

## LETTER

## Transitioning to job redesign: improving workplace health and safety in the COVID-19 era

Godderis and Luyten<sup>1</sup> astutely identified key roles for occupational health professionals amidst the COVID-19 economic downturn. However, in addition to supporting the return to work, and dealing with secondary health effects of the crisis,<sup>1</sup> Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) professionals can lead the adaptation of organisations to an altered world of work by focusing on an active agenda with long-term benefits: improving work design.

While the lockdowns and growing economic crisis raise challenging employment issues and widening health inequalities for some,<sup>1</sup> many others in continuing roles are working in changed conditions: with new technology, in new spaces, with reduced social and physical interaction, and less supervision and support.

Changes to work extend beyond white collar workers in home offices and physical risks from poorly designed workstations.<sup>2</sup> They include, for example, allied health workers evaluating and treating patients electronically and restaurateurs shifting staffing, equipment and working hours to provide takeaway and home delivery service. These changes are not just about adapting to technology and automation: they reflect changes to how tasks are conceptualised and carried out. This is why work design<sup>3</sup> is fundamental.

Expecting these changes to be temporary, risk analyses of the physical and psychological hazards associated with these new ways of work may have been neglected or suboptimal solutions hastily implemented. Unfortunately, the unpredictable nature of this crisis may mean that these new models of work are likely to persist. Rather than simply responding to the challenges that arise from COVID-19 related changes to work, now is the time

for OHS professionals to lead a proactive, larger scale review of work design, risk analyses, laws, guidance material and best practice in order to protect workers' health into the future.

In addition to forcing work redesign, COVID-19 also prompts renewed emphasis on emerging OHS issues which, to date, have not been comprehensively addressed. Protecting psychological health at work is a central consideration in implementing a comprehensive safety management system<sup>4</sup> and providing a safe system of work. A focus on taking care of mental health was evident during the pandemic, both at work and in the community.<sup>5</sup> This continued focus will help to protect the most vulnerable work populations in transitioning to new work environments, as highlighted by Godderis and Luyten.<sup>1</sup>

Implementing strategies to help workers deal with psychosocial effects of the pandemic will be necessary.<sup>6</sup> However, work redesign affords a bigger, broader and transformative opportunity. This is a chance to finally go beyond mental health awareness, employee assistance programmes and individual-level interventions (such as resilience and stress management) to actually create work tasks and structure without sources of harm.

Seizing these opportunities in occupational health and safety is urgent, both to leverage the current climate of flexible work arrangements and to play a part in mitigating the compounding stressors experienced by workers during these tumultuous times. Improved ways of working can then filter into normal operations, protecting workers and bolstering productivity into the future.

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