meaningful consultations at each workplace before implementing workplace changes, ensuring risks are assessed, eliminated or mitigated.
- 5. Collaborative work design.** Employers must engage in collaborative work design with workers, so new technologies and processes can augment workers' abilities rather than replace them. Involving employees in the design stage can create more effective, worker-centred solutions.

This 5-Point Plan aligns with current Code of Practices of Australian government bodies, including SafeWork Australia.<sup>7</sup> By implementing this plan, the retail sector can reduce psychosocial hazards, improve worker safety and wellbeing, and achieve better business outcomes.

# 1. Introduction

## The rising risk of psychosocial hazards to retail workers demands evidence-based action.

The retail industry is Australia's second largest industry employer, employing approximately 10% of the nation's labour force.<sup>8</sup> Retail workers are exposed to many psychosocial hazards – factors in the workplace that can impact employees' mental health, wellbeing, and social functioning. Some of the key hazards in retail are inadequate staffing, work overload and customer aggression and violence.

These challenges often stem from understaffing, causing excessive workloads and an inability to meet high customer expectations. They are then exacerbated by demanding targets, driven by shifts in customer shopping habits – such as the rise of online shopping – and increased pressure during peak periods. Exposure to psychosocial hazards can lead to physical, psychological and social harm to workers including physical exhaustion, mental strain, stress, anxiety, and burnout. If not addressed, these issues not only endanger employees' health and safety but also affect both short-term and long-term business performance, leading to increased errors, absenteeism, and staff turnover, which raise operational costs.

In Australia, the prevalence and costs of workplace-related mental health issues are on the rise. Mental health conditions now account for 11% of serious workers' compensation claims, representing a 97% increase over the past decade.<sup>9</sup> Such claims are particularly challenging, as they often have significantly longer recovery periods compared to physical injuries.

Worker mental ill-health costs Australian workplaces approximately \$12.8 billion per year.<sup>10</sup> The average work time lost per compensation claim increased from 13 weeks to 34.7 weeks over the same period, while the median cost per claim has more than tripled – from \$18,600 in 2009 to \$53,949 in 2019 (pre-COVID), and rising to \$58,715 by 2021.<sup>11</sup> These escalating costs are driven by rising absenteeism, presenteeism, reduced productivity, and workers' compensation claims.

Under the Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act, employers have a primary duty to ensure the health and safety of workers and to provide a safe work environment.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, this encompasses both the physical and psychological health of workers, which are often closely interlinked. Employers must manage the risks posed by psychosocial hazards. This obligation requires employers to proactively identify and eliminate (where possible) or mitigate hazards such as excessive workloads, stress, and job insecurity.

Regulators also have a key role to play in ensuring employers meet these primary duties to provide a safe working environment. Despite being the second-largest employing industry in Australia and the first workplace for many young Australians, retail has long been under-resourced by regulators. Retail plays a key role in shaping early career experiences and is a public-facing industry. It is crucial that this environment is not only safe but also supportive, offering workers the opportunity to grow and build meaningful careers. With the recent formation of the tripartite Retail Employee Safety Council, regulators should place a closer focus on retail, ensuring the sector receives the resources and attention required to effectively support its workforce.<sup>13</sup>

To support evidence-driven solutions improving worker wellbeing, the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) undertook extensive research in late 2023 and 2024 to better understand and quantify the role psychosocial hazards play in the retail industry. A member survey with over 11,000 participants from various sectors within the retail industry identified the most common psychosocial hazards and subsequent mental health and wellbeing outcomes for workers.

The SDA then partnered with a team of academics from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to identify strategies to eliminate or mitigate these risks/hazards by consulting directly with a group of retail workers through a series of detailed case studies.<sup>14</sup> Safe levels of staffing was a consistent theme throughout the discussions. Many of the hazards exemplified through the case studies could have been addressed, either in whole or in part, with safe staffing levels. Safe staffing was therefore assumed as a baseline intervention across each case study to ensure that additional work redesign strategies were explored.

As a result of both research projects, the SDA has developed a 5-Point Plan, outlining the most urgent interventions needed to address the industry's key psychosocial hazards and increase the psychosocial safety of retail workers. This report introduces the 5-Point Plan, and the evidence base underpinning its development.

This report is divided into two main sections. The first section examines current trends in work practices and psychosocial hazards in the retail industry, highlighting the most prevalent risks faced by the workforce. The second section introduces the 5-Point Plan by addressing five key issues in greater detail, offering both high-level and on-the-ground solutions to mitigate the most common psychosocial hazards retail workers face. The report concludes with an overview of the benefits of the 5-Point Plan, outlining its potential positive impact on key stakeholders, including workers, employers, consumers, and government.

## 2. Psychosocial hazards in retail workplaces

Our research shows that retail workers are under pressure and has identified the 10 most common psychosocial hazards in their workplaces, along with their impact.

Retail workers are exposed to numerous psychosocial hazards linked to their job roles, workplace conditions, and interpersonal dynamics. These issues often arise from a combination of limited staff, high customer demands, strict performance goals, and intense pressure during busy times. Prolonged exposure to these risks can result in physical fatigue, mental stress, anxiety, and even burnout, impacting workers' health and productivity. Current trends in the Australian retail industry foster a work environment that prioritises profit over worker wellbeing and take a top-down rather than consultative approach to workplace design which limits effective solutions.



## 2.1 Optimising business at the expense of worker wellbeing

Insufficient staffing and unsustainable workloads have long been an issue in the Australian retail industry. The risk of inadequate staffing and excessive workloads have been exacerbated by the growing adoption of a Taylorist approach to labour planning in the retail industry in a period of technological change.<sup>15</sup> This management strategy seeks to optimise work output by analysing workflows and processes with claims of achieving precise, systematic efficiency. Enabled by algorithmic scheduling and software tools, this approach increasingly governs key aspects of work, including hours, tasks, and even moment-to-moment activities.

However, this Taylorist method is fundamentally misaligned with the realities of retail work. It enforces a rigid, production-line pace that fails to account for the dynamic nature of retail environments where workers must respond to customer needs and situational changes in real time. Compounding this issue is the flawed data underpinning these systems, often derived from time-and-motion studies on specific tasks conducted during peak performance periods with small sample of staff, rather than reflecting sustainable, long-term work rates across a workforce. Consequently, the resulting benchmarks create unrealistic and unsustainable expectations for employees.

This shift to a Taylorist approach to retail staffing, increases the strain on workers. The cumulative pressure leads to extreme stress, mental fatigue, and widespread burnout, fostering harmful workplace environments riddled with psychosocial hazards.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, worker wellbeing is significantly compromised, posing a critical challenge for the industry. Moreover, management systems that fail to align staffing levels with their own Safe Work Practices and WHS structures result in internal safety processes that are unrealistic and unattainable.

