

# The organisational and social work environment – key pieces of the puzzle in shaping a good work environment



Guide for implementation of the Swedish Work Environment Authority's provisions concerning the organisational and social work environment, AFS 2015:4



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# Foreword

A good work environment benefits both employers and employees. Systematic Work Environment Management is at the core of all work environment management in Sweden. It encompasses the physical as well as the organisational and social work environments, ranging from safety helmets to unhealthy workloads.

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in the organisational and social work environment. Unhealthy workloads, conflicts and victimisation in the workplace have been garnering more attention. Consequently, employers have requested clarification of regulations and requirements concerning the organisational and social work environment, and the new provisions (AFS 2015:4) are in response to meet this need.

This guide is intended to provide support for those responsible for implementing and complying with the new provisions at work. We hope that this guide and the provisions will help ensure that organisational and social work environment management will become an integral aspect of daily life at work.

**Ywonne Strempl**  
Manager, regulation department  
Swedish Work Environment Authority

# About the guide

The physical, organisational and social factors of the work environment are all interrelated. By viewing them as a whole, we can take appropriate corrective measures to improve the work environment. The provisions concerning the organisational and social work environment serve as an integral tool in this process.

These provisions contain rules and concise general recommendations that may require further explanation or examples, which is the purpose of this guide. Here you can learn more about the realities of the organisational and social work environment. The guidelines provide a general foundation, but may not always go into detail about all types of jobs and work situations. That is where you are the experts!

Our efforts are aimed at employers, managers and supervisors, as well as at employees and their representatives. Health and safety, union and other representatives are also important target groups. This information is also intended for others involved in work environment issues such as occupational healthcare personnel.

Successful work environment management is rooted in both relevant knowledge and collective experience. Through cooperation and dialogue, employers and employees can find common ground and solutions. A basic premise of the Swedish Work Environment Act is that work environment management should be based on local collaboration, for example through safety committees.

## **The guide in brief**

The organisational and social work environment is interrelated, and thus we encourage you to read through the guide in its entirety. The guide begins by defining the organisational and social work environment, then describes the provisions and what they cover, followed by a review of what the provisions regulate. The review begins with a brief description of what systematic work environment management entails. The guide concludes with a description of how to apply it to the organisational and social work environment.

At the back of the guide is a tear-out quick reference explaining “what you should do at work”. It includes a brief review and related questions concerning organisational and social work environment management.

The guide also refers to other laws, regulations and provisions. However, for a more complete understanding readers are encouraged to go directly to the regulations. The Swedish Work Environment Act (1977:1160), Swedish Working Hours Act (1982:673), provisions on the work environment, and additional information can be found on our website: [www.av.se](http://www.av.se).

### **About the organisational and social work environment**

The physical work environment is easy to envision. For example, it pertains to the space we occupy in relation to sound, light, machinery, and other equipment. But what is the organisational and social work environment? The organisational work environment is determined by how work is organised, controlled and communicated, as well as how decisions are made. The social work environment refers to how we interact with and are affected by the people around us such as coworkers and supervisors. It also includes digital forums like email, text messages and social media. The physical work environment is closely intertwined with the organisational and social work environment. The following example illustrates the realities of the organisational and social work environment.

#### **Example**

On the warehouse floor, Anton chooses to lift a heavy box in a way that he knows may entail risk, rather than asking a coworker or getting a lifting device to help. A disgruntled customer has applied pressure on the manager to speed the job up. Anton quickly and inappropriately lifts the box, and injures his lower back. It takes months for him to fully recover.

### **Multiple interacting causes**

If an employee in the described situation injures his back, multiple causes are involved. The physical act of lifting is partially to blame, but so are factors related to the organisational and social work environment. Such factors may relate to management or customer demands, or to how the work is organised, or to cultural values that hold that men should be stoic and not ask for help. Using the right tool may not always be enough; attitudes with regard to how the job should be done may need to change.

The contributing organisational factors in the example may involve staffing and requirements for what should be achieved. Perhaps no one is available to help at certain times or it may not be clear who

should help. Social factors in the work environment may also be a contributing cause. Are there problems in working relationships or even conflicts that have been brewing for a long time? Asking for help under such circumstances may be difficult. In contrast, good organisational and social work environment management makes it easier to get the job done while defusing stressful situations.

### **The work environment must function for everyone**

It is well established that shortcomings in both the organisational and social work environment can manifest in various types of ill health such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, cardiovascular diseases, neck, back and shoulder problems, as well as depression. In addition to negative effects on the individual, companies and society also pay a heavy price.

Obviously, individuals differ with regard to how they may be affected by the organisational and social work environment, just as they do in response to the physical work environment. For instance, we may vary in strength or in sensitivity to air quality and noise levels. Simply put, we differ in our ability to cope with various types of work-related stress. Just as in the case of the physical work environment, the organisational and social work environment must also work for everyone.

The term “psychosocial” is commonly used to refer to this aspect of the work environment. This broad concept basically refers to how individuals experience and react to their surroundings, and thereby puts the individual front and centre. Instead, we have chosen to focus on the organisational and social conditions at work because these aspects can be controlled by the employer. The focus may be on management, governance, resources, and responsibilities, as well as on cooperation and support.

### **New working methods**

Recent decades have seen changes in the way we work. Many aspects of work have become more complicated as a result of the increased use of technology and digitisation. Some jobs that were previously only physically demanding have now also become more psychologically demanding. For example, industries have undergone significant changes in recent decades. Physically demanding work has decreased, replaced by duties that involve

computer screens and a joystick. Machines now carry out tasks that once had to be done manually. In other words, many duties have shifted from “body to brain”. Changes in the workplace have placed new demands on work environment management.

### **A systematic approach**

In order to manage the organisational and social work environment, and to reduce health risks, regular and systematic surveys are required. Managers must stay informed about and assess the job content, what resources are needed, whether the resources are adequate, or if any serious conflicts arise. It is also important for them to track the progress of organisational and social work environment goals. Remember that the work environment is constantly changing. For instance, it may be affected by changing demands from customers, new deadlines, staffing changes, new skills requirements or expanded duties.

In large operations, work environment management may be the responsibility of supervisors, while a knowledgeable HR department and a well-functioning safety organisation handle its administration. Small businesses with fewer employees may find that it is sufficient for everyone to be aware of and follow established procedures and to document risk assessments. Such an arrangement is based on a systematic approach to managing work environment issues on a daily basis, in dialogue with the employees.

#### **Example**

Lena is the manager of a small sheet metal workshop with four employees. Before taking on a new project, she meets with the employees to assess the status of projects already underway. They also discuss the best way to get the job done and what should be given priority. She wants to make sure that they can cope with the workload without risking their health. Lena makes regular job site visits to see if there is anything she can do that would facilitate getting the job done. “I try to arrive at break time so I can chat with the team and get additional details about how work is progressing.”

She also has the goal of meeting with each employee on a one-to-one basis at least once a month. She gives a clear message that she would appreciate being informed about any problems, for example when a customer wants extra work done that has not previously been agreed. She then steps in to discuss the matter directly with the customer so her crew can continue



working without disruption. Lena found it difficult to deal with victimisation and conflicts. To get help with this part of the work, she turned to Ismail at occupational health services, who then reviewed the relevant guidelines with everyone.

All employees should be aware of work-related risks and know who they can turn to with questions. Remember that, for many reasons, some people may find it more difficult than others to address work environment problems. Consequently, they may need to be reminded and encouraged to do so.

A good work environment does not happen by chance; it must be embedded in the DNA of the organisation and embodied in policies, goals, governing documents, rules, and procedures. While the employer holds ultimate responsibility, securing a good work environment and translating it into action requires both knowledge and participation, as well as a long-term approach.

