

COSBOA Submission NWI

Consultation on the draft [National Workplace Initiative core framework](#)

COSBOA's six-point formula for mentally healthy workplaces

1. Healthy business = healthy owners

The mental health and wellness of a small business owner is best served by a healthy economy where the business can succeed. The health of the business and the mental health of the business owner are closely aligned. As small businesses are, by their very nature, reliant on factors outside and greater than themselves, policies around competition, supply, and regulation all impact directly on mental health and wellness.

2. Mentally healthy business owners = mentally healthy workplaces and employees.

Information about workplace wellness tends to be employee centric. COSBOA contends that workplace wellness starts with the mental health wellness, awareness, and actions of the owner and/or leader of the business, and that is the best way to influence the mental wellbeing of most employees in Australia. Whether it's one person or 100, the business owner is a central influence.



3. Information + services = mentally healthy workplaces

Current offerings tend toward more information. More information is not a solution for most small business people. Information overload is often part of the problem. Knowing is not enough. The solution is a mix of information and a readily accessible, purpose-built mentoring service that guides and encourages small business owners not only to build their own mental health capabilities, but the capacity of a mentally healthy workplace in their small business.

4. Help line/psychologist = small business mentoring services

There needs to be a service in between the extremes of a help line and a psychologist for small business owners' mental health and wellness. This should be someone who helps the business person adapt and adopt mental health wellness practices, understands the challenges of the small business environment, is personal, consistent, and includes the best, evidence-based information. For too long business owners and their aspirations have been considered expendable and they have been left to sink or swim.

5. Shared responsibility = mentally healthy workplaces

The tendency to assign blame, shift responsibility, persecute and litigate employers for all mental health issues of employees is counter-productive for the 97% of business people who want to provide mentally healthy workplaces. It disengages the very people who should be empowered to create mentally healthy workplaces. Employers and employees must work together to create mentally healthy workplaces and share the responsibility. It also ignores the very personal dynamics of small and relationship-based workplaces where there are fewer than 5 staff members — the majority of workplaces.

6. Diversity = impact

Solutions that cater for the diversity of small business needs, given that small business is the major employer in Australia, will have the biggest impact and best outcome to create more mentally healthy workplaces. One size does not fit all.

COSBOA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Workplace Initiative. When realised the National Workplace Initiative (NWI) will:

- create an evidence-based framework for workplace mental health strategies
- help people at work and those connected to them find suitable initiatives and resources
- showcase successful approaches to mentally healthy workplaces
- strengthen the many programs and interventions already underway in Australia.

Acronyms and website links

[National Workplace Initiative \(NWI\)](#)

[Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.](#)(MHWA) Established by the National Mental Health Commission in 2012.



Question 1.