The current approach to change management in the retail industry also often fails to adequately involve workers, particularly in the adoption of new technologies and processes. Though consultation on change is a legislative requirement, decisions are frequently made with little proper consultation with employees who have firsthand knowledge of daily operations, leading to solutions that are impractical, or poorly suited to staff needs.

The introduction of technology is often an especially problematic change in retail workplaces. It frequently prioritises cost-cutting measures, such as worker replacement, over enhancing employee roles by making them safer, simpler or easier. A lack of consultation in both the design and implementation phases of technological change exacerbates resistance to new tools and processes, reduces productivity, and creates a disconnect between management and the workforce.

Genuine, collaborative approaches to work design are the best practice approach to engaging staff on all forms of change. In contrast, perfunctory or superficial consultation, or 'after-the-fact' consultation that takes place when decisions have already been made are counterproductive to effective change. They can foster a sense of disempowerment and alienation among workers, undermining morale and engagement.

## 2.2 Retail workers' mental health at crisis level

In 2023, the SDA partnered with FlourishDx to conduct a survey to provide a comprehensive psychosocial risk assessment with its members in the retail industry. With 11,105 members participating, this survey provides the industry with an exceptionally robust dataset. The findings highlight the critical challenges facing the Australian retail industry regarding workers' exposure to psychosocial hazards and their mental health and wellbeing.

The survey revealed that nearly eight in 10 workers (77%) are at high risk of harm due to exposure to psychosocial hazards. Additionally, almost three-quarters (72%) reported experiencing burnout – which is twice the rate observed in FlourishDx's cross-industry benchmark data, including over 60 organisations. Retail workers in managerial positions show a notably high hazard exposure, with 82% experiencing burnout. More than half of all the workers surveyed (58%) reported very low wellbeing. Those results paint a highly alarming picture of the overall condition of the retail workforce in Australia.

These negative outcomes contribute to widespread dissatisfaction among retail workers:

- 54% are dissatisfied with their jobs.
- 50% intend to resign.
- Only 6% would recommend their organisation as a workplace to others.



77%  
at high risk of harm

72%  
reporting burnout

58%  
reporting very low wellbeing

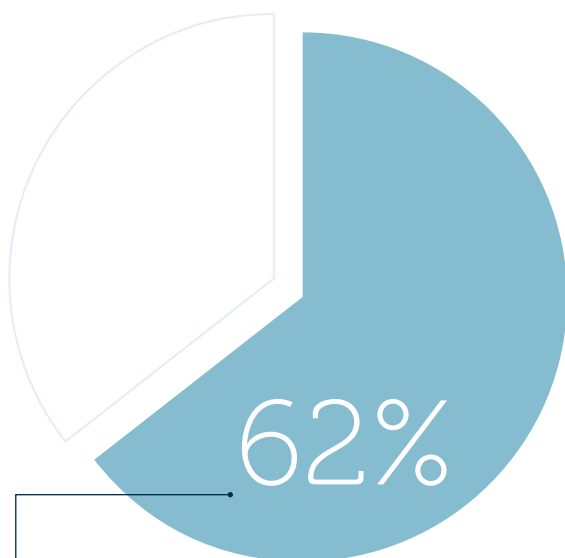
54%  
are dissatisfied with their job

49%  
intend to resign

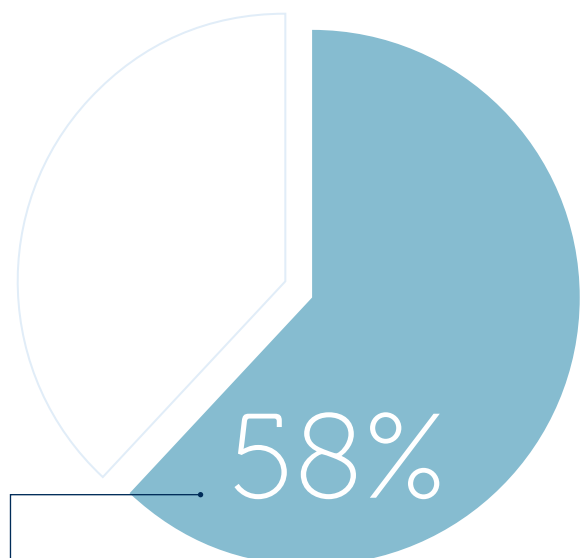
6%  
would recommend their organisation as a workplace to others

In relation to the psychosocial safety climate in the workplace, our survey results show that most retail workers (62%) rate the consultation processes at their workplace as inadequate. Over half (58%) perceive their employer's commitment to psychosocial safety negatively. These findings are consistent with other Australian research which shows that both workers and managers in Australian retail businesses tend to agree that health and safety are not focal areas of the business, and that their health, safety and wellbeing are not fully supported at work.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, international research suggests that a poor psychosocial workplace environment – including high job intensity, scheduling demands and job dissatisfaction – can increase the risk of physical workplace injuries,<sup>18</sup> as well as significantly increase the risk of other adverse health effects, including heart disease, stroke, musculoskeletal disorders and mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.<sup>19</sup> This emphasises the need for retail organisations to take stronger action in addressing psychosocial hazards as a critical focus.



**Perceive consultation processes at their organisation as inadequate**



**Report negative perceptions of employer commitment**

Chart 1: Perceptions of psychosocial safety climate at the workplace. 2023 SDA member survey.

## 2.3 The 10 most common and severe psychosocial hazards

Participants were asked to evaluate 18 identified hazards based on three criteria: severity (ranging from ‘no impact’ to ‘extremely severe impact’), frequency (from ‘almost never’ to ‘multiple times a day’), and duration (from ‘5 minutes or less’ to ‘almost constant’). A total score of up to 100 could be achieved, with scores above 25 indicating moderate risk and scores above 40 signifying high risk.

The overall exposure score for all survey respondents was calculated at 69, indicating a very high risk of harm. Additionally, nearly eight in 10 workers (77%) reported an exposure score above 50, placing them at a high likelihood of experiencing harm.

The graphic on the right shows the most common and severe psychosocial hazards in retail work, ranked by highest risk level. These findings echo other research studies of the retail sector in both Australia and internationally, which often cite high job demands and workloads, low job control and low autonomy, staffing issues and customer aggression and abuse as at the forefront of staff concerns.<sup>20</sup>

Psychosocial hazards in retail rarely occur in isolation. Instead, they often interact, creating a compounding effect that intensifies stress and risk for workers.

Infographic 2: 10 most common psychosocial hazards, 2023 SDA member survey.



### 1. Inadequate staffing

Insufficient staff leads to overwork and increased stress levels.



### 2. Work overload

Excessive workloads created by unrealistic and unsustainable expectations of work rates, especially during peak periods or on understaffed shifts.