# Regulations

The provisions governing the organisational and social work environment (AFS 2015:4) regulate what is of central importance to prevent ill health and accidents, as well as to promote a good work environment. The provisions on systematic work environment management then describe how to accomplish this.

This guide is intended to serve as an aid to help you understand the provisions governing the organisational and social work environment. The provisions are available in their entirety at the end of the guide. At the same time that these provisions enter into force, the National Board of Safety and Health general recommendations (AFS 1980:14) on mental and social aspects of the work environment, the National Board of Safety and Health provisions (AFS 1993:17) on victimisation in working life, and the National Board of Safety and Health provisions (AFS 1990:18) on nursing care work in individual homes were all repealed.

## **For whom are these provisions intended?**

The rules apply to all employers since they are ultimately responsible for compliance with laws and provisions. The rules also apply to all employees who have an employment relationship: permanent employees, part-time employees, contract employees, staffing agency employees, employees who are hired in or hired out, substitute employees, hourly employees, interns, and trainees. The umbrella term “employee” applies, regardless of what their duties are or how long they will work.

**Employers who engage temporary staff** must comply with the provisions governing the organisational and social work environment (AFS 2015:4) for these temporary employees.

The provisions on systematic work environment management (AFS 2001:1) stipulate that **employers who temporarily hire out staff** must carefully plan and monitor their work, including choice of workplace, duties and working hours, as well as a summary of the job experience. Employers who hire out temporary staff should be vigilant concerning the employee's overall physical and mental workload. They remain responsible for the employees and are obliged to implement long-term work environment measures such as education and rehabilitation (see AFS 2001:1, page 13).

Under the provisions of the organisational and social work environment (AFS 2015:4), employers who temporarily hire out staff must have procedures for handling victimisation (section 14) and objectives for the organisational and social work environment (section 7). Employers who hire out employees for short-term assignments, or to several different clients, hold the main responsibility for preventing unhealthy workloads (sections 9–11) and for avoiding scheduling of working hours that could lead to ill health (section 12).

The provisions on the organisational and social work environment are not geared to the conditions that pertain to those who are enrolled in educational programmes (i.e., students), nor to those under institutional care. However, this does not mean that organisational and social factors are any less important for these groups. Remember that the Swedish Work Environment Act and the provisions on systematic work environment management also apply to these groups. The Swedish Work Environment Act states that employers must take all necessary measures to prevent ill health and accidents (chapter 3, section 2 AML).

# Systematic Work Environment Management

This is what the provisions state about the organisational and social work environment:

**5 §** The Swedish Work Authority's provisions on systematic work environment management contain rules concerning work environment policy and knowledge requirements, and also requires the employer to regularly investigate and assess what risks may arise at work. The provisions also include regulations requiring the employer to take corrective measures to manage the risks.

Like all other aspects of the work environment, systematic work environment management also addresses organisational and social factors. Systematic work environment management must be practiced at all workplaces and can be described as a systematic approach to improve the work environment and prevent accidents and ill health.

## **Tree of Regulations**

The work environment regulations can be thought of as a tree in which the Swedish Work Environment Act represents the roots that provide nourishment and the conditions necessary for the rest of the tree to thrive. Systematic work environment management represents the trunk, which governs how to carry out work environment management. The provisions are contained in the branches and specify what is required in greater detail and the conditions that should prevail. The provisions relating to the organisational and social work environment are located on a single branch that affects all workplaces. The provisions that otherwise apply to various workplaces depend on the kinds of risks that need to be managed there.

## **Systematic Work Environment Management – an ongoing process**

Systematic work environment management is an ongoing process, the core of which is comprised of investigating the work

environment, assessing risks, taking corrective measures, and subsequent follow-up to ensure that the measures have had the intended effect. It is usually portrayed in the form of a wheel, to underscore that it is a constantly ongoing process.

To ensure an efficient approach to systematic work environment management, the provisions on systematic work environment management also state that

- the employer must provide an opportunity for employees and safety representatives to participate in work environment management,
- there must be a description of duties that clearly indicate who will do what,
- everyone must have an understanding of work environment management, and
- procedures must be in place describing how, when and by whom all activities relating to work environment management should be carried out.

### **Work Environment Policy**

According to the provisions on systematic work environment management, all businesses must formulate a work environment policy. It should reflect the employer's overall vision for long-term work environment management or, simply put, describe "how we would like things to be." The provisions on the organisational and social work environment also set requirements for goals (read more in the section on goals). These goals may appropriately be included as part of the work environment policy.

### **Knowledge and allocation of tasks**

Concerning knowledge and allocation of tasks, the regulations on the organisational and social work environment specify the particular responsibilities of managers and supervisors (read more in the section on knowledge). When businesses lack adequate knowledge, the employer should engage external assistance, such as from occupational health services. The provisions on the organisational and social work environment also specify procedures in certain areas, such as how to deal with victimisation (read more in the section on victimisation).

### **Reporting system**

A core activity in systematic work environment management involves identifying causes of work environment-related ill health, accidents and incidents in order to prevent them from occurring in the future. In order to determine what undesirable incidents occur, businesses must implement a reporting system that clearly states what, how and to whom reports should be made. Such incidents may be an important signal that the work environment needs to be more closely examined, in addition to routine procedure.

### **Follow-up of systematic work environment management**

Systematic work environment management should be followed up at least once a year to ensure that the work environment management system is effective. It is important to ensure that the system results in a better work environment for all employees. Follow-up makes it possible to identify and correct weaknesses, as well as to gain an overview of and effectively focus the work environment management system.

You can read more about systematic work environment management in: *How to improve work environment: Guide to the Swedish Work Environment Authority's provisions on systematic work environment management, AFS 2001:1 (H 455)*

# Knowledge

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 6** Employers shall ensure that managers and supervisors have the following knowledge:

1. How to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads.
2. How to prevent and manage victimisation.

Employers should ensure that this knowledge can be applied in practice.

In order to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads and victimisation, managers and supervisors must know what to look for and what to do in the work environment. This requires general knowledge about the effects of the work environment on employee health. However, general knowledge is not always sufficient.

Knowledge must encompass and adapt to the unique organisational and social situations found in each workplace. The provisions state that managers and supervisors should have this knowledge, since they are in charge of the allocation of tasks, monitoring employee interaction and are usually close to the employees. Examples of managers and supervisors are personnel managers, sales managers, workshop managers, and group supervisors.

## **Prevention of unhealthy workloads and victimisation**

In order to prevent unhealthy workloads, specific knowledge is needed to determine whether the demands of work and available resources are reasonable. This requires an understanding of the special conditions that apply to the work and the operations in the relevant workplace. Preventing victimisation requires an understanding of the specific circumstances of the social work environment in the relevant workplace. In other words, knowledge is required to quickly identify and address problems related to employee interactions and other sources of victimisation.

## **Management of unhealthy workloads and victimisation**

Knowledge is also needed to manage victimisation and unhealthy workloads when they arise. The first step is to identify early signs of problems. Knowledge is then required to determine the appropriate corrective measures to be taken. Read more about this in the section on workloads and victimisation.

In order to prevent and manage problems or deficiencies, the people who possess such specific knowledge (i.e., managers and supervisors) must also be able to act. The ability to act requires the proper authority, management support, and sufficient time to carry out such actions. Keep in mind that managers and supervisors are also covered by the work environment management system and should also have a good work environment.

Section 6 of the provisions on systematic work environment management (AFS 2001:1) includes regulations on knowledge and allocation of tasks. It states that the employer must ensure that employees who are assigned tasks have the skills necessary for effective work environment management.

