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The role of worker voice in managing psychosocial hazards in the Western Australian mining industry

Mental Awareness, Respect and Safety Centre (MARS)
Centre Research Report



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Aim

This report synthesises interim findings on the role of worker voice in mitigating psychosocial hazards in the Pilbara iron ore industry. Workplace psychosocial hazards are "known antecedents of work-related distress" and even suicide¹, and subsequently in Australia are now considered to be a serious work health and safety issue. The Work Health and Safety Act of 2011 (WHS Act) mandated that employers must manage psychosocial hazards, and the Work Health and Safety Amendment Regulations of 2023, with specific relevance to psychosocial hazards, were introduced to provide better guidance to workers and employers in seeking to manage these risks. However, serious issues remain for workers in the Pilbara iron ore industry.

Worker voice is a mechanism through which employees can express dissatisfaction in the workplace and change situations which are not amenable to them. This can be either an individual (such as a discussion with your supervisor) or collective (such as union representation and bargaining). Academic literature regards worker voice as a route to improving wellbeing within the workplace context, whilst an absence of voice, or silence, has strong correlations to a reduction in wellbeing². However, connection between voice and the management of psychosocial workplace hazards in the workplace is seldom explored.

This project explores the perceptions of psychosocial hazards of workers in the Pilbara mining industry in Western Australia. Through interviews with mining workers, alongside a small number of union officials, we investigate the effectiveness of worker voice – both through company and union channels.

Method

This report is based on preliminary analysis of twenty (20) semi-structured interviews: nineteen (19) workers and one (1) union official. Workers were all employed in operational roles by various iron ore companies. Our sample includes both Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO) workers on varying rosters and residential workers, and both men (M) and women (F). Recruitment was done through union contacts, and ethics approval for the project was gained from Edith Cowan University.

1. Thompson N, Robertson A, Loudoun R, Biggs A, Townsend K, 2024. Psychosocial Hazards in the Northern Territory Building and Construction Industry: A Profile of Job Demands and Job Resources in a Jurisdiction and Industry with High Rates of Suicide International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 21(3):334.
2. Wilkinson, A. Knoll, M., Mowbray P. K. and Dundon, T. 2021. New Trajectories in Worker Voice: Integrating and Applying Contemporary Challenges in the Organization of Work. *British Journal of Management* 32(3), 693-707.

Psychosocial hazards

1. Poor organisational justice

WA code – 13. Referred to as “Unfairness, inconsistency, bias or lack of transparency in the way procedures are implemented, decisions are made, or workers are treated”.

Many participants referred to biased treatment by supervisors, with certain workers being favoured over others.

The industry term ‘purple circle’ refers to a clique or in-group who receive favourable treatment. Those outside the circle described being given the worst jobs, not being given opportunities for training and even being given lower bonuses. They feel isolated and find it harder to get their leave approved. It was also reported as being common for supervisors to hire friends.

*‘[The purple circle is the] most important part of mining...[t]hey call it FIFO, but it's actually fit in or f*** off’*
Worker (M)

The use of individual contracts means that two employees working side by side with similar skills and experience can be paid a very different salary, which can create division and discontent within the workforce. It can even be the case that newer starters are paid more than existing employees. Differences in pay can run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

2. Poor leadership practices and workplace culture

WA code – 1. Referred to as “Leadership practices (e.g. style, resource allocation, supporting workers) that negatively influence workplace culture, which is the shared beliefs, norms and values of the workforce”.

Supervisor behaviour was raised repeatedly by interviewees. The acts of a supervisor are central to whether things got better or worse for workers. Workers described supervisors who lacked operational knowledge, played favourites, failed to act, micromanaged, leaked concerns, gave unsafe instructions, or simply did not understand the practical reality of the job. A workplace culture of rigid hierarchies emerged from the interviews. Workers felt that they weren’t listened to. Poor communication, including around changes to work practices, was an issue for some.

Many leaders lack operational experience. Supervisors or managers sometimes do not understand the machinery or the work itself, but still make decisions that affected safety, performance, or discipline.

Supervisors are a key gateway for worker voice. While in theory, workers can raise hazards, concerns with their supervisor, in practice, whether that works depends heavily on who the supervisor is. A good supervisor can act quickly and make a worker feel protected. A poor supervisor can shut the issue down, ignore it, or, worse, make the worker feel like they have put themselves at risk by saying anything.

“The supervisors really is the worst part... they tend to recycle bad supervisors.”
Worker (F)

3. Inappropriate and unreasonable workplace behaviour

WA code – 16. Referred to as “Exposure to behaviours that are unreasonable, offensive, intimidating or may cause distress”.

Many interviewees referred to experiencing bullying. The effect on them was exacerbated by the inadequate management response to the bullying. These responses can be summarized as slow and opaque. Workers felt that the responsibility for managing the hazard fell onto them. They were told to document interactions. This documentation was a heavy burden for some workers, but did not lead to satisfactory results. Often, complaints were dismissed as “he said, she said”, with no action taken.

“All I used to keep getting from my superintendent or HR is he said, she said [and] just document every conversation...”
Worker (M)

Women continue to experience sexism, sexual harassment and sexual assault. Interviews described women having to prove themselves, women being blocked from progression, women being channelled into certain machinery or roles. Diversity efforts were experienced as box-ticking rather than genuine inclusion.

While more women are being hired, sexist discrimination has not gone away. There are also inadequate facilities for workers at some sites, including despite increased numbers of women workers.