### 3. Low job control

Workers often have little say over their schedules, tasks, or pace of work adding to their sense of being overwhelmed.



### 4. Poor change management

Changes to technology, policies, or work practices without adequate worker input through consultation, cause stress and confusion.



### 5. Low supervisor support

Insufficient guidance, feedback, or help from leadership exacerbates stress.



### 6. Customer aggression and violence

Retail workers frequently face abuse and violence, which impacts both their mental health and physical safety.



### 7. Dangerous tasks

Physical risks involved in tasks such as heavy lifting or unsafe work environments.



### 8. Poor decision-making input

Workers are often excluded from decisions that affect their roles, leading to frustration and disengagement.



### 9. Working hours, rosters, and schedules

Unpredictable and inflexible schedules disrupt work-life balance.



### 10. Role conflict

Conflicting job demands cause stress, as workers struggle to meet competing expectations.

Hazard exposure scores vary between different retail sub-sectors within the industry (see Table 1). Employees across all sub-sectors show a high exposure to hazards such as inadequate staffing, work overload, low job control and poor change management. However, the sub-sectors supermarket, hardware, and large format store exceed the average score on eight of the top ten hazards, indicating that these workplaces face particularly high risks to employee wellbeing. Supermarket workers also have above-average risks of burnout, very low wellbeing, intention to resign, and job dissatisfaction (see Infographic 3).

To ensure these hazards are effectively and continuously addressed, ongoing proper and thorough monitoring and review are essential. This includes conducting thorough risk assessments and engaging in regular, meaningful consultations with workers. Incorporating employee feedback into these reviews will help identify emerging risks and develop timely, effective responses.

### Hazard exposure score by sub-sector

Hazard label	Grand total n=11,501	Supermarket n=7,158	Department stores n=2,101	Hardware n=1,026	Large format stores n=633	Liquor n=262	Petrol and convenience n=125	Small format fashion n=110
Inadequate staffing	67.1	68.6	63.2	72.7	68.7	59	55.9	64
Work overload	59.5	60.8	57.3	61.6	59.6	52.7	55.2	56
Low job control	52.8	54.1	50.1	52.4	53.5	44.9	48.1	48.9
Poor change management	47.7	48.4	46.8	53.1	49.3	40.1	42.8	41.9
Low leader / supervisor support	47.3	46.9	46.7	52.9	49.3	39.4	43.6	42.9
Dangerous tasks	37.8	39.5	32	38.1	36.1	38	35.6	47
Customer aggression and violence	37	36.7	40	44.5	40.6	40.1	43.1	32
Poor decision-making input	32.2	33.1	30.7	35.3	34.3	27.1	29.5	31.3
Working hours and schedule	31.1	33.7	24.5	25.7	30.4	32.8	43.1	36.8
Role conflict	30.8	30.4	33.3	35.2	31.1	22.6	22.2	22.2

● High risk    ● Moderate risk    ● Elevated risk

Note: Heatmap colours for hazards reflect risk of harm, risks are moderate for scores >25, and high risk >40.

Table 1: Psychosocial hazard exposure by sector, 2023 SDA member survey.

## Worker health and wellbeing outcomes by sub-sector



### Burnout

Many retail workers are experiencing burnout, with hardware (76%), large format stores (75%) and supermarkets (74%) being the worst affected.



### Low wellbeing

The majority of retail workers are experiencing low wellbeing, with supermarkets (60%), department stores (56%) and large format stores (56%) showing the highest levels of low wellbeing.



### Job dissatisfaction

More than half of retail workers are dissatisfied with their jobs, with supermarkets (56%), hardware (53%) and large format stores (53%) reporting the highest level of dissatisfaction.



### Intention to resign

Half of all retail workers intend to resign, with liquor (58%), supermarkets (50%) and hardware (49%) reporting the highest intent.

Infographic 3: Psychosocial hazard exposure by sector, 2023 SDA member survey.

### 3. 5-Point Plan for psychosocial safety

Safe work systems start with proper staffing and sustainable workloads. Supporting and listening to frontline workers reduces psychosocial risks and improves worker and business outcomes.

To effectively address key psychosocial hazards in retail, the SDA strongly advocates for safe staffing levels as the primary intervention – eliminating risks where possible and minimising them otherwise. Safe staffing requires allocating sufficient hours of labour to enough workers with the right skills, so they can safely complete the tasks required to the level of service expected by the employer across the working week.

Where the risk cannot be eliminated, the SDA advocates for a work redesign approach to support safe staffing levels alongside other strategies. This approach focuses on restructuring how work is organised, performed, and managed to improve outcomes for both employees and organisations.

Interventions targeted at individual workers – such as stress management, mindfulness, wellness programs, or access to support services – are the lowest level WHS interventions possible, the psychosocial equivalent of providing basic personal protective equipment (PPE). Work redesign, however, directly targets the root causes of psychosocial risks within workplace systems.<sup>21</sup> By addressing these systemic issues, it offers a more effective means of eliminating or minimising sources of harm. The work redesign approaches in this 5-Point Plan are multifaceted, beginning with directly addressing risks – such as workload through safe staffing levels – while also incorporating complementary strategies, which have been shown to be more effective when used together.<sup>22</sup>



The SDA's 5-Point Plan aligns with current Code of Practices of Australian government bodies such as SafeWork Australia (both at federal<sup>23</sup> and state level<sup>24</sup>), Workplace Health and Safety Queensland,<sup>25</sup> and WorkSafe Western Australia.<sup>26</sup> These bodies also emphasise a systematic, consultative process to eliminate or minimise psychosocial hazards at their source, ensuring all workers – from shift employees and casuals to those with diverse needs – are included and protected. These approaches ensure businesses meet WHS obligations, reduce disruptions, improve productivity, and foster healthier, safer environments.

The following sections outline the five key solutions proposed by the SDA to address the high levels of harm faced by the Australian retail workforce. The detailed work redesign strategies and change logics outlined in these following sections have been based on the work of Associate Professors Carlo Caponecchia and Sharron O'Neill from UNSW in their 2024 report for the SDA, *Next steps for managing psychosocial risks in retail*.<sup>27</sup>

# 5-Point Plan



Infographic 4: 5-Point Plan to resolve risks resulting from psychosocial hazards in retail.