The provisions on the organisational and social work environment (AFS 2015:4) entail work environment tasks must be allocated within the organisation. Some of these tasks are appropriate for managers or supervisors. This applies in particular to tasks described in sections 9–11 and 13. Tasks described in sections 7, 8, 12, and 14 may also be appropriately allocated to managers and supervisors.

Should problems with allocation arise, the employer should be notified so that they can be solved, or so that the work environment-related tasks can be returned to the employer for reallocation.

## **Health and safety representatives must also be given specific knowledge**

Providing health and safety representatives with specific knowledge on how to prevent unhealthy workloads and victimisation is both beneficial to and efficient for the organisation. Health and safety representatives often approach the operation from a different perspective than managers. Therefore, it may be practical to offer both managers and health and safety representatives the same type



of specific knowledge, for example by organising joint meetings and training initiatives. It is of course beneficial for as many people in the organisation as possible to have specific knowledge concerning these issues and that they understand what is involved. If no one within the organisation has the appropriate knowledge an external resource can be engaged such as occupational health services or others with appropriate expertise.

#### Example

In the main office of a large manufacturing company, an employee survey and a leadership seminar showed that several supervisors lacked specific knowledge on how to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads. Some noted that they did not have time to learn about the subject. Consequently, management decided to allocate a few days in the spring for training. Health and safety representatives were also offered the opportunity to participate.

The educational material was ordered from a company well-versed in how to work in this type of organisation. They ensured that the material would be available in several languages since Swedish was not the native language of all employees. Management also decided to check whether these employees had an adequate level of understanding one year later. The office manager also started a work environment project to review what the supervisors need in order to take action in response to deficiencies in the work environment.

#### Questions to ask:

- **Is there specific knowledge** to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads and victimisation, and, if so, who possesses it?
- How can we make sure that everyone who needs the specific knowledge **acquires** it?
- **What conditions** are needed to allow managers and supervisors **to take action**?

# Objectives

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 7** Beyond what applies in accordance with section 6 and sections 9–14 in these provisions, the employer shall have objectives for the organisational and social work environment. The objectives shall be aimed at promoting health and increasing the organisation's ability to counteract ill health. The employer shall give employees the opportunity to participate in the formulation of these objectives, and ensure that the employees are aware of the goals

**Section 8** The objectives shall be documented in writing in all organisations with at least ten employees.

A proactive and systematic approach to work environment management helps create good workplaces. Objectives specifically aimed at the organisational and social aspects facilitate and support such efforts.

## **Work environment policy and objectives**

There must be a work environment policy in place describing working conditions in the workplace (according to section 5, Systematic Work Environment Management). Work environment policies are overarching strategic directions. What is new is that objectives should now be set for the organisational and social work environment. The objectives should point the way and support initiatives that not only reduce risks, but also those that contribute to good conditions and healthy workplaces. Clear common objectives provide opportunities for cooperation to strengthen and improve the work environment.

## **Taking inventory and setting objectives**

Taking inventory is a good starting point. Explore questions such as where are we right now? Do we agree? Are there deficiencies or weaknesses? Is there potential for growth? What can we strengthen

and improve? Do different groups and functions require different objectives?

Begin by considering factors such as communication, learning, leadership, collaboration, influence, and participation in relation to these questions. Based on the current situation, concrete, measurable and time-based activities can then be formulated. It is important to be able to assess when the objectives are reached.

Put the objectives in writing! Everyone should also be familiar with the objectives – do not forget temporary employees and new employees.

### **Plan and gain support**

A clear goal planning strategy or plan should be in place to provide an overview and make it easier to carry out, correct and measure whether the objectives have been met. The employer has ultimate responsibility for ensuring that objectives are in place, but everyone should be given the opportunity to have input in the discussion. Health and safety representatives are important in this process. In order for goal-setting to be effective, the entire management should support the goals.

#### **Example**

The manager of the cheese factory is satisfied. The management group, along with the coordinating committee, have succeeded in solving the major work environment-related challenges. They seem to have attained balance with regard to the workload and have successfully reduced sick leave. She feels they have come up with a good solid plan for how to reduce injuries and work-related risk. For the organisational and social work environment, they were assisted by occupational health services. She is now on her way to see the head of human resources to ask him to write down the objectives they identified at the last coordinating committee meeting.

The cheese factory will have the most satisfied employees in the entire district! The goal is to increase participation within one year by first posting all management-level decisions for comments on the Intranet and the bulletin board for two weeks. They will also purchase a leadership training programme aimed at fulfilling the goal of improving communication, and all managers will complete the programme before summer.

**Questions to ask:**

- **What is our current status** from an organisational and social standpoint?
- What changes would we **like to see happen** within a given time period?
- How **do we achieve this?**
- Are the objectives firmly **entrenched** and supported by everyone (including top management)?

# Workload

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 9** The employer shall see to it that the tasks and authority assigned to the employees do not give rise to unhealthy workloads. This means that the resources shall be adapted to the demands of the job.

Workload is a central theme in occupational health research. The conditions as defined by requirements and resources determine the workload, but also whether the work can be carried out as expected.

When resources are inadequate for the job, an imbalance arises in relation to the requirements of the job. It is important for the employer to be alert to this type of imbalance so that it does not recur or remain unresolved, thereby leading to ill health – in other words, to an unhealthy workload.

## Job requirements

In order to describe unhealthy workloads in greater detail, we must first explain the concepts of resources and requirements. A complete presentation of all types of resources and requirements is beyond the scope of this guide, but we will review some of the most important points.

All jobs involve a variety of requirements. Requirements may be placed on what should be done, for example what care should be given, what products are to be manufactured, or what services need to be provided. Requirements are also placed on how much should be done (quantity) and how good the final product/service should be (quality). In addition, timeframes come into play that specify when the job should be carried out and when it should be completed.

Some requirements are related to the physical work environment such as temperature, air quality and the workplace itself.

Another type of requirement poses mental challenges, including multitasking, summarising, solving unexpected problems, and learning on the go. The social work environment may also place requirements, for example should conflicts or problems with regard to cooperation and support arise.

Working in close contact with and for other people, for instance in the nursing or teaching professions, places special requirements on social skills and flexibility. Emotional expression is an important component in many of these occupations. When encountering clients and customers, employees may need to be extra pleasant, smile, be patient, and control their emotions. One example is airline cabin crew members, who have to deal with passengers under various stressful conditions.

An important issue is whether there are contradictory requirements and who is responsible for them. For example, the assistant nurse is required to provide the best care possible but must also limit the time taken with each patient. Who set the requirements for nursing care and are they reasonable – the nurse in charge, the patient, family members, or the assistant nurse? Who set the time limits for each patient – the care coordinator, the supervisor, or the assistant nurse? Generally, if there is any uncertainty about what to do, how it should be done and by whom, it needs to be resolved, which is a requirement in and of itself. Such ambiguities may also affect the social work environment and may lead to conflicts about what to do and how.

### **Resources for the job**

Resources are needed to achieve balance in the job requirements. The correct resources help meet the requirements and reach the established objectives. Resources may consist of tools and techniques needed to carry out the job. They may also include help with heavy lifting from coworkers, clear instructions, or good advice. Resources may also include special working methods and procedures. Other types of resources include staffing, skills, maneuvering space, adequate time, feedback, and the decisions that are necessary to get the job done. The opportunity to address problems and difficulties at work can also be considered a resource.

The opportunity for recovery is an important resource that is related to the workload. Work peaks are generally manageable as long as they do not occur too frequently and there is time in between for recovery. Bear in mind that tasks may sometimes seem so important, interesting or stimulating that there is a risk of neglecting or forgetting to take work breaks.

