

## ISO 45003 & Workplace Wellbeing - what and why?



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## Disclaimer

This white paper is not definitive for all workplaces and Health & Safety, HR and Compliance responsibilities/duties vary depending on the type and size of businesses. This white paper is to be used as rough guidance only. iHASCO assumes no responsibility for errors or omissions in the contents of this document.

## An introduction to mental health in UK workplaces

Before the pandemic, roughly two-thirds of people in employment had reported suffering from a form of mental ill-health. Many of these people suffered with daily anxiety and depression, and because of this, many businesses across the globe had started to recognise the importance of championing employee mental health and making sure that their cultures aligned to this.

However, despite the increase in awareness among workplaces, it is evident that mental ill-health was an epidemic in itself before the Coronavirus, and it was long overdue the thorough attention it deserved.

There have been a number of large scale studies and surveys that have demonstrated just how serious mental ill-health issues were before the pandemic.

[The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014](#)<sup>3</sup>, published in 2016, reported that:

- 5.9 in 100 people had a generalised anxiety disorder
- 3.3 in 100 people had depression
- 2.4 in 100 people had phobias
- 1.3 in 100 people had OCD
- 0.6 in 100 people had a panic disorder
- 4.4 in 100 people had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- 7.8 in 100 people had mixed anxiety and depression

The [MHF](#)<sup>4</sup> also reported:

- 1 in 6.8 people experienced mental health problems at work
- 12.7% of sickness days were linked to mental ill-health
- Women in employment were nearly two times as likely to have a common mental health problem as men in employment.

Additionally, in 2019, a government report showed that poor mental health cost UK business between 33 and 42 billion pounds every year, with over half of this cost down to the loss of productivity.

It's clear to see the extent of the issues surrounding workplace wellbeing pre-pandemic, but how has COVID-19 affected workplace wellbeing?

## How the pandemic has affected workplace wellbeing

2020 and 2021 have been incredibly damaging years for most of the global population.

The Coronavirus pandemic has damaged businesses and the economy, caused frustration to the wider public, and caused devastation for many.

Whilst there seems to be a sense of returning to normality, some people are still dealing with dramatic changes in their lives such as losing loved ones, job losses, and changes to their usual routines - leaving opportunities for stress and mental illness to take hold.

Many businesses have seen a further rise in mental health problems in their workforce. This, on top of an already growing problem, is a serious concern.

A survey conducted by the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported that 43% of UK psychiatrists saw an increase in urgent and emergency cases during lockdown, and evidence from the Sars pandemic points to the risk of both patients and healthcare workers experiencing diagnosable symptoms of traumatic stress in the months and years ahead. Moreover, it has been suggested that [500,000 more people will experience mental health conditions in the UK related to the economic downturn](#)<sup>25</sup>.

## Has workplace wellbeing stepped up the agenda since the pandemic?

Since the Coronavirus pandemic, more people are talking about mental health and recognising the ill effects it can have on people's day-to-day lives. Common anxieties as a result of COVID-19, including health, finances and social isolation, have contributed to poor mental health across the nation.

For some time, mental health awareness has been creeping up the agenda, and the pandemic has provided a platform for acknowledging that more can be done when it comes to addressing mental health. Whilst there is still a way to go before it is given the recognition it requires, some progress has been made and a number of individuals and businesses are starting to confront it face on.

Businesses are undoubtedly in a period of uncertainty and are facing a huge number of challenges. What is clear is that Coronavirus is not going to disappear overnight, and longer term strategies will be required for businesses to remain competitive and come out of this on the other side. With many believing that there will be long-lasting effects on mental health as a result of COVID-19, employers need to be mindful that they can play their part in raising awareness and supporting employees who are struggling with poor mental health.

With lines between work and home during the pandemic being more blurred, the requirement for employers to provide support for mental health and wellbeing was vital. Many have recognised that putting employee wellbeing high on their agenda is important to help staff remain healthy, focussed and motivated.

Ensuring the workforce feels valued and putting them at the centre of the company will not only help employees but the business itself, too. With the current challenges and effect

on the bottom line, it is sometimes difficult to recognise the bigger picture.