### 3.1 Point 1: Safe staffing levels

#### The problem

## Insufficient staffing levels

“

**“We have major understaffing on the service desk in the evening. [...] For 3-4 hours we have only two staff to do all end-of-day tasks in service and serve. It is just not enough team members to serve customers and it's leading to stress, anxiety and customer abuse.”**

- Supermarket worker (NSW)

“

**“We are constantly running around pulled in lots of directions. From having to do things in our department and then being pulled to online as they are short and have no staff and then to the front to help a customer. It never stops.”**

- Specialty store worker (NSW)

“

**“We are constantly filling in for other people, not knowing where they were up to, and getting moved around the other departments with no real knowledge of what to do or the products.”**

- Discount department store worker (QLD)

Staffing challenges are a persistent issue in the retail industry, significantly impacting workers' wellbeing and productivity.<sup>28</sup> Insufficient staffing levels often result in overwork, heightened stress, and burnout among employees leading to increased absenteeism and high staff turnover. Retailers frequently understaff their stores,<sup>29</sup> leaving workers struggling to manage demanding workloads and customer expectations. Understaffing in the retail industry can be attributed to several interconnected factors, including cost-cutting strategies, labour shortages, and operational inefficiencies.<sup>30</sup>

The 2023 SDA member survey revealed widespread concerns about staffing adequacy, underscoring the ongoing challenges in this area. Inadequate staffing had by far the highest risk exposure score within the industry (score 67.1 – see Table 1) across all sub-sectors, making it the number one psychosocial hazard retail workers face.

Staffing levels have traditionally been treated by industrial tribunals as an area of managerial prerogative – but recognition of psychosocial hazards as a WHS issue means employers have an obligation to provide staffing levels that are sufficient to ensure workers' health and safety. The concept of safe staffing levels includes the number of hours allocated, the skill sets of the workers and coverage at peak times or when rostered workers are absent.

## The solution

# Safe staffing levels

# 1.

This requires allocating sufficient hours of labour to enough workers with the right skills, to safely complete the tasks required to the level of service expected by the employer across the working week.

## What safe staffing levels can look like in practice

Work redesign strategy	Change logic
<b>Revisit staffing levels to ensure adequate and safe staffing</b>	Rostering sufficient workers at all times contributes to sustainable workloads by ensuring that tasks are distributed more evenly, reducing stress and pace demands. Adequate staffing involves accurate measurement and realistic allocation of hours, including ensuring that workers can take scheduled meal and rest breaks whilst maintaining operations. It also provides the flexibility to manage multiple tasks effectively and to address challenging situations, such as swapping out after interactions with difficult or abusive customers.
<b>Where specialist skill sets are needed, train and develop team members accordingly or recruit workers with the required expertise</b>	Training and/or upskilling existing workers to have the specialist knowledge and skills required to meet demand is beneficial for career development, worker retention and increased job satisfaction (i.e., by experiencing progression or variation in work). If it is not possible to train existing workers, then workers should be recruited with the skillsets required. This may include leveraging the expertise of older, injured, or disabled workers being utilised in training roles.
<b>Introduce and implement a policy of replacing absent workers</b>	Replacing workers (for both planned and unplanned absences) helps to achieve minimum safe staffing levels so workers are not exposed to excessive or unsafe working conditions. This also helps to ensure that customer wait times are not unnecessarily increased.

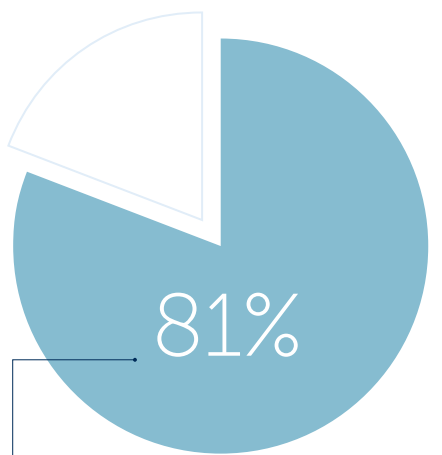
## The benefits of safe staffing levels

- **Increased safety and error reduction:** Ensures safe and efficient work systems by minimising errors, reducing accidents, and distributing workloads more evenly through task sharing and supervision.
- **Improved employee wellbeing:** Promotes overall worker health by allowing necessary breaks, reducing fatigue, preventing burnout, and boosting morale. Reducing unplanned leave caused by burnout leads to a decrease in lost time for employers.
- **Enhanced customer experience:** Improves customer service quality, leading to better experiences and increased customer satisfaction and loyalty – thus increasing sales and profitability.
- **Strengthened workforce stability:** Reduces absenteeism and staff turnover by improving job satisfaction and retaining a skilled, experienced workforce.

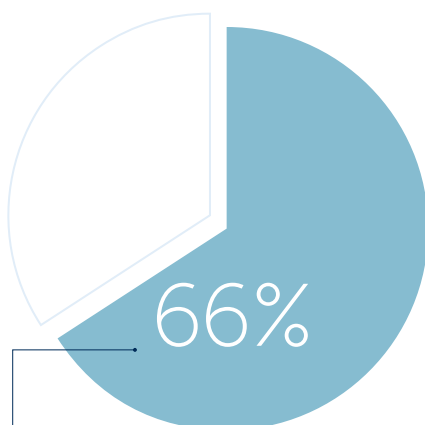
## 3.2 Point 2: Sustainable workloads

### The problem

# Unsustainable workloads



**Report that workload has increased over the last 12 months**



**Report that workload affects their ability to work safely**

Unsustainable workloads in retail result from a combination of unrealistic expectations, inadequate support, and poor work organisation, creating significant challenges for workers. The disconnect between 'work-as-imagined' (ideas about how others do, or should do, their work) and 'work-as-done' (the direct experience of those who actually do the work)<sup>31</sup> often exacerbates these issues, as assumptions about efficiency and capacity from head office may not align with the actual demands faced by workers on the shop floor.

Employees are often required to manage rapid, unexpected demands, especially during peak periods, which can overwhelm them.<sup>32</sup> Multitasking in a fast-paced environment, with the need to quickly switch between tasks, heightens cognitive load and decreases efficiency.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, high workloads frequently prevent workers from taking necessary breaks, contributing to fatigue and diminished performance. Many also face emotional distress from managing difficult situations or safety-critical tasks, which can further reduce their ability to focus and perform effectively.<sup>34</sup> These factors combine to create work overload, where expectations surpass workers' capacity, leading to burnout, compromised job satisfaction and long-term negative outcomes for both employees and organisations.

Chart 2: Perceptions of workload, 2023 SDA member survey

Unsustainable workloads are a well-documented source of stress and job dissatisfaction for retail employees. Research often identifies work overload, time pressures, tight deadlines, and staff shortages as key stressors.<sup>35</sup> In our survey, eight in 10 workers reported that their workload has increased in the past 12 months. Two thirds of workers indicated that their workload negatively impacts their ability to perform their work in a safe manner. These results highlight the severity of the issue and underscore the urgent need for workloads to be better managed, ensuring workers can perform their roles safely and effectively.

