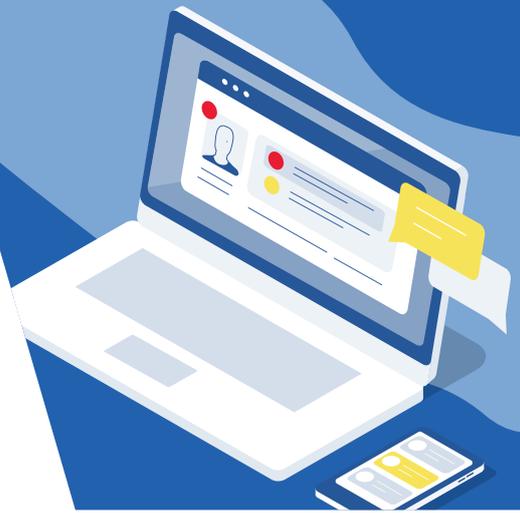![safe work australia]

Online abuse in the workplace

Information for employers /

This fact sheet provides information for employers on duties under work health and safety (WHS) laws to manage the risk of online abuse in the workplace.

What is online abuse?

Online abuse is behaviour that uses technology to threaten, intimidate, bully, harass or humiliate someone. It can take place via online platforms (social media, online chat and messaging services), telephone (calls and text messages), email or other technology used in workplaces.

It can take many forms, such as:

- offensive or sexually explicit messages or phone calls
- abusive comments on a business' or a worker's social media
- threatening or inciting violence
- sharing or threatening to share an intimate image or video without the person's consent
- publicising personal details online (known as 'doxing')
- hacking into a business' or a worker's online account, and
- stalking a person online or tracking them through a phone or device.

> **Family and domestic violence can also become a WHS issue**, if the perpetrator threatens violence or intimidates a partner or family member at the workplace, including through use of technology such as emails or phone calls.

> **Online abuse at work can come from customers, clients or members of the public, or it can happen between workers, supervisors and managers.**
>
> It can also happen when working away from the usual workplace (e.g. working from home).

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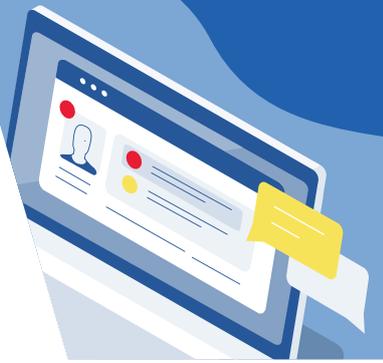
WHS laws require you to take care of the health and safety of your workers. This includes yourself, contractors, volunteers and other people like clients, customers and visitors at your workplace. You must manage the health and safety risks of working online or with other technologies.

What do you need to do under WHS laws?

Apply a risk management approach to eliminate or minimise risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

- **identify** how, where and when online abuse might happen

- **assess** the likelihood that a worker may experience online abuse and how it may affect them (e.g. their physical or mental health)

- apply **control** measures to prevent online abuse from happening, and have processes to address it if it does happen, and

- **check** your control measures are working and if there is more you can do.

You must **consult** your workers and any health and safety representatives (HSRs) at each of these steps.

Behaviours such as violence, aggression, bullying and sexual harassment can have significant short and long-term impacts on a person's physical and psychological health, including when carried out online or via other technologies. Online abuse may escalate to affect a person's physical safety.

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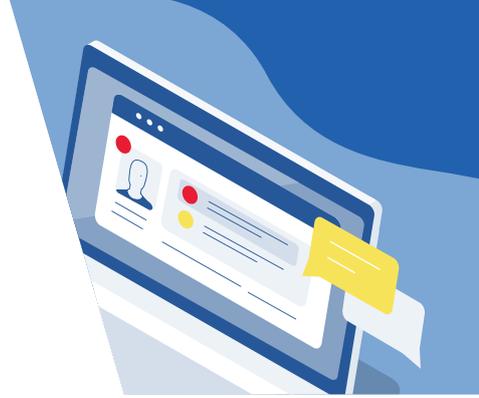
If you or anyone at your workplace is in immediate danger, call triple zero (000).