However, more employers are encouraging open conversations about wellbeing in light of COVID-19, so for many, this has allowed employees to feel more comfortable approaching them with any mental health issues.

## An introduction to ISO 45003

Founded in 1947, the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) is an internationally recognised organisation that establishes standards for businesses in 165 countries worldwide.

They are the world's largest and most recognised developer of voluntary international standards and they facilitate world trade by providing common standards among nations.

There are a great number of benefits associated with receiving an ISO certification for your business, including: positioning yourself as an industry leader, increasing trust with your clients, and lowering insurance costs.

With around 20,000 standards having been developed and set, some of their more notable standards include ISO 45001, ISO 9001, ISO 14001, and the newly released ISO 45003.

[ISO 45003](#)<sup>35</sup> is the first global standard that gives employers practical guidance on how to manage psychosocial risks to staff in the workplace, focusing on the "mental health" and "wellbeing" aspects of health & safety.

The practical guidance is stand-alone and is not a certified standard in its own right. However, the guidance is relevant to areas of the existing ISO 45001, therefore following ISO 45003 can help organisations achieve compliance with ISO 45001.

## Who is it for?

The ISO 45003 guidance document is for any organisations that are looking to improve work-related mental wellbeing and implement working with wellbeing training as part of their management of occupational health & safety.

The new standard provides relevant guidance that delivers measurable benefits regardless of an organisation's current ISO 45001 status.

## Has it been published?

The guidance was published in June 2021, during a time where it is arguably more



important than ever for employers to reach out to their workforce about the subject of mental health.

## More about ISO 45003

The guidance document is 23 pages long and consists of 10 sections:

1. Scope
2. Normative references
3. Terms and definitions
4. Context of the organisation
5. Leadership and worker participation
6. Planning
7. Support
8. Operation
9. Performance evaluation
10. Improvement

The standard goes into detail to cover aspects such as:

- How to identify the conditions, circumstances and workplace demands that have the potential to impair the psychological health and wellbeing of workers.
- How to identify primary risk factors and assess them to determine what changes are required to improve the working environment.
- How to identify and control work-related hazards and manage psychosocial risk within an occupational health and safety management system.

Some other key areas that the guidance addresses also includes out of hours work & remote working - two key topics in the new age of homeworking.

Remote working has become a more frequent go to solution for workers, but also comes with it's own psychological risks. Additionally, out of hours work has become far more common as a result of a more blurred line between work and home life.

The guidance brings this information to the attention of the reader, and offers guidance on the risk assessment and planning surrounding these risks.

## Who developed the standard and where can it be downloaded?

The standard was developed by ISO technical committee ISO/TC 283, Occupational health and safety management, whose secretariat is held by BSI, ISO's member for the UK.

A read-only version of the guidance document can be downloaded for free from the [ISO website](#)<sup>35</sup>.

## Highlights of ISO 45003

The mere fact that this guidance now exists is a huge positive, as it will encourage those looking to comply with ISO 45001 to be more considerate of psychological health risks, and it will give organisations of all kinds the guidance needed to make a positive impact on their employee's mental health and wellbeing. Overall it's a huge step in the right direction.

Another huge positive of the guidance document is it's consideration for an aging workforce. The psychological impact that work has on older people is often an area of risk that goes unaddressed and it was clearly an issue that was due attention.

On the other hand, an issue with the guidance document is that it uses a lot of technical terminology and certain areas can be difficult to understand for someone who isn't from a health & safety background.

With that said, this is often the case with ISO standards and most organisations would have employees with the skill sets to interpret and understand them.

The guidance also shies away from bereavement, which is probably due to the standard being international and different cultures processing bereavement in different ways. As we know, bereavement is a hugely difficult experience for most and can have severe effects on a person's mental health and wellbeing. There are also jobs in particular sectors where staff will encounter bereavement on a regular basis and employers should understand how to mitigate the impact of this on their employees.