## Unhealthy workloads

Unhealthy workloads occur when job requirements exceed resources on more than a temporary basis. This imbalance becomes unhealthy if the situation is prolonged and if opportunities for recovery are inadequate. Employers can resolve such problems by lowering the requirements or adding more resources. If the imbalance persists, employees may try to compensate in unhealthy ways, thereby increasing the risk of ill health. This may entail working hard for a long time, leading to risk of overexertion and overuse injuries, or taking shortcuts that entail safety risks.

Employers should inform themselves about the conditions that employees face and then set reasonable requirements. This may occur by continually monitoring and checking to see how employees are doing. It is important that employers hold meetings for this purpose or otherwise make sure that employees can take an active role and report when the workload becomes too high.

## Resources should not become obstacles

It is fairly common for work conditions to change. When this occurs it is important to review resources and requirements. Changes in assignments, new hires and streamlining are examples of things that can affect the workload. New assignments can be beneficial for the company, but increased requirements need to be weighed against resources. It is also important to remain alert so that what usually serves as a resource does not instead become an obstacle. For example, technology and computer programmes may not function properly, or the workplace may be ill-suited for the task at hand.

It is important to remain aware of the interdependencies between various parts of the organisation, especially in large complex operations. Even minor changes in resources and requirements in one part may affect the work environment in other parts. The employer needs to make sure that this type of work environment problem does not result in unhealthy workloads.

### Questions to ask:

- **What requirements** are demanded by the job and **what are the available resources?** Are they in **balance?**
- Is there sufficient opportunity for **recovery?**
- Are there procedures for **reporting and identifying** signals indicating unhealthy workloads?

# Job content

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 10** The employer shall see to it that the employees know:

1. what tasks they are to perform;
2. the results they are to achieve with their work;
3. whether the work is to be performed in a specific way and, if so, how;
4. which tasks are to be prioritised when the time available is insufficient for all tasks to be performed; and
5. to whom they can turn to in order to receive help and support in carrying out the work.

In addition, the employer shall ensure that employees know what authority they have according to points 1–5.

## Clarify the job content

One measure to avoid unnecessary requirements and workloads for the employees is to review and clarify the job content together. New employees need to have their job content clarified right from the start.

As defined here, the term “job content” refers to the tasks to be carried out, expected results and working methods. The concept also includes setting priorities and to whom the employees can turn to in order to receive help and support. In addition, employees should know what they are authorised to decide themselves. In practice, the immediate supervisor or manager usually clarifies all points in the job content in dialogue with the employee. It is important for the employer to make sure that employees have the opportunity to raise questions should anything be unclear. This can be accomplished through regular meetings or in other appropriate ways.

## Negative consequences

Should employees and employers differ in their understanding of the job content, the result may be a number of negative consequences from the standpoint of the work environment. First and foremost, the employer may lose control of the actual task and



thereby also over work environment-related risks. The result could also be that employees are forced to repeatedly clarify ambiguities, which in itself requires extra effort that could lead to unhealthy workloads. Another consequence is that ambiguities may lead to cooperation problems and conflicts. Therefore, it is important to make sure that a forum is available to continually discuss and clarify these aspects.

Ambiguities causing recurrent stress and difficulties may also arise when dealing with clients or customers. Thus, clarify the job content together so that everyone is in agreement and the employer will be able to back up and support the employees.

#### Example

Heidi is a star consultant who always tries to meet her customer's many demands. Recently, she has felt tired, overworked and dissatisfied with her performance. Her manager has noted that she is less enthusiastic about her work than usual and asks why. When Heidi describes the problem, the manager discovers that many of the tasks she performs are not covered by the contract. The manager contacts the customer to clarify the assignment and tells Heidi that if she finds it difficult to set priorities in such cases she should carry out the main task, and then turn to her manager before she develops any problems. He is extremely firm on this point. The manager then reviews the situation for all of the consultants and schedules regular meetings to discuss their assignments.

#### **Prioritise tasks**

To avoid stress when time is short and the workload high, such as during work peaks, employees must be able to determine what duties to prioritise. In many jobs, the employees are first to notice that time is short and priorities need to be set. It needs to be clarified whether the manager or supervisor should then be contacted, which means it must be possible to reach them or whether the employees themselves have the authority to set priorities. For example, are there certain tasks that should always be prioritised? The employer may also need to determine whether lack of time is a recurring problem. In the long run, such problems may result in unhealthy workloads, risk of accidents or victimisation.

#### **Help and support**

Help and support at work may refer to actually receiving help from someone to carry out tasks, make decisions, or for backup and support. The people who are available to help and support

each other need to be clarified. Otherwise, employees may become overworked or take undue risks. Sometimes the work team takes the initiative to decide how to help and support one another. In such cases the employer must remain aware of the social work environment to avoid cooperation problems and conflicts. Certain jobs may be carried out when no one else is present. In such cases it is especially important that the employee can contact someone who can be reached.

The provisions do not include absolute requirements to document the job content in writing. But there may be practical benefit in doing so to serve as a backup for memory and to avoid conflicting interpretations of agreements. This may be especially important if supervisors or managers are difficult or impossible to reach. Written documentation may also be helpful because employees differ in their ability to understand and absorb information. The documentation needs to be up-to-date and updated when changes occur.

#### Questions to ask:

- Is it clear what employees are **expected to do**?
- Is it clear what the **result** should be, **how** it should be achieved and **what is needed** to do so?
- Is it clear what should be **done first** when time is short?
- Is it clear **who can provide help and support** and **who has** the necessary **authority**?
- What **forums** are available for dialogue?

# Severe mental stress

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 11** The employer shall take measures to counteract ill health among employees who encounter tasks and situations that entail severe mental stress.

This section concerns jobs that include tasks that involve encountering people in difficult situations. Examples include people with severe diseases, those in poverty, or with high requirements for assistance, as well as those in crisis (grief), or who are subjected to threats and violence. It also applies to making tough decisions that will have serious negative consequences.

## **Demanding work situations**

It may be particularly difficult to cope with situations that strongly impact our lives, for example when an accident hits close to home and makes it difficult for us to protect ourselves emotionally. Moreover, should the situation be unexpected, an emergency or perhaps caused by violence, the encounter becomes even more demanding and therefore more stressful. Severe mental stress may be encountered by the social worker who must take children into custody, rescue workers who face highly traumatic situations, psychiatry staff who care for extremely ill patients, or the manager who is forced to terminate fellow employees for whom the decision will have an extremely negative impact.

It is important to create opportunities and formulate procedures to make it easier for employees to report work-related mental stress.

## **Support for employees**

Coworker support, such as regularly scheduled meetings for reflection and development, serve as a good foundation. But additional measures may be required like adapted tools, approaches, working methods, and action plans. One way to improve the ability of employees to cope with work associated with severe mental stress is through special information and education initiatives. The kind of support needed must be chosen based on the type of work or what the specific situation requires.

### Example

Professional guidance for the staff at the residence for people with substance abuse problems had previously been good. However, changes occurred in the client group. Additional hardcore addicts had moved in because of changes in the municipal guidelines. For a while several staff members experienced excessive stress. The manager and the personnel reviewed what was needed and decided to engage a new guide with the appropriate expertise in the field. A work team was tasked with reviewing procedures and training needs.

### Appropriate expertise

A basic premise is to avoid unnecessarily subjecting someone who is inexperienced or lacks the proper skills to handle this type of situation. For example, encountering a person with mental illness may be difficult for people who lack the knowledge to understand what is entailed and what can be done. Even employees with the appropriate knowledge and expertise may require support through guidance or regular counseling. In some workplaces a decision may be taken that regular counseling is unnecessary. In such cases a preparedness mechanism must be in place to arrange for additional guidance.