Prioritising sustainable workloads aligns with Safe Work Australia's recommendations for managing psychosocial hazards by controlling job demands in the workplace.<sup>36</sup> These recommendations include: effectively managing workloads by planning for adequate and appropriately skilled staff; ensuring breaks during long shifts; rotating workers through demanding tasks; rescheduling non-urgent work during fluctuations; providing additional support during peak periods; allocating sufficient time for complex tasks; and outsourcing tasks to qualified external providers when needed.

“

**“They pulled out the old service area and now have one person serving on express and also to cover the smoke shop/customer service as they are built together. Customers are getting really frustrated. It’s impossible. I don’t have four hands.”**

- Supermarket worker (NSW)

“

**“They have added a few (customer) platforms recently, and initially gave us more hours but then have dropped them back again because they aren’t making money from the sales being made due to margins. But we are still getting the extra work.”**

- Online supermarket manager  
(state unknown)

“

**“I am always early to work so I can get on top of all the things that I have to do, but as the list keeps getting longer and longer, this is very difficult to achieve.”**

- Petrol station worker (NSW)

## The solution

# Sustainable workloads

# 2.

Workloads should be sustainable and realistic. Technology should augment workers' ability and make work easier, not more intense. Employers must ensure that the use of AI and algorithmic scheduling tools are based on realistic, repeatable and long-term sustainable measurements of work; do not create unsafe workloads; factor in required break times; and do not allocate work on discriminatory attributes. Legislators and regulators should update regulations to reflect these requirements.

## What making workloads more sustainable can look like in practice

Work redesign strategy	Change logic
<b>Review and adjust job descriptions and task schedules (where possible)</b>	A realistic task analysis that is guided by Safe Work Practice of WHS and takes into account the dynamic nature of retail workplaces should inform any revisions to job role descriptions and the scheduling of tasks for each department. This may assist multiple teams (i.e., by reducing work overload of individual roles and the need to use spaces at the same time). This should improve unsustainable workloads and allow work to be done more effectively and efficiently.
<b>Limit reassignments of workers from one department to another</b>	While multiskilling benefits both workers and employers, spreading staff across departments is only effective when strategically co-ordinated. When the same limited pool of workers is needed in multiple areas at the same time, departments compete for staff. These constant transitions can create conflict, tensions and inefficiencies, as employees must continually adjust to different workflows, priorities, and team dynamics – potentially delaying progress on their core responsibilities. Limiting the time workers are required to assist other departments during peak periods can help maintain adequate staffing levels without compromising productivity in any one area.
<b>Rearrange task priority and output expectations whenever staffing levels fall below a threshold (or during peak periods)</b>	Giving local teams the ability to rearrange task priorities or rescheduling tasks when necessary will help maintain a focus on critical tasks at times of staff shortage, ensuring workloads are more manageable. It can prevent workers from being pressured into missing breaks, working longer hours, or taking shortcuts which pose additional risks to the employee and the business. These strategies may also assist in addressing hazards such as customer aggression/abuse and interpersonal relationships which are strained due to urgent tasks not being fulfilled in a timely manner. The ability to pause or transfer tasks can improve workers' overall levels of job control.

## The benefits of sustainable workloads

- **Improved health and wellbeing:** Reduces fatigue, stress, and burnout, promoting physical and mental health.
- **Increased productivity and customer service:** Enables workers to maintain focus, efficiency, and provide better service.
- **Higher retention and morale:** Boosts employee morale, job satisfaction, and reduces turnover.
- **Better work-life balance and reduced errors:** Allows for a healthy balance between work and personal life, leading to fewer mistakes and accidents.
- **Increased workforce participation:** If workloads are manageable and the work environment is respectful, part-time workers will be more willing to take on extra hours.

### 3.3 Point 3: Support frontline workers

#### The problem

## Low supervisor support



**“I don’t work with a manager or leader much and without set expectations you find yourself working [...] above and beyond to ensure your team aren’t behind the ball when they start their shift.”**

- Worker at small retailer (SA)

All store-based workers, including managers, are frontline retail workers who require support. Frontline workers in the retail industry often face a significant lack of support, which negatively impacts their performance and morale. Insufficient supervisor support, such as a lack of guidance, constructive feedback, assistance, or training, leaves workers feeling undervalued and overwhelmed. Poor communication and inadequate information sharing further compound these issues, creating confusion about expectations, work standards, and responsibilities.<sup>37</sup>



**“Not getting backed up with customers in regard to policy. For example, I explained to a customer how the price beat guarantee worked, and they didn’t like it so asked for my manager, and the manager just did what the customer wanted.”**

- Hardware worker (QLD)

Role conflict is another common challenge, as workers are often caught between competing demands, leading to stress and reduced efficiency. Middle managers often have limited autonomy to meet the competing demands of their role or to resolve the differing needs of the staff they supervise. Uncertainty around roles, tasks, work schedules, and job security exacerbates feelings of instability, making it difficult for employees to focus and perform effectively. Without clear direction or acknowledgment of their contributions, frontline workers struggle to navigate the pressures of their fast-paced and demanding environments, resulting in heightened stress, lower job satisfaction, and decreased retention.<sup>38</sup>

It is crucial to note here that supervisors and managers themselves often face excessive workload pressures, compounded by inadequate training and support, which can negatively impact their teams. Frontline managers frequently work through breaks or beyond rostered hours to meet demands or make up for staff shortages and have insufficient time allocated for managing, training, and supporting their teams.

Our survey shows that managers have the highest exposure to psychosocial hazards and report the highest risk of burnout, highlighting the employer's responsibility to provide proper supervision and support for workers in managerial positions. Additionally, many managers have limited job control due to top-down decision-making and centralised, automated systems like rostering, leaving them with little authority to implement positive changes for their teams.

Research into best practice management across several industries provides ample evidence of how improving supervisor support can resolve these issues. For example, research on frontline hospital service workers shows that when supervisors demonstrate both affective commitment and supervisory support, frontline workers are less likely to intend to leave the organisation.<sup>39</sup> US research on the hospitality industry similarly shows that supervisory support for frontline workers had a positive effect on both employees' organisational commitment and their career satisfaction,<sup>40</sup> and another large US study of customer-facing grocery store workers reveals that a supportive work climate has a strong impact on effective service performances as well as on employee motivation and job satisfaction.<sup>41</sup>



**“They got rid of sales assistant managers which were like supervisors in our direct areas and now have only floor managers. And they aren't always around and they also alternate [...] and generally its harder to get the support you need.”**

- Department store worker  
(NSW)

**The solution**

## Support frontline workers

**3.** Shop workers, including managers, need strong proactive support in dynamic workplaces to manage workloads, resolve role conflicts, and handle customer abuse. Employers must provide managers with proper training. Managers must then:

- have the authority to manage workloads and adjust tasks in store when understaffed;
- clearly communicate on realistic or changed workload expectations;
- ensure all workers receive their proper rest and meal breaks;
- provide guidance to workers on role conflicts and competing priorities;
- support workers during and after customer abuse incidents;
- monitor for stress and burnout, with workload adjustments and offering access to counselling if needed.