## The business case for psychological health in the workplace

It is a legal requirement for employers to have risk assessments in place in order to protect their employee's overall/general wellbeing. For the most part, the risks identified are those that can cause physical harm. However, it's important to remember that emotional wellbeing is just as important as physical wellbeing and therefore should be treated with the same urgency.

Our mental health influences the way we think and feel about ourselves, our capacity to learn, communicate, and form, sustain and end relationships, as well as our ability to cope with change.

Work is a massively influential factor in the wellbeing of a person. Although there is evidence to suggest that those who work are happier & healthier, it's important to recognise that work can have a negative effect on a person's wellbeing.

With that said, workplaces should aim to create an environment that fosters good mental wellbeing and eliminates or minimises the potential hazards which can have a negative impact.

For employees, working for an organisation that has an environment like this offers a number of benefits including:

- A sense of fulfillment
- Effective work relationships
- Good work/life balance
- Career development
- Sustainable work
- Dependents/society positively impacted

Additionally, there are a number of benefits for organisations including:

- Higher levels of performance
- Better staff retention
- Improved recruitment and diversity
- Improved employee engagement
- Enhanced productivity
- Increased innovation
- Improved organisational resilience
- Legal compliance
- Decreasing absenteeism

Financially speaking, investing in your employee's mental wellbeing makes absolute sense too...

According to a study by [Deloitte](#)<sup>2</sup>, for every £1 a business invests in mental health initiatives, they can see up to a £6 return on investment!

## Psychological risks in the workplace

Some of the most common psychological risks in the workplace include...

### Burnout

Burnout is a state of exhaustion, whether it be emotional, physical, and mental, and it is caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It can occur when you're feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands.

It has been argued that employee burnout is on the rise as a result of the workplace pressures created by the global pandemic. In some circumstances, employees have experienced longer working hours, unmanageable workloads, a poor work-life balance, and increased concerns about job security and targets.

A survey carried out by [Robert Walters](#)<sup>36</sup> found that 47% of managers thought their



employees may be at risk of burnout.

Whilst employees in some industries appear more susceptible to burnout, it can happen to anyone in any occupation.

Employers need to be mindful about the impact of COVID-19 on their staff. Ensuring workloads are manageable, encouraging staff to take holiday, offering rewards and recognition for success, and building team morale are just a few of the ways employers can help prevent burnout.

## Long working hours

Working long hours is killing over [700,000 workers per year](#)<sup>37</sup>, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

The global study, which is the first of its kind, found that 745,000 workers died in 2016 from stroke and heart disease relating to long hours of work.

Shockingly, the research also found that working 55 hours or more a week lead to a 35% higher risk of stroke, and a 17% higher risk of dying from heart disease, as opposed to working between 35 and 40 hours per week.

When considering the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, the WHO has suggested that the trend may worsen.

There is evidence to suggest that when countries go into a national lockdown, the number of hours worked increases by about 10%.

Evidently, it's crucial for employers to ensure that workers are given manageable workloads and provided with the skills and knowledge they need to be as productive as possible within work hours.

Organisations who have employees working long hours should firstly see if they can reduce the need for extended working hours. If this is not possible, employers should look at offering staff support in the form of 'time off in lieu', more frequent breaks, overtime pay and mental health support.

It is an employer's responsibility to ensure that their staff are given a manageable amount of work in their given working hours. Prioritisation is a key element to fixing the issue of long working hours as it will allow employers to work with their staff to ensure that they are being as productive as possible. So what can employers do?

- Encourage cutting out less important meetings that may not be necessary.
- Encourage staff to reach out if they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Encourage staff to delegate certain pieces of work if possible.

- Encourage healthy working patterns, including dedicating certain hours of the day to taking calls and responding to emails.
- Establishing and encouraging a 9-5 working routine with regular breaks.
- Don't give unrealistic deadlines; speak with staff to properly understand how long something may take.
- Provide staff with the tools they need to better manage their time - this could be up-to-date software or training.

