

How to support workers in short-term, casual, insecure or irregular roles

Supporting tool for the Victorian Mentally Healthy Workplaces Framework

Victorian Government



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the First Peoples of the lands and waters across Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which we live and work and pay our respect to their Elders past and present.

We recognise that poor mental health disproportionately affects First Peoples' communities. Further, there are long-lasting, far-reaching and intergenerational consequences of the dispossession of First Peoples and their Country that are a direct result of colonisation and the establishment of the State of Victoria. This history, and the systems it gave rise to, continue to harm First Peoples today. It is only through community-led approaches to supporting healing and structural transformation to enable true self-determination that we can begin to right the wrongs of the past.

Disclaimer

This guide is intended for general information and guidance purposes only and should not be considered or relied upon as an official compliance tool or advice. Using this guide does not ensure compliance with Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) regulations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004. Additional resources such as those provided by WorkSafe Victoria need to be considered / adopted to abide by regulations.

While efforts have been made to ensure information presented is accurate and reliable, it is important to note that laws, regulations and requirements can change over time and may vary by jurisdiction.

This guide does not constitute legal, professional or regulatory advice. It is recommended that you consult the appropriate jurisdictional resources and consult with qualified legal or compliance professionals if you require specific compliance and regulatory guidance.

Acknowledgement of Lived and Living Experience

We acknowledge people with lived experience of mental ill-health and recovery and the experience of people who have been carers, families, or supporters. Some of the most powerful evidence to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System came from the personal experience of people living with mental ill-health, their families, and carers. There has been extraordinary determination and courage as people have revisited painful memories in the hope of shaping a better future for themselves and others. We and other Victorians are deeply appreciative for this.

This website uses language to describe and discuss themes and concepts relating to mental health, but we acknowledge others might use different words to communicate their experience which are also valid.

Crisis support services

If you or someone you know or work with are experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact one of these 24 hours, 7 days services

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

MensLine Australia: 1300 789 978

QLife: 1800 184 527 (3pm to midnight daily)

Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800

13YARN: 13 92 76

How to support workers in short-term, casual, insecure or irregular roles

Introduction

People in short-term, casual, insecure or irregular work can feel disconnected and isolated from their colleagues and team. This can lead to declining wellbeing and mental ill-health for these individuals.

Certain groups of people (e.g. women, young individuals, migrant individuals, and individuals from a culturally and linguistically diverse background) are at an increased risk within a workplace, and are typically employed in short-term, casual and irregular roles.¹

As an employer, you have an obligation to provide and maintain a working environment for your workers that is safe and free from risks to their mental health and wellbeing, so far as reasonably practicable.

Key terms and their meaning:

Business Types: This framework has been developed for all Victorian Businesses, including sole-traders, small business, not-for-profit organisations, for profit organisations, government organisations and volunteer organisations. Either the term “**workplaces**” or “**organisations**” has been used in this framework as a catch-all to represent all different types of businesses and places where people conduct work. Unless specifically mentioned, the information provided is guidance for all Victorian business types and all workplace types, including working from home or remote work, and working outdoors.

Employment Type: This framework has been developed for all Victorians engaged in work. It recognises that people are engaged in work as full-time, part-time or casual employees, self-employed, contractors, subcontractors, volunteers, apprentices, student-workers and other types of work. The term “**worker**” has been used in this framework to represent all different ways Victorians are engaged in work. This includes all forms of work, including short term, casual, irregular or insecure work.

¹ International Labour Organisation: Non-standard Employment Around the World, Understanding Challenges, shaping prospects. [2016].

Who this tool is for

This tool is for every organisation whose workforce has people engaged in temporary work arrangements.

