Designing 'good work' is good for business

Insight by Belinda Bastow and Jo Casey

The way we work has a huge affect on our overall health and wellbeing but we don't often take the time to think through if our current work practices are effective and efficient, or the best for us when it comes to health and safety. The good news for business owners is that when focusing on designing good work practices there are other benefits. For example with well-designed work practices not only improve safety in the workplace they can also lead to increases in productivity, morale and efficiencies – which all have a positive impact on the bottom line.

Well designed work practices and processes eliminate hazards and risks to workers health and safety and also allow them to be productive and motivated in their work. They consider how the work is performed, the physical working environment and the capabilities and needs of the workers to complete the tasks involved.

To help business owners, Safe Work Australia has created a handbook which outlines 10 principles of good work design. It provides a high-level overview of the principles to keep in mind when you are setting up workplaces, working environments and tasks to best protect the health and safety of your workforce. You will, of course, also need to take into account the specific circumstances of your business and your workers, but this provides a great resource to get started.

Following these principles will help business owners, or those with a duty of care, to comply with relevant work health and safety laws.

The 10 principles of good work design

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[1] Source: *Safe Work Australia, Principles of good work design: A work health and safety handbook, pg 4 Figure 1*

1: Good work design gives the highest level of protection so far as is reasonably practicable

- Australia's work health and safety laws demand that all workers have a right to the highest level of protection against harm to the health, their safety and their welfare while at work.
- Good work design will ensure this level of protection is afforded, and also ensures the business owners and leaders are compliant with their legal obligations and duties under work health and safety laws.
- Good work design will not only look to eliminate hazards and reduce risks, it will aim to enhance the overall well-being of workers by providing satisfying work, social interaction and safe processes to improve overall physical and mental health. A good example is the increasing popularity of providing office workers with standing desks to help combat the effects of sitting for long periods of time.

**2: Good work design enhances business success and productivity**

- By preventing deaths, injuries and illnesses to workers, good work design also ensures businesses are not impacted by the associated costs that come along with these incidents. Improving the motivation and engagement of your workforce will also lead to increases in overall productivity.
- Good work design creates an environment that fosters innovation and continuous improvement – which also have positive impacts on the bottom line – through increased efficiencies and better quality production of goods or delivery of services. It can streamline work processes to reduce wastage or cut down on training or supervision requirements.
- Good work design also makes better use of the skills of your workforce, creating tasks and processes that all them to focus on the areas where they deliver the most value t the business. A motivated and engaged workforce is also more likely to contribute new ideas and extra effort to help with the success of the business.

3: Good work design addresses physical, biomechanical, cognitive and psychosocial characteristics of work, together with the needs and capabilities of the people involved

- Good work design considers the characteristics of the tasks involved and looks at all the aspects of work that can have an impact on a worker's health and safety. All characteristics should be considered in combination to ensure hazards or risks are not missed.
- The key characteristics of work are the physical (physical, chemical and biological hazards), the cognitive (information processing load, complexity and duration), psychosocial (work demands, job control, supervisor and peer support, role variety, managing relationships, managing change, organisational justice) and biomechanical (force, movement, posture, vibration).
- They consider the abilities, diversity and weaknesses of workers and create tasks to accommodate these. Tasks should be designed to accommodate the 'normal' range of human cognitive, biomechanical, physical and psychological characteristics. You should also consider if you have workers with special requirements that may need additional support or different processes

4: Good work design considers the business needs, context and work environment[2]

- Good work design is 'fit for purpose' and will reflect the needs of the business, including those of the owners, the managers, the workers, the supply chain and the clients. The approach to implementing good design should be specific to your business, and often 'off the shelf' solutions won't be suitable, a solution will need to designed to suit your workplace.
- It considers the entire work environment, not just the physical elements like buildings, plant and equipment. It will also include the culture of the workplace, the systems used for human resources and allocation of work and information and control systems. These can all have an impact on how well work is completed and how safe the working environment is.
- Major changes in business operations like relocating, refurbishment or introducing new systems or technology are a great time to consider work design. Each of these will present new hazards and risks that are specific to your business, and it is always easy to design these out in the beginning than having to retrofit or re-train workers to address them after the fact.


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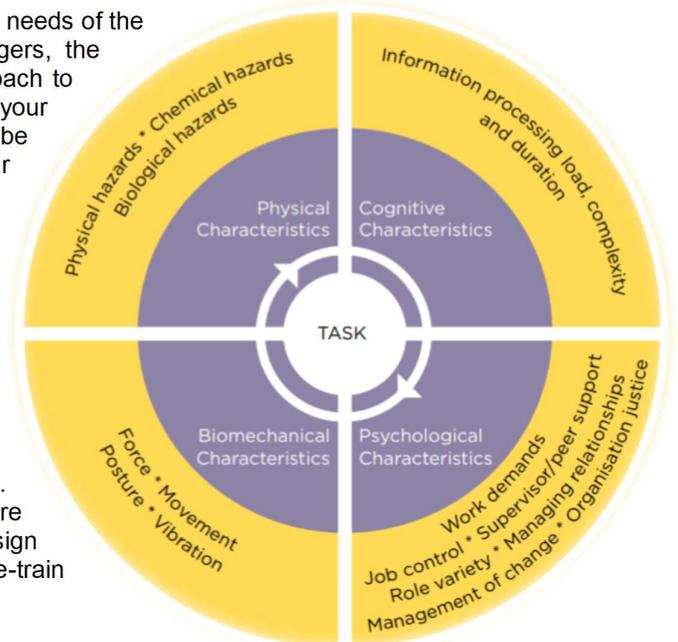
[2] Source: *Safe Work Australia, Principles of good work design: A work health and safety handbook, pg 9 Figure 2*