## What better support of frontline workers can look like in practice

Work redesign strategy	Change logic
<p><b>Providing adequate resources for appropriate training for all employees when new technology, processes or systems change</b></p>	<p>Providing adequate training resources when new technology, processes, or systems are introduced ensures that retail workers (including managers) can adapt effectively and confidently. It reduces errors, enhances efficiency, and minimises downtime, allowing employees to better perform their tasks.</p>
<p><b>Develop a system of adequate supervision over a new worker's first shifts</b></p>	<p>Mentoring and shadowing systems help to ensure that workers are learning how to do things safely and correctly from the commencement of employment. Hands-on training, rather than reliance on multiple-choice competency tests, allows employees to develop real-world skills more effectively. On-the-job training can lead to fewer accidents and improved workloads across the team, as new workers come up to speed sooner. These strategies will also help to monitor the effectiveness of any training provided and assist with improvement to training materials and practices.</p>
<p><b>Develop manuals that include specific job descriptions, FAQs, and procedures guidance</b></p>	<p>Clear examples of how to deal with specific situations and what to prioritise may assist staff by having consistent information to guide their actions in particular circumstances. They can also guide managers in responding to the decisions made by workers.</p>
<p><b>Empower supervisors/managers to adjust expectations when local circumstances change</b></p>	<p>Authorising supervisors/managers to adjust expectations when circumstances change, such as staffing or resource availability, helps making workloads more manageable for frontline workers. This flexibility allows managers to prioritise tasks effectively, ensuring that employees are not overwhelmed and feel supported whilst maintaining quality service, even during challenging conditions.</p>
<p><b>Scheduled feedback sessions on a regular basis, with options for situation-specific meetings</b></p>	<p>Feedback and debrief sessions between workers (including supervisors) and managers encourage open communication, teamwork, and reduce individual anxiety about receiving feedback. This support can minimise bullying and harassment, and help employees process negative experiences, feel validated, and manage anxiety about future interactions. Managers should ensure their office is a supportive space that fosters an environment where employees feel comfortable and open to feedback, rather than fearful or intimidated. Managers should be trained to understand when referral to professional mental health support is warranted.</p>

## The benefits of better support of frontline workers

- **Enhanced employee wellbeing and job satisfaction:** Providing mental health support and proper breaks improves worker wellbeing and job satisfaction, reducing burnout.
- **Increased productivity and efficiency:** Clear direction and manageable workloads boost productivity by ensuring realistic goals and effective task performance.
- **Stronger manager-employee relationships and retention:** Proactive support and open communication build trust, leading to higher staff retention and lower turnover.
- **Improved organisational culture and customer service:** A supportive environment fosters a positive culture, motivating employees to deliver better customer service and satisfaction.
- **Transfer of institutional knowledge:** Experienced supervisors can pass on valuable skills, knowledge, and tips that are difficult to capture in a formal module or procedure.

### 3.4 Point 4: Consultation on workplace change and eliminating risks

#### The problem

## Lack of worker consultation on change

“

“[The store I work in is located] near a Centrelink, soup kitchen, public park around the corner. Lots of violence and abuse... Store told company pulling guards on weekends without consultation, [and] concerns raised to company fell on deaf ears.”

- Supermarket worker (WA)

“

“Front-end service transformation rollout had really poor execution and lack of training and tools, we got 24 hrs notice and were just expected to go with it.”

- Supermarket worker (QLD)

The significant potential contribution of organisation change to psychosocial risks for workers has been acknowledged by organisational psychology research since the 1980s.<sup>42</sup> The retail sector in Australia is currently undergoing profound transformation, with digitisation, artificial intelligence, big data and automation radically reshaping the industry and the experiences of workers.<sup>43</sup>

Consultation on workplace change is a legislative requirement, but in practice workers often face significant challenges related to change management, primarily stemming from low job control, lack of worker consultation and inadequate support during and/or after transitions. Many workers also have little say over their schedules, tasks, or work pace, which leads to feelings of being overwhelmed, especially when changes are introduced.<sup>44</sup>

Poorly managed transitions, such as changes to technology, policies, or work practices, often occur without sufficient consultation before or during the change which can lead to impractical solutions or unnecessary risks that could have been avoided or designed out. This lack of consultation, communication or training on changed technology or processes causes confusion and stress.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the lack of practical support during periods of change exacerbates the negative impact on workers, leaving them ill-equipped to adapt to new demands.<sup>46</sup>

A current problem with consultation on major changes in chain stores is that they often take place at only a select number of sites. While meaningful engagement may occur at these sites, the changes are then applied universally, overlooking the need to consult directly with workers in each affected workplace, which can lead to poor outcomes.

To eliminate workplace risks, it is essential to conduct thorough risk assessments prior to implementing changes, ensuring that potential psychosocial hazards are identified and mitigated through effective consultation, communication, and training. When risks emerge, it is important to provide immediate support, address concerns promptly, and implement corrective measures to minimise the impact on workers.

Our survey shows that four in 10 retail workers don't receive adequate training when new working processes or technologies are implemented.

In addition to the SDA's research, a 2022 Australian survey of how retail workers understand and experience the changing nature of work in retail found that over one-third of workers were somewhat or very concerned that machines or computer programs will be used to replace human workers. Around one-quarter (24%) were somewhat or very concerned about being able to keep up with the technical skills required to do their job. Non-English speaking background employees and older employees were more likely to feel vulnerable to technological change.<sup>47</sup>

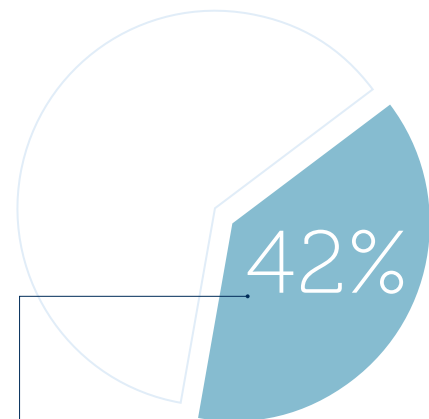
The current approach to change management in retail often neglects to involve workers, leading to impractical solutions that fail to address their needs. This top-down method fosters disempowerment, reduces morale, and increases resistance to change, especially when technology adoption prioritises cost-cutting over improving employee roles.