- **Short-term work:** Individuals who work on a time-limited basis before moving to another role (e.g. construction workers).
- **Casual work:** Individuals who work irregular hours and days, and as a result may have income that changes pay to pay, dependent on the organisation's point in time workforce needs. These individuals are not eligible for the benefits associated with full-time or permanent part-time work (e.g. non-permanent retail staff).
- **Insecure work:** Individuals who have working arrangements where there is uncertainty about whether they will continue to be employed or will continue to have the same working conditions and experience in the future (e.g. full-time work for a small startup). Short-term and casual workers can also be in insecure work roles.
- **Irregular work:** This includes people who work non-standard hours, as they may not be working at the same time as their peers or leaders, but could also include other types of workers who may be more likely to miss out on receiving information or support services, due to the nature of their work.
- **Remote work:** People who are engaged in geographically isolated work away from their colleagues, or workers who are isolated for any other reason, for instance, Fly in-Fly out (FIFO) workers.

The term 'temporary workers' is collectively used to refer to all five types of work arrangements.

This guide does not apply to gig workers such as those engaged in ridesharing services, airtasker, etc., which may not always be subject to standard workplace regulations.



How to use this tool

The following boxes outline some key issues that are experienced by people in temporary work, and some suggested actions that you as an employer can take to support these individuals in their role.

Staying connected to the team



Key issues

- It can be hard for people in temporary work to build relationships with teams (e.g. create a sense of work family). Where all workers in a team are engaged in short-term or temporary work (for example, in construction), it can be hard to create a sense of team connectedness.
- This can lead to workers not feeling safe and comfortable to discuss mental health issues at work or asking where they can seek help.
- Less connection with work colleagues also means that people in temporary work can feel less valued than full-time team members, as they aren't able to 'celebrate the wins' as a group.



Actions

- Intentionally find ways to encourage people in temporary work to collaborate in teams where appropriate, so they can get to know their colleagues.
- Encouraging workplace socialising can also help foster relationships with others in the organisation or team. This could include creating space for 'water cooler chats', peer mentoring opportunities, and social events.
- Create a 'buddy system' with other full- or part-time colleagues, to ensure people in temporary work can ask questions informally.

Connection to leadership



Key issues

- Many people in short-term or casual work are less likely to report mental health challenges or hazards in the workplace to their leaders because they may worry that this might impact their ability to get work hours or continue to be employed.



Actions

- Show workers that you have an open and positive attitude towards worker mental health.
- Leaders should proactively consult people in temporary work about mental health concerns and hazards at work (which may be different to their full-time or part-time colleagues doing the same role) and provide clear management processes, systems and accountabilities for these issues.
- Recognise workers who are taking proactive care of their mental health and wellbeing to create a safe and inclusive environment where individuals are comfortable to speak about their wellbeing.

Specific examples of actions you could take include:

- Keeping in regular contact by checking in with workers who are taking mental health leave.
- Where possible, enable temporary flexible working arrangements or partial leave for workers when they need help with their mental health.
- Where there is a contracting arrangement in place, check in with the leadership of the contracting organisation to find out what services are available to support their workers' wellbeing. Work closely with the agency on their mental health and wellbeing strategy to align and agree on the support that is offered. This could be part of a standard Work Health and Safety assessment.
- Address any psychosocial hazards that are identified, with the same level of commitment and focus as other hazards in your workplace.

- Discuss return-to-work options with personalised plans for workers who are taking time away. For instance, after a short period of leave, a quick check-in may be all that is required, or a formal return-to-work plan could be more appropriate after a serious or long-term mental illness.
- Offer access to professional services, or other worker resources and supports, where appropriate.
- Consider the diversity of your workers – for instance women, young people, migrant individuals, LGBTIQ+ individuals, or people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background – and take into account any additional barriers or needs they may have.
- Consider the impact that discrimination in the workplace could have on the psychological safety of your workers, and their ability to feel comfortable to speak up.



Availability of learning and development



Key issues

- Many of the same challenges that affect full-time staff also affect people in temporary work but they may not have the same working conditions or entitlements - like working from home or access to training - or financial ability to address those concerns.
- Some temporary employment contracts can stop workers from accessing training resources or participating in professional development.