5: Good work design is applied along the supply chain and across the operational lifecycle

- Work design impacts on the entire supply chain of a business and applies right throughout the operational lifecycle from design, manufacture, distribution, use and disposal of goods and the supply of services. New technologies or major changes in any point of the supply chain should be used as points to consider how work is designed and what hazards can be eliminated.
- Poor work design can have impacts and costs for others in the supply chain, and these can be passed up or down the chain. Working with supply chain partners and networks to address common problems and hazards can design work practices and processes to protect the health and safety of workers up and down the supply chain.
- Well designed contracts should consider how to support good work design by setting clear expectations around work health and safety and encourage the use of codes of conduct or quality standards to ensure consistent health and safety standards are met. Regular monitoring of contracts should include how well parties are adhering those standards.

6: The common product lifecycle

- The good work design principles can also be applied to all businesses, regardless of where they may be in their lifecycle and also all points in the product lifecycle as well. In fact, some stages can present complex challenges when it comes to work health and safety, for example during the construction, manufacturing, installation and disposal stages.
- New technology can often be the driving force behind changes to work or business operations. Good work design will consider any new hazards or risks that need to be addressed before the new technology is introduced to ensure new work practices not only improve quality and efficiencies but also the health and safety of workers.
- Information and communication systems are changing rapidly and are often the main drivers of changes within the way businesses work and operation. Often however, they are overlooked as sources of risk or hazards for workers. Consider the trend for standing desks, and good ergonomics if staff are going to be spending more time in front of a screen. Good work design will consider these factors and design solutions to identified risks and hazards before the new technology or system is introduced.
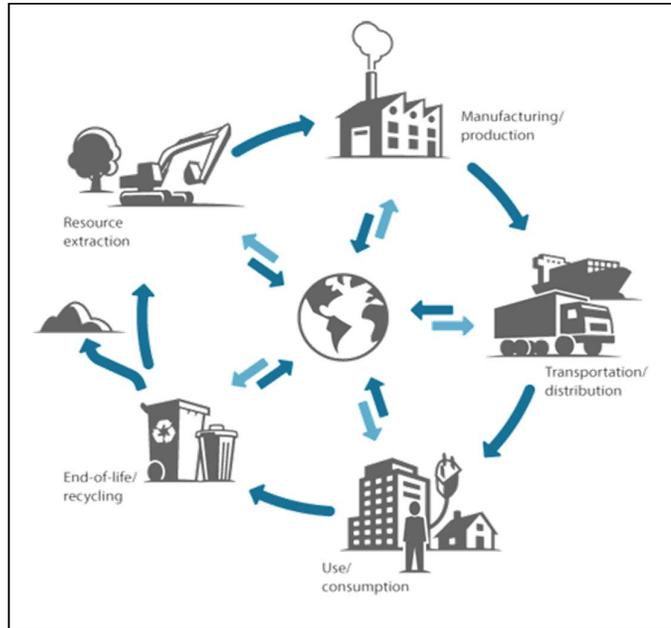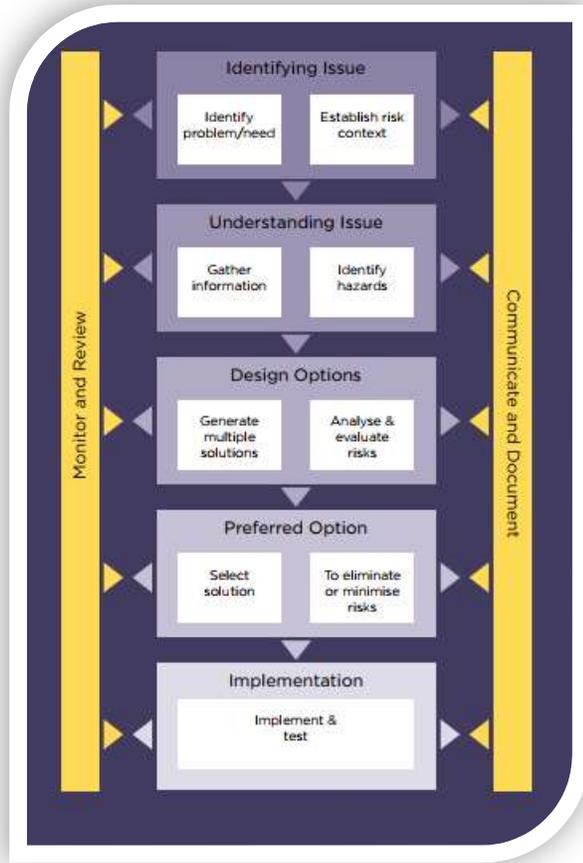
7: Engage Decision makers and leaders