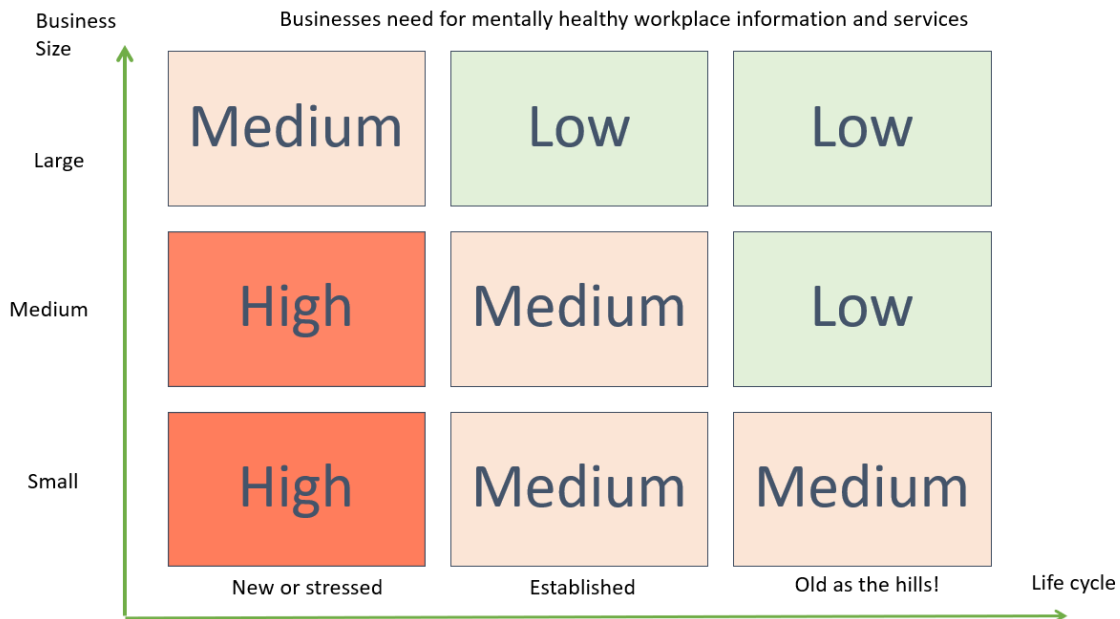
The statement that “a mentally healthy workplace framework that is equally relevant to all Australian businesses” underestimates the variety and diversity in businesses. Making the framework so generic and non-specific that a business person will not be able to find what they need is the very challenge that led to the creation of the NWI. We refer to Formula 6 above, Diversity = impact.

We note the framework will avoid information about implementation or “how to do” things that is not equally relevant to all Australian businesses. Given the variety and diversity of Australian businesses, this creates a framework that by necessity, will be overwhelmingly general and vague. It also ignores the way small business works, being pragmatic, action focused and very much about “HOW TO”. They often arrive with a specific problem and they’re looking for “how to” solve that issue.

There are recognised ways to define businesses that would be helpful in presenting mental health wellness information, being business size, (small, medium, or large) and life cycle. Regardless of sector/industry and regional differences, these factors apply to all businesses and they are clearly recognisable. Mapping businesses according to these criteria helps to identify where the most need resides. In general, and noting there are always exceptions to generalisations, a small business just starting out or that is stressed is going to have fewer resources, experience and knowledge about a mentally healthy workplace compared to an established, well-resourced, large business with access to resources, experience and knowledge both within and outside the company.

While this is a generalisation, COSBOA’s experience is that most small business people value their staff (sometimes like family) and are highly conscious of their needs, personalities, and mental health. Some businesses prove to be exceptions and their work practices need to be addressed. The NWI is a great place to start the journey from awareness to action.

When viewed on a matrix, the tendency to treat all business like they are large and well-established is counter-productive to getting information to the businesses with the most need for mentally healthy workplace advice and guidance.



All businesses go through a lifecycle from start-up to well-established. They do not always grow larger. There are many one or two person consultancies or contractors who have run successfully for many years and stay small for a variety of reasons. If you look at a matrix of business size and life cycle, then it is easier to see where there may be a greater need for information on a mentally healthy workplace at certain stages and sizes of business.

The framework's attachment to being relevant to all businesses may hamper the NWI's approach to resonate where there is the most need to provide mentally healthy workplace information. The question is, how will a very generic offering resonate with small businesses, sole traders, contractors, start-ups, and business owners who are stressed? (COVID-19, bushfire, flood, drought). Is there a way to funnel information from these broader business types to a more user-specific, nuanced, and helpful offering?

There is an irresistible urge to try and find the homogenous. one-size-fits-all and craft the solution to the cliché of a business being a larger, defined, hierarchical organisation with leaders, managers, employees and well-recognised roles, cultures, and processes. The reality is much more messy, creative, and paradoxically difficult and fun.

Small business people thrive from and suffer through the hazards Safe Work Australia lists on its website. They become more resilient through the adversity they face and surmount. In doing so, they drive Australian economic prosperity. There is tragedy too, and the NWI challenge is to find and address it amongst the variety and diversity of experiences and responses. We are concerned that being generic and appealing to all businesses will mean that once again, small business won't be able to navigate through to find the information *and* the services they need.