#### Questions to ask:

- **Are** the employees **subjected** to severe mental stress?
- **If so**, have measures been adopted to counteract ill health and, if so, **what measures**?

# Working hours

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 12** The employer shall take any steps necessary in order to counteract scheduling working hours that may lead to ill health among employees.

Sometimes work must be scheduled during hours that entail risk for ill health. Such scheduling may be unavoidable in fields such as medical care, social services, law enforcement, and emergency services. Systematic work environment management must be carried out as usual. Begin by examining and assessing risks associated with length of working hours, time of day and opportunities for recovery. If risks are identified, the first step is to consider whether they can be avoided. If not, measures need to be adopted to avoid ill health. Examples of such measures include the opportunity to trade or change tasks, carry out risky duties during daylight hours and schedule shift rotations clockwise.

## **Sleep, rest and breaks**

The opportunity for recovery is crucial. Recovery refers to sleep and allowing the body to rest between work shifts. In addition, employees need opportunities for breaks and recess during working hours to be able to manage their duties. Long shifts or evening and night work may require more or longer breaks. Of course it is also important to make sure that employees actually take advantage of breaks and recess. It is further important to have an appropriate location for rest and relaxation so that recovery can occur in an undisturbed environment.

## **Night and shift work**

Night and shift work are examples of work scheduling that may disrupt the natural circadian rhythm. The result may be poor sleep leading to fatigue, less energy and difficulties concentrating. In the long-term, serious health problems may occur. Moreover, the performance of most people is worse at night, even if they are well rested, thereby increasing the risk of mistakes and accidents.

Employers are required to offer medical monitoring to employees who work at night under the provisions on occupational medical supervision (AFS 2005:6). Medical monitoring and physical examinations may detect possible ill health on an individual or group level. Bear in mind that signs of ill health in one employee may be an indicator of a larger problem in the work environment.

Many parts of the Working Hours Act are dispositive, for example collective agreements can replace the regulations. However, the Swedish Work Environment Act and provisions issued based on the Act cannot be waived. This means that the regulations or collective agreements relating to the Working Hours Act apply in parallel with the regulations in the Swedish Work Environment Act and section 12 of the provisions on the organisational and social work environment (AFS 2015:4).

### **Split shift**

In split shifts, the employee works two or more shifts on the same day with time off in between. The length of the shift and the location of the workplace may sometimes vary. One example is when part of the job is carried out in the workplace and another part is carried out at home. Split shifts may entail health risks should the work day become too long. For example, the time between two shifts may be too short to take advantage of the time off, or the time off may be insufficient for recovery.

Working long days and weeks (including overtime) over an extended period of time may entail risks for ill health. The Working Hours Act (1982:673) specifies limits for the maximum number of hours an employee may work, as well as for minimum periods of rest. The Act thereby specifies the maximum limits for working hours, but does not contain rules stipulating that the employer should take into account working hours relating to systematic work environment management.

The notes concerning on-call time, extended hours and overtime (AFS 1982:17) state that employers must keep a record of on-call time, overtime and extended hours for each employee. The employer may decide on the format of the documents used for these records. They must be clear and well-organised.

### Clarify limits

A liberal approach to allow employees to carry out work at different times and in different places, such as with mobile phones and computers, is one way to provide flexibility. However, this approach may also pose a risk that the work will know no boundaries and interfere with rest and recovery. The employer should therefore clarify the limits and thereby minimise the risks and retain control over scheduling of working hours.

#### Questions to ask:

- **Are there any health risks** associated with **the work schedule**?
- **If so, can** they be **completely avoided**?
- If that is not possible, **what measures have been taken** to avoid ill health?

# Victimisation

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 13** The employer shall make it clear that victimisation will not be tolerated at work. The employer shall take measures to counteract conditions in the work environment that could give rise to victimisation.

What does victimisation mean? Firstly it pertains to words or actions that insult and denigrate individuals or groups. Secondly, it entails being treated differently from others in an unfair or unjust manner, which risks isolating the victim from the workplace community. Such incidents are emotionally stressful, unpleasant and disagreeable, or even worse. In the worst cases the result may be severe mental health problems.

Clear examples of victimisation include isolation through silence, insulting nicknames, being ignored, exclusion from meetings that the victim should have attended, unfair accusations or scapegoating, or being called insulting names in front of others. All employees must understand that such behaviour toward others is unacceptable in the workplace.

## Example

At a work team meeting, Sören stood up and spoke directly and loudly at Lenita: "You've never understood this, have you? Can't you just do things like the rest of us and not question everything, miss do-as-I-want? You aren't as good as you think!" The meeting fell completely silent. The manager ended the meeting and noted only a difference of opinion.

Lenita felt sad and worried. Sören had been criticising her for a long time, but never as directly and in front of everyone else, including the boss! She slept poorly that night and the next morning she felt uneasy about going in to work. When she thought about it, Sören had held a grudge against her for some time. On several occasions he had "forgotten" to call her to important meetings and once or twice she had overheard him make negative comments about her clothing. She could not understand why he was so unpleasant just to her. Other employees also had their own ideas and suggestions. Lenita called in sick.



Victimisation is worse when it is repeated and continues for a long time. In the worst cases, the situation can develop into mobbing, where the victims are subjected to systematic harassment over an extended period of time and are unable to defend themselves. Regardless of the form of victimisation, it is important to identify such behaviour early on as a work environment problem. Sexual harassment and various types of discrimination are also included. Remember that victimisation can also occur via email, text message and social media.

Victimisation, which is based on gender, gender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other beliefs, disability, sexual orientation or age, may also entail discrimination.

The Discrimination Act (2008:567) includes regulations on discrimination. The law stipulates the grounds for discrimination that apply. The Equality Ombudsman is the agency that supervises compliance with the Discrimination Act.

### **Discuss and prevent**

As is the case with all work environment initiatives, employees must be able to participate and have an influence on the outcome. Discuss what may be considered victimisation in your workplace. For example, use the terms unpleasant, uncomfortable, incomprehensible, and unfair to kick off the discussion. It is a good idea to write down what is agreed upon for possible later reference. Sometimes employees use expressions like “we may use locker room talk, but it’s all in good fun,” or “the sky’s the limit.” But what does that mean? Remember that use of language has to be acceptable for everyone, including new and temporary employees.

### **Risk sources**

To prevent victimisation the entire work situation needs to be considered. A red flag may be a poorly functioning work team or open conflicts. Interpersonal conflicts in themselves may be at the source of a poor work environment and may require intervention. Conflict can be defined as a situation in which two or more individuals are actively engaged in heated discussion, from angry arguments at the meeting table to yelling in the corridor.

Conflicts risk degenerating into victimisation, for which reason it is important to take preventive measures. Other sources of poor social work environment may be unhealthy workloads, unclear job content, a heavy workload, lack of time, and unclear division of labour. It is important to be especially vigilant in the face of major changes such as a reorganisation.

**Questions to ask:**

- Does everyone **understand what victimisation** is?
- Has it been made **clear** that it will **not be tolerated**?
- Is management **monitoring possible causes** of victimisation?
- **Is anything being done** about it?

# Measures to be taken when victimisation occurs

This is what the provisions state:

**Section 14** The employer shall see to it that there are procedures for how victimisation is to be handled. The procedures should indicate

1. who receives information that victimisation is occurring;
2. what happens with the information, what the recipient is to do; and
3. how and where victims can quickly receive help.

The employer shall make the procedures known to all employees.