The solution is to adequately consult workers – which research has shown to be critical to successful change management, fostering more practical and inclusive strategies,<sup>48</sup> as well as ensuring smoother transitions and sustainable outcomes.<sup>49</sup>

“

**“I used to work in the fitting room until they decided no one would be based there, and so I got moved to tech, no training and a bunch of stuff I have no knowledge of, the first week was the most anxious week of my life.”**

- Discount department store (QLD)



**Don't receive adequate training when new ways of working or technology are implemented at their organisation**

Chart 3: Training and workplace change, 2023 SDA member survey.

## The solution

# Consultation on workplace change

## 4.

Any significant changes to the workplace - whether involving technology, scheduling systems, or work processes - must be implemented with proper consultation with workers and their representatives. Proper consultation before change is implemented will lead to safer and more effective change. Risk assessments must be conducted before any change to ensure that new systems do not create new hazards or exacerbate existing ones. Whilst stores may be from the same company, each workplace is unique and should be assessed and consulted independently. Effective consultation involves engaging those undertaking the work directly who are best placed to provide practical and true feedback as well as engaging with unions. This is a key objective and requirement under WHS legislation.

## What increasing consultation on workplace changes can look like in practice

Work redesign strategy	Change logic
<b>Include worker representatives from all roles and shifts in the communication process</b>	Consulting all affected workforce groups, including their union, health and safety representatives and committees, can help ensure issues are acknowledged and needs are met. This supports a smoother change process. Effective communication about workplace changes increases employees' morale and their perceived job control.
<b>Set targets in consultation with workers, and allocate work time to achieve them</b>	Improved consultation in setting change targets (e.g., sales targets) including the opportunity to jointly review and adapt them, helps the organisation determine whether the changes are feasible. Actively including employees in the process ensures they feel involved, leading to more effective and sustainable workplace changes.
<b>Implement systems for workers to report incidents, provide feedback and submit requests</b>	Comprehensive reporting systems enable organisations to monitor workplace incidents and strengthen risk management strategies. Allowing workers to request changes when needed helps de-escalate conflict, reduces risks, and improves safety, job control, and decision-making. These systems foster better customer service and a more supportive work environment.

## The benefits of better employee consultation on workplace change

- **Safer and more effective change:** By consulting workers before implementing changes, businesses can identify and address potential risks, ensuring that new systems are safer and more effective for employees. Employee engagement in consultation leads to better implementation, as informed staff are more likely to support change rather than resist it.
- **Prevention of new hazards:** Risk assessments conducted prior to changes help prevent the introduction of new hazards or the exacerbation of existing ones, creating a safer work environment.
- **Informed feedback for better solutions:** Employees who directly engage in the work are best positioned to provide practical, accurate feedback, resulting in more suitable and efficient workplace changes.
- **Compliance with legislation:** Ensuring consultation with workers and their representatives meets the requirements of WHS legislation, promoting legal compliance and fostering a culture of shared responsibility.

### 3.5 Point 5: Collaborative work design

#### The problem

## Lack of collaborative work design

Retail workers often face challenges when new technologies and processes are introduced without their involvement in the design and implementation stages.<sup>50</sup>

Ongoing misalignment between 'work-as-imagined' through employer expectations and 'work-as-done' can lead to systems that fail to align with the practical realities of workers' roles, increasing stress and inefficiency. Instead of augmenting their work, poorly designed tools can create additional burdens, such as confusing workflows or creating unrealistic productivity demands.<sup>51</sup>



"Whilst my contract and hours are safe, the job that I was hired for, worked in, and was good at, disappeared overnight with no consultation. I am now essentially an online picker despite all my prior skills and experience not being aligned with this new department. This was all because an algorithm decided that my job was no longer required."

- Supermarket worker (SA)



"We have no control over orders and what drops into our store. We can have staff that are away or sick, it doesn't matter it will come in. We can't switch it off if we can't cope."

- Online supermarket worker (state unknown)

The lack of collaborative work design also leaves workers feeling overlooked and reduces morale and engagement. Ultimately, this gap between management and workers hinders productivity and fosters a sense of alienation, undermining the potential benefits of workplace innovations.

In contrast, there is vast evidence from organisational research that improved work design processes are linked to positive outcomes for both individual workers and organisations.<sup>52</sup> While there are multiple pathways to achieving better work for all, interventions that enable individuals and teams to contribute to job crafting, negotiating ideals, or other forms of proactive 'bottom-up' contributions are a critical component.<sup>53</sup>



**“For a while the company has this requirement which they just introduced without talking to us [...]. We have to make sure we get the bulk items scanned first when customers come through assisted checkout [...]. If we don't, they come and speak to us about it. I and many others in self-checkout find this very difficult [...], especially when it is busy. We often are getting blamed even when clearly we cannot be everywhere at once [...].”**

- Self-checkout worker  
(state unknown)



**“They made changes to the distribution centre and as a result the loads took much longer to break down because the products were more mixed up across the aisles whereas before there was only one or two aisles on one pallet. They didn't talk to us about it or warn us. They haven't taken into account if we have enough equipment or space.”**

- Supermarket worker  
(state unknown)

## The solution

# Collaborative work design

# 5.

Employers must engage in collaborative work design with workers, so new technologies and processes can augment workers abilities rather than replace them. Involving employees in the design stage can create more effective, worker-centred solutions. Whether for new technology, work processes or physical design/layout engaging workers in collaborative work design ensures that their insights and concerns are considered at the design stage leading to better outcomes for both workers and the employer. This includes ensuring that technology and new systems serve as tools to enhance productivity without causing additional stress and other safety concerns.

## What collaborative work design can look like in practice

Work redesign strategy	Change logic
<b>Involve workers in designing the workplace to meet diverse needs</b>	Collaborative work design (including work processes, new technologies and physical design/layout) relies on workers' input and perspectives, allowing flexibility to accommodate the individual needs of each store. This approach enables more effective redesign of equipment and environments, improves perceptions of supervision and support, boosts morale and retention, and helps prevent workplace injuries by addressing diverse needs, abilities, and limitations.
<b>Rearrange the workplace layout to create a space that accommodates the needs of different teams</b>	Redesigning the workplace layout to create a safe and efficient space can support multiple teams using spaces simultaneously. Involving workers in the design process enhances job control and demonstrates that they are trusted and valued. Work design should prioritise minimising risks (e.g. from equipment) and addressing workload challenges (e.g. implementing efficient and safe storage solutions). When new systems, tools, or processes are introduced, it is important to ensure that these changes function effectively within the constraints of the physical work environment, with consultative adjustments made where necessary.
<b>Implement a system that gives workers more responsibility and involvement</b>	This strategy enables workers to contribute to decision-making and process design, within the boundaries set by the organisation. It also addresses the lack of professional development opportunities by giving employees more responsibilities, enhances management by leveraging their knowledge (e.g. for stock control), and boosts morale by ensuring all employees feel heard.