5. Shared responsibility = mentally healthy workplaces

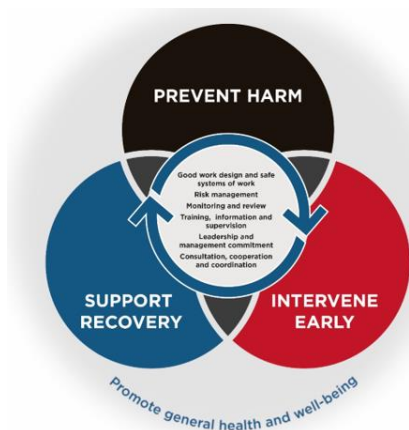
Mental health in the workplace

Mental health can be adversely affected by exposure to a range of hazards or factors in the workplace, including, for example:

- high job demand
- low job demand
- poor support
- poor workplace relationships
- low role clarity
- poor organisational change management
- poor organisational justice
- poor environmental conditions
- remote or isolated work, and
- violent or traumatic events.

For many small businesses this list, taken from Safe Work Australia's Work-related psychological health and safety document, describes an ordinary day in the "office" (that could also be a shop, café, back of a car, paddock, workbench, garage, forest, hotel, or kitchen). How does a sole trader, a two-person partnership, or a family trust of three people avoid these "hazards" when they are part of running a small business? It would be good if the framework recognised the diversity of workplaces and businesses.

While we accept these factors are stressful for people, identifying them as hazards that must be eliminated only creates more stress for small business people. A different approach would be more effective, like formula 5, "Shared Responsibility."



Question 2.

Relevance of domains for all Australian businesses

1. Supporting recovery – relevant domain.
2. Preventing harm - problematic
3. Promote wellbeing – the best.

The domains look a lot like the ones in Safe Work Australia's (SWA) Work-related psychological health and safety report. COSBOA has been critical of the approach taken by SWA.

Supporting recovery

It is important to understand "supporting recovery" in the context of the great proportion of businesses in Australia that are small. Often, it is the staff supporting the owner when they become unwell. Or if one person in a small team is unwell, the whole viability of the business can be threatened. There is not an EAS or an HR Department, and there is also a fear of being persecuted that can make matters worse and stop people seeking help. The stigma-free culture within the business is important and it is also important that small business people who are reaching out for help don't feel like they will be blamed or face prosecution. Who supports the mentally ill employee who is also the business owner?

Actions within this domain include increasing awareness and understanding of mental ill-health, reducing stigma, training managers and leaders to support intervention and recovery, providing access to and/or supporting uptake of early intervention, injury management, recover at work / return to work supports and employee assistance programs.

→ people
not applicable to
over 50% of
work places

↓? not sure how this
relates to mental
health... Already
covered in WHS

Regarding getting help early, or “early intervention”, we agree that this should be encompassed here. But who does a small business person reach out to early?



4. Help line/psychologist = small business mentoring services

There needs to be a service in between the extremes of a help line and a psychologist for small business owners' mental health and wellness. This should be someone who helps the business person adapt and adopt mental health wellness practices, understands the challenges of the small business environment, is personal, consistent, and includes the best, evidence-based information. For too long business owners and their aspirations have been considered expendable and they have been left to sink or swim.

This also addresses the information overload that characterises most of the NWI approach. More information is not the solution; it often creates more problems. If funding allows it, we need to look at a mix of information and services. The thin research¹ that does exist for small business mental health suggests this is a far better solution.

- Businesses moving beyond legislated requirements to excel in this domain understand the health benefits of good work and support people to stay at work during periods of mental ill-health. This also extends to proactive support for people away from work with physical injuries to eliminate or minimise secondary psychological injury. Businesses excelling in this domain also understand how incorporating mental health within diversity and inclusion initiatives strengthens their business and supports the many
- Australians who will experience mental ill-health at some point in their lifetime.