Even when employers have taken measures to prevent victimisation, such incidents cannot be completely eliminated. The purpose of section 14 of the provisions is to identify the incidents at an early stage and prevent ill health. Consequently, management must be prepared to address and resolve the situation and provide help to the victim. Clear procedures, known to everyone, must be in place. Everyone should know what to do. If incident reporting procedures are already in place it may be convenient to include victimisation procedures. And remember that you may be dealing with sensitive information. Who has access to the information? How is it protected from unauthorised access?

## About the procedures

At a minimum, procedures should include:

- Who should be informed?
- That person should be knowledgeable and able to quickly receive the information.
- Who do you speak to if the perpetrator is your immediate supervisor or someone else on whom you depend?  
Alternative routes should be available.

- What happens after I provide the information?  
It must be made clear who may access the information and what happens next.
- What help is available for the victim?  
Help can be provided by someone with the right expertise from human resources, occupational health services, a consultant or equivalent. It is important to handle these matters quickly and professionally.

The provision regulates what, at a minimum, the procedures should include, while allowing for expanded approaches to handle the problem. For example, occupational health services may be contacted immediately and have a mandate to intervene with approval from the reporting party.

### **Quick help**

An important first step is to find out whether anyone has suffered negative consequences or harm as a result of the situation. The purpose of this step is to ascertain whether those who need help receive it. Keep in mind that other individuals who may have been close at hand may also experience negative consequences without being directly involved.

### **Investigate with care**

If signs of ill health are present, the usual systematic work environment management should serve as a starting point under which measures should be taken to prevent further injury or negative impact on others.

Section 9 of the provisions on systematic work environment management states that if an employee suffers from work-related ill health or has an accident at work, and if a serious incident occurs at work, the employer should investigate the reasons in an effort to prevent ill health and accidents moving forward.

In this context this regulation means that if signs of ill health or serious incidents have occurred that are associated with information concerning victimisation, the employer must conduct an investigation. In practice this entails investigating, assessing risk and remedying deficiencies in the organisational and social work environment that may give rise to victimisation.

The provisions do not require an investigation to determine whether or not the incident involves victimisation. However, if such an investigation is conducted, it is always important to do so in a manner that a) does not risk aggravating the problem for those involved, and b) avoids harming the social work environment. The former may entail being falsely accused, pressured or being subjected to unwarranted attention. When it comes to the social work environment as a whole, trust issues or divisiveness may arise.

Make sure that whoever conducts the investigation is in no way personally involved in the incident and is fully able to act impartially. It may be advantageous to engage an external resource to conduct the investigation such as occupational health services or some other expert. Before engaging such resources, make sure that the proper conditions are set to allow them to act impartially and independently. All involved parties must support the contract.

**Questions to ask:**

- Does everyone have **information about who** to speak with about victimisation?
- Do the recipients of this information know **what they should do** and where the **information ends up**?
- Does the procedure clearly state where the victim can get **help as quickly as possible**?

# Work systemically

The following is a description of how to link organisational and social work environment factors to the steps in systematic work environment management. This description can serve as a basis for orientation and getting started. You may also refer to the brochure *Managing workloads – with systematic work environment management (ADI 701)*.

Signs that may indicate problems in the organisational and social work environment:

- Sick leave, sickness presence, high staff turnover
- Accidents, incidents and deviations
- Overtime work, taking work home, working during breaks and/or lunch
- Poor quality work or missed delivery deadlines
- High work intensity/work pace
- Signs that employees do not have enough time or are unable to finish their work
- Conflicts, cooperation problems
- Lack of motivation, depression, irritability
- Pain, sleeping problems, fatigue, gastrointestinal issues
- Difficulties concentrating, increased forgetfulness, problems getting started and taking initiative

## **Investigate**

Thorough and continual investigations may be needed to identify deficiencies in the organisational and social work environment. At a minimum, investigate the factors included in the provisions on the organisational and social work environment that are described in the various sections of this guide.

Information about the work environment can be gathered through everyday conversations between employers and employees. In addition, there should also be planned occasions, meetings and workplace encounters, for instance, at which such issues can be addressed. The work environment may vary by occupation, work

group and function. Consequently, it is important to let everyone have their say. The purpose is to reach agreement on matters such as requirements, resources, job content, cooperation, and social support. One suggestion is to document the matters discussed at such meetings and encounters.

Employee surveys, which are usually conducted less frequently and allow the employees to remain anonymous, may serve as a good complement. However, remember to take into account differences among various departments, groups and functions so that nothing is omitted when compiling the results.

Another way to identify possible deficiencies in the organisational and social work environment is by gathering information on adverse events that may lead to ill health and accidents, known as incident reporting.

### **Signs to watch for**

Certain signs may indicate problems in the organisational and social work environment. Here are some that are particularly important to watch for.

Effective incident reporting requires consensus on how it should be carried out – verbally, in writing, or through software, for instance. Examples of incidents other than accidents include conflicts and cooperation problems, unplanned overtime or failure to take breaks. It is important to encourage employees to report problems. Remember that each reported incident need not be serious in and of itself. In some cases several seemingly different incidents may indicate a larger problem.

#### **Example**

The care recipients in a care facility lived in a two-story building with a stairway. The harried staff ran up and down the stairs in order to get all their work done. Several incidents reports concerned staff who slipped or tripped on the stairs. The employee survey indicated problems with conflicts. Care recipients also reported concerns and complaints that the personnel had not completed their tasks.

The supervisor and staff sat down and thoroughly analysed the situation. It became clear that the distribution of duties was an important factor. One solution was to divide the duties so that one of the care providers took care of most of the work on the first floor while the other handled the work on the second floor. The division

of duties was posted on a bulletin board at the entrance. The care recipients and their relatives could now see what staff member was primarily responsible for their care. This solution gave everyone time to focus on their own duties at a much calmer pace. The clear distribution of duties helped to improve the atmosphere and cooperation at work. The care recipients also became calmer and seemed to feel better.

### **Risk assessment**

Use the survey results to assess the extent of the risk and who is vulnerable. Risk assessments are undertaken to assess work-related vulnerabilities and consequences such as ill health. To assess risk in this area, you need to consider factors such as risk of accidents, how long they have been present and how often they have occurred, along with cooperation, social support and opportunities for recovery.

#### **Example**

In this case the risk of falling on the stairs was considered serious, so how long the problem had been present was irrelevant to the risk assessment. However, the risk of unhealthy workload was considered to be serious just because of the long-term nature of the problem, which put people at risk every evening. Most evenings there was no opportunity to take a break at all. Since everyone was equally busy, there was no place to turn for help. In certain cases, people were reluctant to ask for help with duties because of the conflicts that had arisen.

### **Corrective action**

To arrive at the appropriate corrective actions, the investigation and risk assessment must be as thorough and comprehensive as possible. Only when the true causes are identified can comprehensive improvements be made to the work environment. It is easy to lose sight of the whole picture, to just address the symptoms rather than solve the fundamental problem.

What are the actual sources of the risks that arise? What factors need to be addressed and changed?

Write an action plan containing the measures that need to be taken. The action plan should describe the measures as clearly and in as much detail as possible. In this way you avoid missing something



important. Decide and write up who should carry out the measures and who is responsible for carrying them out. Also set a deadline for when the measure should be fully implemented. Measures carried out immediately do not need to be mentioned in the action plan, but it may be appropriate to do so to facilitate follow-up. Before taking any measures, consider whether they may impact the work environment for other occupational groups or departments.

In a large organisation, you may need to take decisions and solicit help to carry out measures outside your own unit. Perhaps the purchasing department may need to be involved when purchasing a customised technical system, or the CEO may need to take a decision to hire new staff, or the training coordinator may need to plan and arrange courses. Remember to enter all measures in the action plan, along with who will carry them out.