## A lack of support

The majority of forward-thinking leaders are now on board with addressing mental ill-health in the workplace, because they understand that taking care of their team's mental health is not only their moral responsibility, but it's also the key to a successful business. We've seen that poor mental health costs UK businesses up to £42 billion a year.

An organisation that has employees who are both mentally and physically fit and healthy, produces happier, hard-working, and more productive employees! It's vital for employers to create a safe and supportive environment that encourages employees to talk openly about mental health, but it's also in everyone's best interests that an employee's physical and emotional needs are looked after.

It's good practice for all managers in every business, no matter what size or sector, to create a 'Mental Health at Work Plan'. The idea is to plan and promote mental health initiatives within the business and highlight the support that's available to those who need it.

It's also a good idea for the whole team to get involved in creating the plan so they can share their own ideas about the support they need. The key is to communicate - the more input the better - as this helps all staff feel valued, listened to and involved. It can also direct employees to other important policies and procedures such as sickness and absence, grievances, bullying and harassment, occupational health, employee assistance programmes, and anything else connected to their wellbeing.

## Unfulfilling work & low or high demand

Although it is commonly thought that too much work is what makes up most psychological risks at work, a lack of pressure and fulfillment can be just as damaging.

Not having anything, or enough to do, can feed feelings of unworthiness or not being good enough. It can make an employee feel undervalued or even useless. Doing things that we don't enjoy or don't get any satisfaction from can have us feeling frustrated, angry, anxious or just plain miserable.

Boredom is a common cause of stress, so it's important that employees are given a

reasonable amount of responsibility at work and can get involved in multiple projects. Boredom and stress can be reduced by finding a healthy pressure balance, leaving employees feeling challenged and engaged.

However, it is crucial that employees are able to get the balance between too little work and too much work right.

Just for a moment, we want you to entertain the idea that humans are like balloons...

With very little pressure being applied, a balloon is almost lifeless - in the low pressure zone it's unchallenged, under-performing, and pretty much uninterested in being a balloon. With a little more pressure however, it starts to take shape - it's not the best version of itself, but it's doing well enough - and this is often where we stop and stay; safe in our comfort zone.

Even though it's easy, this can be unfulfilling (boring even) and it prevents us from growing, learning anything new, and reaching our full potential.

Now, with a bit more pressure - an extra few challenges - the balloon is looking good. No doubt it feels good, too. It reaches its optimum state - the stretch zone. This is where we're motivated, productive, take on challenges and meet our goals. The stretch zone is where we become the best version of ourselves.

But, if even more pressure is applied, a balloon starts to strain - it's keeping itself together, looking good for now, but this won't last long. This is when it's time to slow down, but the pressure keeps on coming, until it's too much and the balloon can't take it anymore.

We are no different. Many of us are in the habit of pushing ourselves too far, sometimes to the point of bursting, just to feel like we're doing enough. Of course, everyone should work to the best of their ability, but it shouldn't make them stressed. It's a case of fine-tuning it and getting the balance right. Employees need to find their stretch zone - the place that has just the right amount of pressure for a person to work at their peak without the mental strain.

## Discrimination

The ideal workplace is an environment where every employee is valued, respected and treated with kindness. Their mental health matters; their physical health matters; people's differences are taken into account so individual needs are met; negative behaviour is dealt with quickly and professionally; taking breaks is mandatory to keep people motivated and refreshed; and ideas from all areas of the business are listened to and given equal consideration.

In turn, every employee works hard and enjoys their work, the whole team is inspired, loyal and gets great results.

Despite what some people may think, the ideal workplace doesn't have to be a pipe dream. It's actually a very realistic situation for any organisation that understands the true value of its people, as well as fair policies and processes.

Unfortunately, one of the hurdles on the path to an ideal workplace is discrimination.

People are protected from discrimination at work if the behaviour is connected to one of these characteristics:

- Age
- Race
- Sex
- Disability
- Religion or belief
- Sexual orientation
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Gender reassignment

[A study](#)<sup>38</sup> found that most types of discrimination reported in the UK were:

- Age (11%)
- Gender (9%)
- Race (7%)

Additionally, it has also become increasingly clear that there is a greater awareness of, and a stronger attitude against, inequality from younger people. The study found that younger employees were more likely to say they've suffered discrimination - almost half of those aged 25-34 (49%) say they have been discriminated against, compared to just 23% of those over 55.