What if the injured person is the business owner? Their mental health is even more at risk if the business fails due to their absence. How do they manage this, especially in a small business, say < 5 staff....

¹ Protecting the Mental Health of Small to Medium Enterprise Owners, Angela Martin, PhD, Michelle Kilpatrick, PhD, Jenn Scott, PhD, Fiona Cocker, PhD, Sarah Dawkins, PhD, Paula Brough, PhD, and Kristy Sanderson, PhD



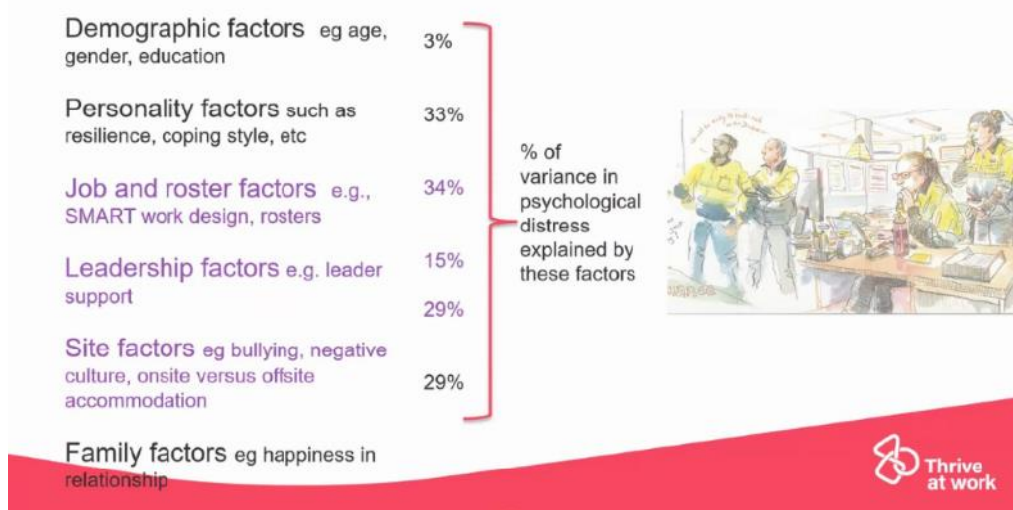
Prevention of harm - relevance/missing?

Shared responsibility

Preventing harm tends to be associated with workplace safety. It also assumes that you can identify and remove all psychosocial risks. These risks vary and are subjective according to the individuals impacted. Some things – like having a sign on the door saying “rudeness to staff won’t be permitted” are fine in theory, but hard to police. Just ask the staff at Bunnings who dealt with mask-free “Karen”. Or the staff at a restaurant ([Kokomos](#)) who just witnessed an assault and murder between patrons.

There’s also, for small businesses, a deep distrust of the perceived slide into them being responsible for the mental wellbeing of their staff regardless of what may be causing their employees’ suffering.

Example of How Work Affects Mental Health



Research shows that factors outside the workplace are just as impactful as those inside the workplace. Small businesses are understandably wary of being held accountable and responsible for psychological harm. The tension and temptation to blame workplace factors and use workers compensation (which should be there for real cases of harm resulting from workplace accidents) to monetise an issue and find fault in the workplace is very real. Staffing issues are usually the second problem for small business people after cashflow.

Perhaps a better domain name is “Shared Responsibility”

5. Shared responsibility = mentally healthy workplaces

The tendency to assign blame, shift responsibility, persecute and litigate employers for all mental health issues of employees is counter-productive for the 97% of business people who want to provide mentally healthy workplaces. It disengages the very people who should be empowered to create mentally healthy workplaces. Employers and employees must work together to create mentally healthy workplaces and share the responsibility. It also ignores the very personal dynamics of small and relationship-based workplaces where there are fewer than 5 staff members, most workplaces.

No employer, big or small, can mitigate risks without all people in the organisation taking responsibility for harm reduction. COSBOA thinks the word “prevent”, again, comes from a world disconnected from reality. Employers do reduce harm, but it is incredibly irresponsible and unfair to suggest they can prevent all harms, especially the nuances of psychological harm.