#### Example

In the example concerning the residential care facility, a thorough investigation was carried out to identify risks in the work environment. They allocated time to meet for discussion and review in groups to identify the underlying cause of conflicts, the unhealthy workload, and occupational injuries. At first, the problem appeared to be inadequate staffing of the evening shift, but closer analysis revealed that staff assignments were unclear.

The workload in the residential care facility as a whole was unevenly distributed, and it was difficult to get an overview of staff duties and assignments. Such decisions were often determined by care recipients who solicited help from the people they wanted. All these factors taken together kept the staff running. This situation also necessitated resolving the ambiguities concerning the allocation of duties over the course of the shift. This in turn contributed to unhealthy workloads and conflicts. An action plan was formulated. The supervisors worked together with safety representatives and the coordinating group to devise corrective actions by implementing scheduling and clear allocation of duties at the residential care facility.

#### **Follow-up**

Follow up on corrective measures to make sure things are going well. If it is difficult to comply with the plan, adjust the duties if needed, check off what has been completed and then continue. If the corrective measures cannot be implemented as intended,

reconsider to see what other options for action might be feasible. If this approach is too problematic, return to the earlier steps and begin again.

#### Example

The supervisor checked to see whether the new measures were successful and then followed up by monitoring illness statistics, reported accidents and documentation. The results showed that the changes in scheduling and allocation of duties had had a positive impact on the workload, cooperation and the accident rate. A procedure was formulated to conduct regular investigations of the organisational and social work environment, which now included scheduling and allocation of duties. They also expanded their reporting system to include questions about incidents linked to the organisational and social work environment.

# Afterword

Many people are knowledgeable and familiar with working with the organisational and social work environment. In such cases this guide serves as confirmation of proper thinking and actions. For others, this guide will serve as a first sojourn into this field and will help them become acquainted with the issues. In this case, more help may be needed to get started. It may then be useful to obtain assistance from, for example, occupational health services, other specialist resources, or a training coordinator. The social partners can offer support and assistance with questions through resources such as Prevent and Suntarbetsliv (Healthy Work Life). More information can also be found at the Swedish Work Environment Authority website ([www.av.se](http://www.av.se)).

It is important to view working with the organisational and social work environment as a long-term project that is always under development, never to be completed. Since the provisions are new in many regards, generally accepted practices and accepted methods will evolve over time. With everyone's help, we will ultimately improve the work environment with better health and good workplaces for all.

Good luck!

# Regulations

# Organisational and social work environment

The Swedish Work Environment Authority's Regulations and General Guidelines on the Organisational and Social Work Environment – adopted 22 September 2015.

The Swedish Work Environment Authority issued the following pursuant to Section 18 of the Work Environment Ordinance (SFS 1977:1166) and establishes the following general recommendations.

## **Purpose**

**Section 1** The purpose of these provisions is to promote a good work environment and prevent risks of ill health due to organisational and social conditions in the work environment.

## **Scope of application**

**Section 2** The regulations apply to all activities in which employees perform work on behalf of the employer.

*General recommendations:* The concepts 'employer' and 'employee' have the same meaning in these provisions as in the Work Environment Act (SFS 1977:1160), with the exceptions indicated in section 3 of these provisions.

## **For whom these provisions are intended**

**Section 3** The employer is responsible for ensuring that these provisions are followed.

The employer has the responsibility for these provisions being followed.

Those who hire a workforce are placed on an equal footing with employers.

*General recommendations:* Chapter 1, section 3 of the Swedish Work Environment Act states that people attending an educational programme or in custody in an institution are considered to be employees in the application of chapters 2–4 and 7–9 of the Work Environment Act. Pursuant to this paragraph, these individuals are not subject to the provisions on the organisational and social work environment.

## **Definitions**

**Section 4** In these provisions, the following terms have these meanings.

### **Demands of the job**

Those aspects of the job that require repeated effort. Demands may include quantity of work, degree of difficulty, time limit, physical and social conditions. Demands may be cognitive, emotional or physical in nature.

### **Victimisation**

Actions in an abusive manner at one or more employees that may lead to ill health or to exclusion from the workplace community.

### **Unhealthy workload**

When job requirements exceed resources on more than a temporary basis. This imbalance becomes unhealthy if it is prolonged and if opportunities for recovery are inadequate.

### **Organisational environment**

Terms and conditions for the work that include:

1. management and governance;
2. communication;
3. participation, latitude to act;
4. assignment of tasks; and
5. requirements, resources, and responsibilities.

### **Resources for the job**

Aspects of the job that help to:

1. achieve the objectives of the job, or
2. manage the demands of the job  
Resources may be: working methods and equipment, skills and staffing, reasonable and clear goals, feedback on work performed, opportunities for control at work, social support from managers and colleagues, and opportunities for recovery.

### **Social work environment**

Terms and conditions for the work that include social interaction, collaboration and social support from managers and colleagues.

## **Systematic Work Environment Management**

**Section 5** The Swedish Work Authority's provisions on systematic work environment management contain rules concerning work environment policy and knowledge requirements, and also require the employer to regularly investigate and assess what risks may arise at work. The provisions also include regulations requiring the employer to take corrective measures to manage the risks.

Specific requirements for knowledge are addressed in section 6 below and requirements for goals are laid out in sections 7–8. Specific organisational and social factors covered by the systematic work environment work are regulated in sections 9–14.

## **Knowledge**

**Section 6** Employers must ensure that managers and supervisors have the following knowledge:

1. How to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads.
2. How to prevent and manage victimisation.

Employers should ensure that this knowledge can be applied in practice.

*General recommendations:* Employers can supply knowledge by providing training, preferably to managers, supervisors and safety representatives together. It is helpful for managers and supervisors of safety representatives to be equally knowledgeable. Training can be provided by occupational health services or some other resource with expertise in the field.

Prerequisites refer to aspects such as sufficient authority, a reasonable workload, and support in the role as manager or supervisor.

## **Objectives**

**Section 7** Beyond what applies in accordance with section 6 and sections 9–14 in these provisions, the employer shall have objectives for the organisational and social work environment. The objectives shall be aimed at promoting health and increasing the organisation's ability to counteract ill health.

The employer shall give employees the opportunity to participate in the formulation of these objectives, and ensure that the employees are aware of this opportunity.

*General recommendations:* The employer should have a clear strategy to achieve the objectives. A fundamental requirement for success when working to achieve the objectives is that they must be firmly entrenched at top management level and other parts of the organisation.

The objectives may aim to strengthen and improve communication, learning, leadership, collaboration, influence, and participation.

The provisions of the Work Environment Authority on systematic work environment management stipulate that there must be a work environment policy. The objectives should be based on and consistent with this policy.

**Section 8** The objectives shall be documented in writing in all organisations with at least ten employees.

### **Workload**

**Section 9** The employer shall see to it that the tasks and authority assigned to the employees do not give rise to unhealthy workloads.

This means that the resources shall be adapted to the demands of the job.

*General recommendations:* Assigning tasks entails requirements in the form of a certain quantity of work and degree of difficulty that needs to be counterbalanced by resources.

The employer should consider the signs and signals of unhealthy workloads when assigning tasks.

Unhealthy workloads can be prevented through measures such as reducing the workload, changing priorities, varying tasks, providing opportunities for rest and recovery, using different work methods, increasing staffing or supplying knowledge. The employer should also make sure that the technology used is designed for and adapted to the work to be carried out.

The employer's obligations to prevent unhealthy workloads cover both managers and supervisors, as well as other employees. It is important that the employer create channels through which employees can notify the employer about high demands and inadequate resources.

Leadership that promotes regular dialogue with employees will create an environment in which the signs and signals of unhealthy workloads can be identified and imbalances corrected.