1. Create a safe and secure online work environment.

Use security settings and the tools on online services to block, mute or remove abusive content. Avoid using workers' surnames or use generic de-identified accounts to protect workers' privacy. Support and encourage staff to maintain their privacy online - refer to eSafety's tips on protecting personal information.

The eSafety Guide provides information on popular workplace platforms and apps (such as LinkedIn and Zoom), about how to protect information and report inappropriate content.

2. Change the way you work to minimise risks.

Use systems, policies and procedures to minimise workers' exposure to online abuse. For example:

- Identify and manage the causes of issues that generate abuse.
- Design work to prevent staff from engaging with abusive material.
- Have clear procedures for workers to protect themselves and respond to online abuse.

3. Moderate content on your online platforms.

Create and enforce guidelines for acceptable content for each digital platform in use. If you allow public commentary or communication, define what you consider abusive comments and decide how to deal with them. A moderator can also help manage online content.

4. Report abusive content.

Most digital platforms have mechanisms to report online abuse. eSafety provides advice on how you can make a report to them, and to social media services to request content be removed. It may be necessary to contact Police for serious cases of online abuse.

5. Implement workplace policies.

Set policies for the appropriate use of online platforms, phones and other technologies, and outline how you will prevent and respond to incidents. A simple written policy, which is tailored to your business and communicates a zero tolerance approach, should be easily accessible e.g. on notice boards, posters, in brochures, digital platforms such as intranets or informal discussions with staff.

![Australian Government] ![eSafety Commissioner]

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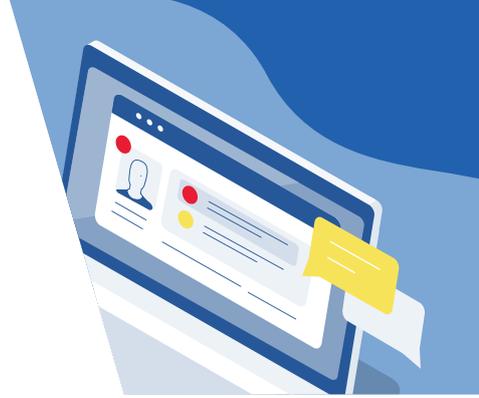
6. Provide information and training.

Support your work systems, policies and procedures with ongoing training. Training may cover dealing with difficult people, conflict resolution, online safety, reporting incidents and support services available. Talk to your workers about where, when and how online abuse may happen at the workplace, and what you're doing to prevent it.

7. Create a positive and respectful workplace culture.

As an employer, it is your responsibility to establish a culture where online abuse is not tolerated from and between workers, customers or the public, and where safety issues can be discussed openly and routinely.

8. Address online abuse within the workplace.

Address inappropriate behaviour early and enforce policies on the use of online platforms. Clearly outline the consequences for online abuse (e.g. disciplinary measures). New or young workers, those unfamiliar with technology, or who are culturally or linguistically diverse, may need more support and supervision to stay safe online.

9. Encourage workers to report online abuse.

Provide information and choices on how to report online abuse (e.g. informally, formally, anonymously or confidentially). Support workers when they raise concerns including having work health and safety representatives (HSRs) and informing them of the support, protection and advice available.

10. Talk to your workers.

Workers can help identify where, when and why online abuse may happen and provide ideas on how to prevent it. You must take workers views into account when making decisions about health and safety matters and advise them of your decision.

In some circumstances, workers or their health and safety representatives (HSRs), have the right to refuse to carry out or stop unsafe work. The risk to their health and safety in the workplace must be serious and imminent. They must tell you as soon as possible and be available for other suitable work. Contact your WHS regulator if you need advice.