There's a lot of evidence to suggest that having a diverse workforce is also great for business.

When we truly value variety in our workplace, we open up a world of possibilities. We start to notice the range of skills, talents, perspectives and approaches that are offered by our diverse team - each with their own background and set of experiences - and the business becomes more innovative, creative and better at problem-solving.

It also helps the organisation to gain a better understanding of the needs and desires of your customers, and it enables the team to tailor and market your products more effectively, especially when members of the team are in the same demographic as your target audience.

It's crucial for all organisations to respect and appreciate the people who work for them.

If you do, it increases staff commitment, improves staff retention, increases the return on training investment, and it creates a supportive culture where everyone can thrive. This healthy environment leads to much more job satisfaction and much greater financial success!

## Common issues with managing psychological risks in the workplace

There are many employers out there that want to better manage psychological risks in the workplace, but are put off by some of the challenges they know they'll face, or even put off by the fear of handling the risks incorrectly.

However, managing psychological risks in the workplace sounds harder than it actually is, in many cases. Many of the challenges employers face surrounding psychological risks can be quite simply solved once they are identified, and knowing how to overcome them can help organisations to create a psychologically healthier working environment.

With that said, here are several of the most common challenges to managing psychosocial risks in the workplace...

**Viewing initiatives as a 'nice to have' activity, rather than core business** - organisations will often promote mental health initiatives as a perk, when in reality many of these initiatives should be core business to most organisations.

This can lead to employees thinking that it's a privilege that can be removed, which is less than ideal for those who are already suffering from anxiety and need certain initiatives in place to help them cope.

**Common belief that psychological risks are irrelevant to overall safety** - a study shows that [UK workers report placing greater importance on their mental health than physical health](#)<sup>39</sup>. With that said, employers should see psychological risks as having equal importance to physical risks.

Additionally, issues that arise from psychological risks, such as stress, can cause employees to suffer from physical risks like high blood pressure. This correlation between the two types of risk is often forgotten, but it is crucial that employers take this into consideration as it is in both their employees and their own best interest.

**Tendency to focus on health promotion means skipping the first and crucial step: prevention** - organisations can often forget that work plays a crucial factor in a person's wellbeing. Whilst it should be a priority for employers to help those suffering from mental ill-health, employers should also take a step back and consider what they could do to prevent their employees from damaging their mental wellbeing.

For example, take a look at what time employees are clocking out. They may be working longer hours due to a high workload, which could lead them to burnout.



Senior managers sometimes avoid early intervention with a more 'hands off' approach - "if it isn't broken, don't fix it" is the phrase that comes to mind here. Recognising mental health issues should be part of a manager's duty, and early intervention can stop any problems from becoming far worse.

Competency gaps with identifying psychosocial hazards - it is best practice for all employees to receive training on recognising mental health issues. Many organisations even take a further step and employ [mental health first aiders](#)<sup>32</sup> to be a point of contact for employees if they are experiencing emotional distress or suffering in silence with mental health problems, such as: stress, anxiety, or depression.

## What can employers do to support employees?

There are a lot of options for you to look at when supporting your staff, and sometimes the simplest gesture can go a long way. It's important you analyse how much help your staff need so you're able to provide them with the right level of support.

Here's some simple ideas to help support your employees with their mental health and wellbeing:

### Remind employees to look after their mental health

This may seem like common sense, but when you get caught up in day-to-day struggles it can be easy to lose sight of taking care of yourself and checking in on your mental health. There are plenty of freely available resources and blogs that you can share with staff. [Check out our blog - 8 simple rules for improving daily mental wellbeing](#)<sup>40</sup>.