Employers should investigate and correct any workload-related risks as part of the work environment management process. Employers should avoid workloads that could result in illness or accident. Identifying the underlying causes of an excessive workload is essential in order to implement effective measures to remedy the situation. Questions concerning corrective measures may also need to be addressed at another level, or in another part of the organisation.

In addition to the organisational and social work environment, physical, cognitive, and ergonomic conditions may also contribute to the workload.

**Section 10** The employer shall see to it that the employees know:

1. what tasks they are to perform;
2. the results they are to achieve with their work;
3. whether the work is to be performed in a specific way and, if so, how;
4. which tasks are to be prioritised when the time available is insufficient for all tasks to be performed; and
5. to whom they can turn in order to receive help and support in carrying out the work.

In addition, the employer shall ensure that employees know what authority they have according to points 1–5.

*General recommendations:* By continually reviewing points 1–5, unnecessary demands and burdens on employees can be avoided. It may be suitable to communicate these points collectively to employees who share responsibilities and tasks in order to promote collaboration. The employer should establish channels through which employees can inform the employer of any ambiguities concerning the points. The employer should keep in mind that communication abilities vary among employees and take this into account.

In cases where support and help from colleagues are unavailable, the employer should ensure that a manager, supervisor or other designated person is available to provide help and support.

**Section 11** The employer shall take measures to counteract ill health among employees who encounter tasks and situations that entail severe mental stress.

*General recommendations:* Examples of tasks and situations at work that could be severely mentally stressful include dealing with people in difficult situations, being subjected to trauma, solving conflicts, and making difficult decisions under pressure that include ethical dilemmas. Examples of measures that should be considered in connection with severely mentally stressful work, apart from those indicated in the recommendations for Section 9, are:

1. regular support from supervisors or access to other experts in the field;
2. special information and training initiatives;
3. help and support from other employees; and
4. procedures for demanding situations when dealing with customers, clients, and others.

It is important that the employer create channels through which employees can notify the employer about particularly stressful working conditions.

The choice of measures to alleviate the situation will depend on the circumstances that cause the work to be severely mentally stressful.

### **Working hours**

**Section 12** The employer shall take any steps necessary to avoid scheduling working hours that may lead to ill health among employees.

*General recommendations:* The employer should consider the effects of the work schedule on employee health during the planning stage. Examples of work schedules that could pose a health risk include:

1. shift work;
2. night work;
3. split shifts;
4. extensive overtime work;
5. long shifts; and
6. extensive opportunities to work at different times and places, with expectations of being constantly reachable.

The employer should particularly ensure that employees have the opportunity to rest and recover. The employer should also keep in mind that scheduling of working hours affects the risk of accidents.

The Working Hours Act (1982:673) specifies limits for the maximum number of hours an employee may work, as well as for minimum periods of rest. The Working Hours Act thereby specifies the maximum limits for working hours, but does not contain rules stipulating how the employer should take scheduling of working hours into account as part of the work environment management process.

### **Victimisation**

**Section 13** The employer shall make it clear that victimisation will not be tolerated at work. The employer shall take measures to eliminate conditions in the work environment that could give rise to victimisation.

*General recommendations:* A written policy may be useful for clarification purposes. Managers and supervisory staff have a special responsibility to prevent, notice and deal with victimisation. It is therefore important that they fulfil the knowledge requirements of Section 6.

A joint initiative to address employee conduct and how employees treat one another may help to prevent victimisation.

Examples of circumstances at work that are important to pay attention to include conflicts, workloads, allocation of work, conditions for collaboration, and reactions to change.

**Section 14** The employer shall see to it that procedures to handle victimisation are in place. The procedures should indicate:

1. who receives information that victimisation is occurring;
2. what happens with the information, what the recipient is to do; and
3. how and where victims can quickly receive help. The employer shall make the procedures known to all employees.

*General recommendations:* Victimisation is usually reported to a manager when the person affected has not successfully resolved the situation. If the employee cannot turn to their immediate manager, they can turn to a manager higher up the management chain. Employees may also contact the health and safety representative. Quick intervention may be necessary to assess the situation and prevent it from deteriorating, as well as to ensure that point 3 is addressed. The employer can assign the task of providing support and help to occupational health services or another specialist in the field.

The Work Environment Authority's provisions on systematic work environment management state that if an employee suffers from work-related ill health or has an accident at work, and if a serious incident occurs at work, the employer should investigate the reasons in an effort to prevent ill health or accidents moving forward.

An inadequate investigation of victimisation may be harmful to both the work environment and employee health. The situation should therefore be investigated by someone who has adequate expertise, is able to act impartially, and is trusted by the involved parties. The purpose of work environment legislation is to prevent ill health and accidents, but it does not regulate compensation or guilt issues.

Legal assistance can be obtained from a trade union or legal counsel.

1. This statute enters into force on 31 March 2016.
2. Through this statute the following are repealed:
  - c) National Board of Safety and Health general recommendations (AFS 1980:14) on mental and social aspects of the work environment;
  - d) National Board of Safety and Health provisions (AFS 1990:18) on nursing care in individual homes; and
  - e) National Board of Safety and Health provisions (AFS 1993:17) on victimisation in working life.

ERNA ZELMIN-EKENHEM

Christina Jonsson      Anna Middelman

## What to do in the workplace:

### Make sure that managers and supervisors know how to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads and victimisation

- **Is there specific knowledge** to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads and victimisation and, if so, who possesses it?
- How can we make sure that everyone who needs the specific knowledge **acquires** it?
- **What conditions** are needed to allow managers and supervisors to take action?

### Add goals for the organisational and social work environment to the workplace health and safety policy

- **What is our current status** from an organisational and social standpoint?
- What changes would we **like to see happen** within a given time period?
- How **do we achieve this?**
- Are the objectives firmly **entrenched** and supported by everyone (including top management)?

### Adapt the resources to the requirements of the job (or vice versa)

- **What requirements are demanded** by the job and what are the available resources? Are they in **balance?**
- Is there sufficient opportunity for **recovery?**
- Are there procedures for **reporting and identifying** signals indicating unhealthy workloads?

### Clarify the job content

- Is it clear what employees are **expected to do?**
- Is it clear what the **result** should be, **how** it should be achieved, and **what is needed** to do so?
- Is it clear what should be **done first** when time is short?
- Is it clear **who can provide help and support** and **who has** the necessary **authority?**
- What **forums** are available for dialogue?

## What to do in the workplace:

### Identify severe mental stress

- **Are** the employees **subjected** to severe mental stress?
- **If so**, have measures been adopted to counteract ill health and, if so, **what measures?**

### Evaluate the risks associated with working hours and if necessary take measures to avoid ill health

- **Are there any health risks** associated with **the work schedule?**
- **If so, can** they be **completely avoided?**
- If that is not possible, **what measures have been** taken to avoid ill health?

### Prevent victimisation

- Does everyone **understand what victimisation** is?
- Has it been made **clear** that it will **not be tolerated?**
- Is management **monitoring possible causes** of victimisation?
- **Is anything being done** about it?

### Formulate procedures to deal with victimisation

- Does everyone have **information about who** to speak with about victimisation?
- Do the recipients of this information **know what they should do** and where the **information ends up?**
- Does the procedure clearly state where the victim can get **help as quickly as possible?**

This guide contains advice, recommendations, and examples that can help you to comply with our provisions on the organisational and social work environment (AFS 2015:4). We divided it into three parts:

- The guide
- Appendix with the complete text of the provisions
- Quick reference guide “What to do in the workplace”

The guide is intended for anyone engaged in workplace health and safety, including employers, managers, health and safety representatives, employees, and resource coordinators