Mentally healthy workplaces are important and the work of NWI and MHW in encouraging awareness and action in workplaces is critical. There is a distinction between a mentally healthy workplace and a physically safe workplace. Physical risks are well definable and objective. Psychological risks are subjective and individual. A shift in responsibility of an individual's mental health to the employer, aligning mental health to workplace safety, is ill-conceived and disconnected from the real world. There is a key difference between an objective workplace hazard that can be identified, assessed, and mitigated, and an individual's subjective mental health resilience and threshold. Employers can do better at providing mentally healthy work places but the approach must recognise the nuances. The trend to blame or assign employer responsibility when mental health issues arise in workplaces is simplistic and unhelpful. Long term, it does not provide a workable model to engage employers in mentally healthy workplace practices; it alienates employers. And it's completely inappropriate, especially when over half of Australia's businesses are small and a very large proportion are sole traders to whom the cliché of a leader and staff doesn't even apply.

The mental health hazards listed by Safe Work Australia sound like a normal day's challenges in small business. It talks about absenteeism, time off and claims, all not relevant to small businesses of one or two staff or sole traders, or family businesses or partnerships of one or two people.

Preventing harm has an almost irresistible assignment of responsibility on the employer to guarantee an employee's mental health in the workplace. This is ill suited to most Australian workplaces. We continue to be critical of an organisation that describes a person running a business as a PCBU and ignores the smaller businesses' perspective. What if your worker is your husband and he has always done it that way for years? What if the employer is two teenage women with a start-up and one has social anxiety and has maxed out the credit card on start-up costs? Who is the responsible PCBU and is this approach practical?

Work health and safety duties

The [model WHS Act](#) requires a [PCBU](#) to ensure the health and safety of their workers, so far as is reasonably practicable. It defines health to mean both physical and psychological health. The [model WHS laws](#) have not been implemented in Victoria and Western Australia, although those jurisdiction have comparable duties and definitions of health.

- Under the [model WHS Act](#), [PCBUs](#) have a duty to protect workers from psychological [risks](#) as well as physical [risks](#).
- The best way to do this is by designing work, systems and workplaces to eliminate or minimise [risks](#) to psychological health; monitoring the health of workers and workplace conditions; and consulting with workers.
- Employers also have a duty to make sure work is safe for those returning after a workplace illness or injury.

Under the [model WHS laws](#), a [PCBU](#) must consult with workers on health and safety matters that are likely to directly affect them, including on psychological [hazards](#) and [risks](#). Further information on consultation is in the [model Code of Practice: Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination](#).

It also makes good business sense to prevent or minimise [risks](#) to psychological health. Work environments that do not adequately manage these [risks](#) can incur significant human and financial costs.

This guide is 43 pages long and in just the extract above, refers to six different links for further information. It's difficult to imagine a sole trader or independent contractor, such as a painter, a music teacher, or a swim instructor, reading and implementing these duties. Yet they absolutely have the same rights to a mentally healthy workplace, and, as the extract emphasises, are duty bound and legally required to follow the law. We contend this approach is not practical.

COSBOA sees a need for shared responsibility to encompass provision of information and services to small business people. Current offerings tend toward more information. More information is not a solution for most small business people. Information overload is often part of the problem. Knowing is not enough. The solution is a mix of information and a readily accessible, purpose-built mentoring

service that guides and encourages small business owners not only to build their own mental health capabilities, but the capacity of a mentally healthy workplace in their small business.

Right now, where do the 200,000 + distressed small business go? Beyond Blue, Lifeline and other services provide fantastic help line services; however, this does not offer specific or consistent business advice. We know that business health is directly linked to the business owners' mental wellness. The waiting time for a psychologist is long and if the person is distressed (not sick) then counselling may not be appropriate. There needs to be a service in between the extremes of a help line and a psychologist for the mental health and wellness of small business owners. This should be someone who helps the business person adapt and adopt mental health and wellness practices, understands the challenges of the small business environment, is personal, consistent, and includes the best, evidence-based information. Something that is more practical than lavender on your pillow and holds a distressed business owner accountable to taking care of themselves so they can take care of their employees.