Actions

Ensure that the organisation actively considers risks to the mental health of their workers in temporary roles to assist in early prevention and intervention:

- Review the design of temporary jobs in your workplace: having high stress tasks to complete in a short period of time, having little or no control over the way the work is undertaken, exposure to trauma, and whether the worker may be experiencing financial strain because of the conditions of their job.
- Involve your workers in temporary roles in shaping workplace policies, practices and procedures. Promote workplace safety through work culture policies, like anti-bullying and sexual harassment policies, and leader training. Consult and engage all workers in hazard identification and mitigating risks.
- Encourage staff to seek early help through wellbeing check-ins, leadership supports, or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Where possible, embed training sessions that are specific to workers in temporary roles (e.g. online seminars that can be accessed at any time), and provide equitable access to professional development opportunities.

Communication



Key issues

- People in temporary work can feel 'forgotten' in team or organisational communications. As these workers are not always at work every day, they may miss key organisation updates, including those specific to mental health and wellbeing.
- People in temporary work are also more likely to miss out when programs / initiatives are introduced and/or restricted in access (e.g. uptake is on a first-come-first-serve basis with a cap on how many individuals can engage). This can also apply to opportunities for promotions or permanent work.
- Privacy and confidentiality are just as important for temporary workers as they are for permanent workers. Ensure that you have clarity on what is shared (or not), with whom and under what circumstances.



Actions

- Make sure all communication includes people in temporary work – even if this is provided in writing following a team briefing or 'town hall' event.
- When designing and implementing mental health policies and practices, involve those in short-term, casual or temporary work in the process.
- Communicating what resources you have available to new or returning workers in casual, temporary, or short-term roles can build awareness around the options that your organisation provides. Where initiatives are introduced but restricted in uptake, reserve a proportion of places for temporary workers.
- If your organisation provides mental health, wellbeing, or work-life balance support to people in temporary work beyond their legal entitlements (e.g. the organisation chooses to offer benefits such as additional paid sick leave, hybrid working arrangements, flexible hours), communicate this to all workers and encourage them to leverage these appropriately.
- Ensure that your wellbeing and mental health policies include how you will protect workers' privacy and how you will keep confidential information secure.
- Consider formal or informal ways to check-in with your temporary workforce about issues that may be affecting them, such as pulse surveys, to ask them what is working well for them or what they need

Granting Equal Opportunities



Key issues

- Be aware of the different ways that short-term and casual roles may be impacted by mental health concerns, and the different resources that may or may not be available to those workers. In some cases, it is simply making workers in temporary work aware that these resources and supports exist.
- For people in temporary work, this could mean working arrangements that are in conflict with family responsibilities, for instance not being able to take paid leave to take care of family concerns, or financial strain due to not having continual and regular work.
- Be aware learning and development opportunities or other benefits that are provided by your workplace for workers in temporary or casual roles.
- Irregular work with limited certainty can place added pressure on workers, forcing them to make short-term decisions, and limit long-term planning and experience additional stress.



Actions

Acknowledge the different ways that casual or short-term work affects mental health in the context of individual roles and responsibilities in your workplace.

Be aware of the different experiences between your permanent and temporary staff and address this when creating and implementing a mentally healthy workplace plan, policies or processes. For instance:

- For workers in casual roles who are experiencing mental ill-health, this can be associated more with presenteeism (where workers are on the job but not performing at full capacity) than absenteeism, because they do not have access to paid leave, and may not be able to afford unpaid leave.
- For workers in short-term roles, consider the job-design factors that may increase risks to mental health. For example, some trade workers engaged in term work may experience high demands (deadlines) and low control as to the way that the job is undertaken, and this may increase risk to mental ill health.
- Consider the learning and development needs and opportunities of workers in temporary roles and provide them with fair opportunities to progress their careers.
- Ask the workers in temporary roles in your organisation what resources and supports would work best for them. Try to do this frequently, to keep up with changes in their circumstances or the organisation.