### Set a time to have a one-to-one catch up with those in your team

A cup of tea and informal chat can go a long way to support someone and give them the boost they need. Instead of discussing workloads and deadlines, instead ask them about how they are feeling and have an open conversation about their mental health. The [Samaritan's Brew Monday](#)<sup>41</sup> encourages people to stay connected through a virtual cuppa. Listening to someone and letting them talk about any problems they are facing can help clear their mind.

### Appoint Mental Health First Aiders

It is so important to ensure that mental health and wellbeing is supported from the top down in any organisation. It is a good idea to appoint [Mental Health First Aiders](#)<sup>32</sup> (MHFAs) to help support employee wellbeing, and it doesn't necessarily have to be members from the management team. Reach out to all staff and ask if anyone is interested in becoming a

MHFA. It can be a great way to offer support to employees whilst also promoting a positive working environment.

## Encourage your staff to take regular breaks

Check in on your staff and remind them to take regular breaks, including their full lunch break. Eating a nutritious lunch and getting some fresh air will not only help them remain more productive in the afternoon but it will help contribute to their general wellbeing.

## Let staff know they can ask for help

Research indicates that 300,000 people with mental ill-health have to leave their jobs each year, with many not even disclosing their health concerns to their employer. This is a scary statistic and speaks volumes for why we as a nation need to be much better at removing the stigma surrounding mental-ill health.

Make sure your staff know that they will be met with kindness and compassion if they need help. Open lines of communication and honesty are valuable traits, and companies that can instill these into their culture will reap the rewards.

It's important to remember that looking after your employees mental health and wellbeing is ongoing - not just one day of the year. Taking steps towards supporting your employees wellbeing can make a real difference to them and even give your company a competitive advantage.

## Create Mental Health Plans / Undertake Stress Risk Assessments

It's essential for all organisations to manage psychosocial risks in a manner that is consistent with other health & safety risks.

Organisations following the ISO 45003 guidance and working towards compliance with ISO 45001 will have an occupational health & safety (OHS) management system in place, and integrating it with the organisation's broader business processes can help reduce psychosocial risks through measures such as stress risk assessments & a mental health plan.

**Stress risk assessment** - By undertaking a stress risk assessment, organisations should be able to identify potential issues in the stress levels of their employees. It will give them an idea of who might be harmed and how. This gives organisations the opportunity to evaluate and record these risks regularly and can help them to decide on control measures. Evaluate and record the risks regularly, and decide on control measures.

**A mental health plan** - This can help organisations have a clear idea on how they will

promote the wellbeing of employees and also gives employers a document to reference when reviewing risk assessments and they need an understanding of how work-related factors could impact the mental health of their employees.

## How eLearning can support your employees and help you work in accordance with ISO 45003

Section 6 of the ISO 45003 guidance document is all about planning actions to address risks and opportunities. The guidance suggests that one of the key ways to address psychological risks in the workplace is by...

*"increasing resources that assist workers to deal with psychosocial risks by raising awareness and understanding through effective training"*

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They are thoroughly researched; written to be informative, accurate and interesting; presented to camera by professional actors with expert delivery; and animated in such a way that they grab and hold your attention.

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When it comes to important topics like mental health & wellbeing, it's important that all employees retain a strong understanding of best practises and how to recognise issues.

Here at iHASCO, we supply Health & Safety, HR, Compliance and Soft-Skills training, making us an obvious choice for thousands of organisations looking to cover a number of key areas when it comes to staff training.

Designed to promote positive wellbeing in the workplace, our [Online Mental Health & Wellbeing Training Bundle](#)<sup>5</sup> includes a number of courses to help promote positive wellbeing to all levels of employees. Some of the courses include:

- [Mental Health Awareness Training](#)<sup>27</sup>
- [Managing Anxiety Training](#)<sup>23</sup>
- [Resilience Training](#)<sup>26</sup>
- [Stress Awareness & Management Training](#)<sup>6</sup>

You can [claim a free, no-obligation trial](#)<sup>42</sup> to any of these courses today! Alternatively, you can [request a quote](#)<sup>43</sup> and a member of our team will get back to you with a tailored quote for your organisation!

## Appendix

1. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-in-england-2007-results-of-a-household-survey>
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