“They say that they want equal opportunities for women and men, but they still have four men's toilets and one woman's toilet in the crib room.”
Worker (F)

There is also a voice issue here. Women may need to speak up about harassment, sexism, or unequal treatment, but doing so can expose them to being dismissed, not believed, or labelled as difficult. So gendered hazards are not just about individual incidents. They are also about whether the system is safe enough for women to raise issues and be protected.

“It's so rife in the industry, and they do nothing to protect females, nothing at all.”
Worker (F)

“Women have to work 10 times harder out there, especially older women.”
Worker (F)

*“They’re doing a big push to try and get more women in which is making men, or most people are now like, what the f*** you only got the job because you got a vagina.”*
Worker (F)

4. Fatigue

WA code – 9. Referred to as “A state of mental or physical exhaustion, or both”.

Another key psychosocial hazard raised was fatigue. For some, it was the monotony of truck work and staying awake through long shifts. For others, it was high cognitive load, night shift, long days, travel time, extra shifts, bus delays, or not getting proper breaks.

“You’re just doing that same run for 12 and a half hours, and it is grueling to stay awake.”
Worker (F)

Fatigue was often treated as something the individual worker had to manage, even when the work system itself was making fatigue more likely. This is important in relation to psychosocial hazards because fatigue is not just about individual resilience. It is built into rosters, transport, staffing, work pace, shift length, break practices, and expectations around availability.

Train drivers have a dynamic 24-hour roster, meaning that they can be scheduled to work at any time, and their start time can change at late notice. While the companies get workers to fill in fatigue assessments, workers reported not feeling confident to honestly state when they are feeling fatigued. They feared being disciplined by management if they said they were fatigued on multiple occasions, as this would disrupt operations.

Voice around fatigue was problematic. Workers can raise concerns, but the response often seems to be compliance-focused rather than genuinely about redesigning the work.

5. Other

Other issues raised related to the work environment included poor quality food, and to a lesser extent, accommodation, for FIFO workers. For train drivers, availability of food was the issue. While there seemed to be a certain acceptance of the long hours that are a feature of the industry, and for FIFO workers, long periods away from home, the issue of work schedules was never far from the surface in our discussions.

Discipline and surveillance – which relate to workers having low levels of control and autonomy, and job insecurity – also emerged as themes. Workers described being watched, recorded, tracked, written up, put on notes to file, losing bonus payments, or feeling that small things could be used against them later. Some monitoring was framed by the company as safety-related, but workers experienced it as punitive or unreasonable.

“They just fire people, left, right and centre for stupid things.”
Worker (F)

The role of worker voice

1. Company avenues for voice

Company avenues for voice such as “My Voice” or “Ethics Point” were widely seen as ineffective. Staff surveys were portrayed as largely or entirely ineffective and lacking in confidentiality. HR is perceived to be on the side of the company, not the worker and unable to protect complainants.

More generally, a disturbing culture of employees fearing speaking up, or being targeted for speaking out, or for being in the union, emerged. For example, one health and safety representative stated that workers often approach him with issues after the meeting, instead of raising them in front of management.

This could in some way be addressed from within the organisation by improving company training around reporting and responding protocols for health and safety generally and psychosocial hazards more specifically. There must be adequate support and an appropriate internal process to follow for those workers who are, for example, victims of bullying. Complainants need to feel heard and considered in resolving outcomes rather having their “problem” shuffled through administrative red tape and holding the belief that “ultimately the company hopes that the problem will just disappear”(M)

2. Collective voice through unionism

Many interviewees referred to the positive role unionism could play in mitigating psychosocial hazards. Some had been provided direct support by their union in dealing with an issue. Others viewed the union as protection in case something went wrong. Though not often explicitly mentioned by interviewees, union claims in enterprise agreements relate to issues such as pay equity which interviewees did raise.

Unions give workers an avenue for voice outside of company hierarchies. This matters in a context where internal systems are often seen as unsafe, filtered through local management, or unlikely to lead to change. Union voice however, can be limited due to companies’ anti-union culture.

“I got the union involved, and honestly, they have been the biggest support.”

Worker (F)

“It’s protection... If things really turn ugly and you end up being hung out to dry and you’re all by yourself, where would you go if you didn’t have a union to fall back on?”

Worker (F)

“I guess that’s why I went to the union, because I feel like there is no one within the business that is willing to help.”

Worker (F)

Implications for industry

Psychosocial hazards in mining are mutually reinforcing. Workers are dealing with fatigue, monitoring, blocked progression, poor supervision, interpersonal harm, weak communication, camp/living issues, and work-home pressures. But these hazards become more damaging when workers also feel that decisions are unfair, supervisors cannot be trusted, and speaking up may not lead to change.

Worker voice is therefore central. Voice is not just a way to report psychosocial hazards after they occur. It is part of the psychosocial risk environment itself. Where voice is safe, trusted, and acted on, it can help control psychosocial hazards. Where voice is ignored, performative, unsafe, or punished, it can make psychosocial hazards worse.

These interviews suggest that psychosocial hazards in mining are not only produced by demanding work conditions such as long shifts, fatigue, isolation, and high-risk tasks. They are also produced by organisational systems that workers experience as unfair, punitive, opaque, or unresponsive. Worker voice has real potential to identify and address these hazards, but only when workers trust the process, feel safe to speak, and see meaningful action result from their input.

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