- Like any change, it must be led from the top – workers need to see their leaders and managers supporting and embracing the changes required before they will also embrace changes to the way they work. To engage decision makers and leaders, you will need to demonstrate the short and long-term benefits of investing in the good work design principles when anticipating a change program for the organisation.
- Support from leaders and decision makers for good work design can be built into the day to day operations of the business but ensuring the principles are included in relevant organisational policies and procedures, contracts and proposals for any workplace changes, the responsibilities and performance measures for management systems and audit reports, communications and providing sufficient resources (both people and money) to address design issues.
- To ensure leaders can make appropriate decisions around the impending changes it is also important to ensure they have access to the right information at the right times to make an informed decision. This includes ensuring design options are presented that support both the desired business outcomes as well as the work health and safety objectives. To assess design options they should be accompanied by risk assessments and short and long-term cost-benefit analysis. Leaders also need to be made aware of when decisions need to be made, and by whom, so the change program can be managed effectively.

8: Actively involve the people who do the work, including those in the supply chain and networks

- Consultation with those to be affected by changes to work design is essential, and is, in fact, required by most state's work health and safety laws. The good work design principles also show it is good practice to also consult on work design changes with your supply chain and other key stakeholders who may be able to

provide useful input into the proposed changes. This can have flow-on effects for both upstream and downstream supply chain participants.

- Effective consultation will promote the sharing of information between those proposing the changes and the workforce and will also give workers opportunities to have input into the design process. They must feel able and encouraged to express their views, raise any issues they have identified and where possible, contribute to the decision making process. This will not only provide additional knowledge about the work in question, but helps to promote ownership of the changes within the workforce.
- Under the current state work health and safety laws, business owners are required to consult with workers if they are going to instigate a change that will have an impact on health and safety associated with the work. Under proposed model laws, if more than one person has a duty of care in relation to the matter, each person with the duty of care must consult, co-operate and co-ordinate their activities with the others who also hold the same duty of care.

Monitor and Review

Identifying Issue
- Identify problem/need
- Establish risk context

Understanding Issue
- Gather information
- Identify hazards

Design Options
- Generate multiple solutions
- Analyse & evaluate risks

Preferred Option
- Select solution
- To eliminate or minimise risks

Implementation
- Implement & test

Communicate and Document

9: Identify hazards, assess and control risks and seek continuous improvement

- This principle considers that a systematic approach should be taken to risk management when designing work practices and that this should be a part of normal business operations and processes, rather than a one-off event when a change is being made. Good work designs should be continually monitored and adjusted to adapt to other changes in the workplace. Feedback is essential to ensure new information is learnt and used to improve the work design.
- Under a systematic approach to risk management for work health and safety risks and hazards, there will be decision points that allow for a review of options and consultation before a decision is made. This allows flexibility in the design to respond quickly to new or unanticipated outcomes.
- Applying these good work design principles will result in a continuous improvement approach to work health and safety for any business. The consideration of health and safety issues should be integrated into the business' overall risk management processes. [3]

10: Learn from experts, evidence and experience

- No business will have all the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to apply all the good work design principles each and every time. Often you will need to work with other experts in the work design process. In fact, continuous improvement often relies on expert contributions to be effective as this helps to fill knowledge and skill gaps. Most complex projects will need a core group of people involved during the design and implementation phases. This core group will bring in other expertise as needed.
- It is important to recognise strengths and limitations of each expert's knowledge and incorporate that into your design process. The type of expert required will be specific to your business and the changes you are considering making. To choose the right expert make sure you assess their skills, qualifications, industry experience, reputation as well as their technical expertise. Most good work design processes will require some collaboration between internal and external experts.
- Other information sources that can assist with evidence and experience and information to help design good work process are internal experts, such as workers, line management, technical personnel, maintenance staff, engineers and work health and safety advisors. Near misses, injuries and illnesses can also provide important information about poor design of work practices.

Before you start any work design process, you should consider all the evidence – and ensure it comes from a range of sources. Gather information about new technology, the business direction and future plans, and details on incidents that have occurred such as near misses and work injury and illness rates. Many of these metrics can also be used to assess the effectiveness of current work design and identify areas that may require changes to be made.

However, these ten good work design principles, when applied to suit the specifics of your workplace, and taking into consideration your local work health and safety legal requirements, should result in better work health and

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[3] Source: *Safe Work Australia, Principles of good work design: A work health and safety handbook, pg 19 Figure 5*

safety outcomes for your people, and should also support an increase in business productivity. It just makes good business sense, doesn't it?

If you are considering a major change in your business, have you considered how it will affect the way people work? If you'd like to use this as an opportunity to ensure your work practices embrace good work design, get in touch to see if we can help you develop systems and processes that bring out the best in your people.

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Source: www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/good-work-design-handbook.pdf.