## The benefits of collaborative work design

- **Improved efficiency and productivity:** By designing technologies and processes to augment human work, employees can perform tasks more effectively and safely without added stress, leading to higher productivity.
- **Better alignment with workplace needs:** Engaging workers in the design stage ensures that new systems align with the practical day to day realities of their roles in their workplaces, reducing inefficiencies and disruptions.
- **Enhanced employee morale and engagement:** Including workers in decision-making fosters a sense of value and ownership, boosting morale and commitment to workplace changes.
- **Reduced stress and improved wellbeing:** Tools designed with worker input minimise stress by supporting, rather than complicating, tasks, creating a healthier and more sustainable work environment.

## 4. Conclusion

The SDA's 5-Point Plan provides a clear framework to address retail's psychosocial hazards. Centered on safe staffing, it fosters collaboration to protect workers and adapt to new ways of working.

This report highlights the urgent need for action on psychosocial hazards in the retail industry. Excessive workloads, chronic understaffing, poorly managed workplace changes, and the introduction of new technologies without proper consultation are driving stress, fatigue, and burnout among retail workers. These conditions create unsafe, unsustainable workplaces that not only harm employees but also threaten the long-term future of businesses. Addressing these hazards is not just a legal obligation under WHS legislation – it is essential for building a healthier, more resilient, and more productive retail sector.

The SDA's 5-Point Plan provides a clear framework for tackling these challenges, with safe staffing levels as the foundation. Without adequate staffing, workloads become unmanageable, support structures break down, and workplace risks multiply. Ensuring safe staffing means providing enough trained workers to meet operational demands, allocating sufficient hours, and allowing flexibility to adapt to peak periods or absences. As safe staffing is increasingly recognised as a WHS issue, employers have a duty to implement solutions that protect workers' health, safety, and wellbeing.

However, lasting change requires more than just individual employer action – it demands a collaborative effort across the industry. Unions, employers, and regulators/policymakers must work together in a tripartite approach to create safer, more sustainable retail workplaces. Retailers that take proactive steps to address psychosocial hazards and implement safe staffing solutions will not only meet their legal obligations but also position themselves as employers of choice in an increasingly competitive labour market. By committing to these reforms, the industry can move beyond a crisis-driven approach and build a retail sector that values and protects its workforce as it continues to improve productivity in an everchanging and dynamic workplace.

# 5. Appendix

## 5.1 Appendix A: SDA member survey

A risk assessment survey was conducted with SDA members to establish a baseline of psychosocial hazard exposure and risk levels within the retail industry in Australia. Commissioned by the SDA, the survey was administered by third party, FlourishDx, a specialist in psychosocial risk assessments.

### Aim

The primary objectives of the SDA member survey were to:

- provide an overview of psychosocial hazards and risks across the retail industry;
- establish a baseline of psychosocial risk levels within the retail industry;
- provide insights into factors influencing the risk of harm;
- enable comparisons between different retail sectors to identify the most prevalent psychosocial hazards;
- compare risk scores between employers within the industry.

### Participants

The survey gathered responses from n=11,535 SDA members across nine retail sectors in Australia. Access to the risk assessment survey was provided to all members and promoted through the SDA's established communication channels. The survey remained open for 3 ½ weeks in November and December 2023.

### Sampling strategy

Participation in the survey was voluntary and not incentivised. It was administered anonymously, ensuring that workers could not be identified and that individual responses could not be linked back to participants.

### Data analysis

The data analysis of the risk assessment survey involved:

- heatmapping of hazard and risk scores to visually highlight trends and areas of concern;
- comparisons against FlourishDx's norm data to benchmark the results;
- correlational analyses to explore relationships between hazards, risk scores, and potential outcomes.

## Key demographics of the SDA member survey sample

Age			Gender			Role		
17 and under	240	2%	Female	7,830	68%	Team member	9,002	78%
18-25	1,504	13%	Male	3,309	29%	Manager / supervisor / leader	2,534	22%
26-35	1,953	17%	I prefer not to say	268	2%	SDA member		
36-45	2,250	20%	Non-binary / other identity	129	1%	Yes	11,346	98%
46-55	2,520	22%	Employment type			No	190	2%
56-65	2,460	21%	Full-time	3,759	33%	Sector		
65 or older	609	5%	Part-time	6,532	57%	Supermarket	7,188	62%
Location			Casual	1,245	11%	Department stores	2,104	18%
ACT	180	2%	Tenure			Hardware	1,027	9%
NSW	4,597	40%	< 1 year	758	7%	Large format (non-department stores)	633	5%
QLD	2,865	25%	1-3 years	2,429	21%	Liquor	263	2%
SA	767	7%	4-5 years	1,149	10%	Petrol and convenience	125	1%
TAS	331	3%	6-10 years	2,272	20%	Small format fashion	110	1%
VIC	2,031	17%	11-15 years	1,680	15%	Online fulfilment centres	66	1%
WA	690	6%	16-20 years	1,319	11%	Pharmacy / beauty / cosmetics	20	0%
NT	75	1%	> 20 years	1,929	17%	Note: results for cohorts with <8 responses were grouped to protect employee anonymity.		

## 5.2 Appendix B: Case studies - hazards and redesign strategies

Following the SDA member survey conducted in 2023, which identified key psychosocial hazards in retail workplaces, the SDA commissioned the UNSW to explore strategies for addressing these hazards across the retail sector.

### Aim

The objectives of the case studies were to:

- **Highlight psychosocial hazards** by identifying and illustrating common psychosocial hazards in typical work scenarios across diverse retail sectors and realistic retail work environments.
- **Develop worker-informed solutions** by creating practical redesign strategies to address these hazards through consultation with retail workers, ensuring the solutions are rooted in their lived experiences.

### Approach

Seven case studies were developed in collaboration with the SDA WHS Committee, covering a range of retail sectors such as grocery, fashion, hardware, and small businesses. The case studies addressed key psychosocial hazards, including challenges faced by injured workers, age-related limitations, and emerging work systems like online order packing. The cases were refined to ensure clarity and relevance across different retail environments.

A workshop with 27 SDA members helped further refine the case studies. Participants worked in small groups to discuss, refine, and develop feasible work redesign strategies, which were then presented to the wider group for discussion. This process also enabled the research team to consult directly with workers, allowing them to develop tailored strategies for managing the identified risks. It increased members' confidence in identifying psychosocial hazards and creating practical redesign solutions.

### Outcome

The final set of case studies serves as a resource for initiating conversations about psychosocial risks and promoting work redesign across the retail industry. The case studies were not designed to cover every possible scenario but to highlight realistic situations applicable to different retail settings.

The redesign strategies developed considered:

- procedural and policy changes;
- changes to task timing, staffing and support;
- equipment and environment redesigns.

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