Domain 3 - Promote wellbeing through positive elements of work.

Allowing flexibility and recognising diversity in workplaces is key to promoting wellness. All people at work should be encouraged to be aware, adopt, adapt, and action workplace wellness.

What if you do not control a lot of the factors at work and you're the employer? A family business run by the son, where Dad will not compromise on the rostering? An employer facing the fallout from COVID-19? The Draft Framework again presents language from big business, "assigning clear accountability for action and outcomes." If there are 3 staff members in the workshop, this is never clear. Everyone is responsible.

"Using measurement and data to guide decisions and outcomes" in small business looks more like "listening to staff and customers to make decisions and run a better business." And "co-design" in a small business is people making it up as they go along, having fun, making mistakes, leaning in, and learning in the deep end.

Wellbeing promotion first and foremost must resonate and be recognisable to those it seeks to influence. That means clear communication that comes from a place of understanding the needs the business is facing, one of many being the capacity of the workplace to cater for the mental wellness of people working within. The framework's recognition that action at all levels from the individual to the industry is welcome. For small businesses, other factors like finance, regulation, suppliers, economies, communities, climate, and governments, all impact on their ability to create mentally healthy workplaces.

6. Diversity = impact

Solutions that cater for the diversity of small business needs, given that small business is the major employer in Australia, will have the biggest impact and best outcome to create more mentally healthy workplaces. One size does not fit all.

1. Healthy business = healthy owners

The mental health and wellness of a small business owner is best served by a healthy economy where the business can succeed. The health of the business and the mental health of the business owner are closely aligned. As small businesses are, by their very nature, reliant on factors outside and greater than themselves, policies around competition, supply, and regulation all impact directly on mental health and wellness

Critical Success factors

COSBOA has formulated six points that create mentally healthy workplaces and we would like to see these included in the NWI framework as they relate to over half the workplace employment situations in Australia. The “action at all levels” approach to us sounds like Shared Responsibility.

COSBOA acknowledges the contentions around the inclusion of physical and financial health and the implications of overloading business people with “responsible for everything” syndrome. We note the same concern around including supply chains, customers, clients, and “ecosystems” (probably being markets and economies).

Small business people are part of local communities; they sponsor sport teams and local arts and charities. They are on the sidelines, at the opening night, and at fundraisers on the weekend. They roster themselves and their employees around matches, away games, band tours and volunteering. They are intimately and inextricably connected with community and well understand the needs for balanced physical exercise, a good diet, enough sleep, and time out, even when they are not getting any of these. Understanding is not enough.

They also know there is a big supermarket opening next door that pays its staff less under unfair IR laws. Or an online retailer selling the same goods and not paying taxes. Or landlords that dictate unprofitable opening hours. They know their costs, what sales must be made and how much money is in the bank. Small businesses are directly impacted by external factors and as most Australian employees and employers work in small business, there needs to be more than a passing reference to these factors and their direct impact on mental health and wellness. The smaller the business the BIGGER these external factors will be on their business.

The problem is not overloading businesses (they are probably overloaded already), the challenge is making the NWI relevant and having it resonate with the majority of people in small business. Deleting or minimising factors that directly impact their ability to function in the world and create mentally healthy workplaces is not a solution.

If the NWI Framework cannot address these issues, then how CAN small businesses?

COSBOA agrees making it more complicated is not the solution. The challenge for us all is to make the NWI framework comprehensive and clear without complexity. This involves digging deep through the depth of complexity and understanding the issues so well that you can focus on what is essential. That means having an in depth understanding of small business workplaces and their business owners.

Simple can be harder than complex: you must work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it is worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.

Steve Jobs – Apple Founder (started small!)