

OSWE survey question areas

OSWE is an abbreviation of *organisational and social work environment* and concerns how work is managed, planned and allocated, and how people interact with, treat and support each other in the workplace. Another term for this is *psychosocial work environment*.

The OSWE survey encompasses various factors in the organisational and social work environment, and by getting your employees to respond to the OSWE survey, you can find out how things are going in areas such as workload, offensive behaviour and leadership. Below you can read more about the survey's nine question areas.

1. Organisation of the work

The *Organisation of the work* question area is about determining whether it is clear what an employee is expected to do and what the objectives are for both specific teams and the organisation as a whole. For example, the questions in the section on organisation of the work address:

- the extent to which management has made objectives and task allocation clear to employees;
- how management communicates on issues impacting the entire organisation;
- how management provides feedback on suggestions and initiatives stemming from employees.

The section also addresses questions concerning:

- how tasks are allocated;
- how work processes are designed;
- the objectives and results that management expects and therefore also rewards.

A well-functioning work organisation should have clearly defined objectives, with each employee aware of the tasks to be performed and the results to be achieved. All employees should also have the opportunity to influence how the work is carried out in dialogue with their manager.

A good work organisation is a dynamic organisation that constantly evolves through the interplay of management and employees. It is therefore important

that the different levels of the organisation communicate about the organisation of work, from senior management to employees and back. Employees often have valuable information about the obstacles to achieving the organisation's objectives, along with factors for success in this regard. Leverage these insights to achieve the organisation's objectives and promote employee health and well-being.

The way the work is organised impacts demands and different resources in the workplace, the social climate, and the conditions for managers to lead and establish psychological safety at work.

2. Workload and demands

An unhealthy workload can arise when the work entails an imbalance between demands and resources. Such imbalances become unhealthy when they last for a long time and thus are not just temporary. An unhealthy workload is the main cause of stress and employee sickness.

Demands refer to everything that the employee needs to do or manage in order to perform their work. High demands may stem from having a large amount of tasks to be deal with, the tasks being demanding and complicated, or them needing to be completed quickly and within a short period of time. Demands can therefore differ depending on occupation and situation. The following are examples of three types of demands:

- cognitive demands, such as problem solving,
- emotional demands, such as trying to help people who are struggling or not feeling good,
- physical demands, such as heavy lifting.

Resources are things that the employee can use to manage the demands of the work. They should enable the employee to perform their tasks in a way that meets the objectives of the work. Resources can be:

- work equipment and tools
- skills and knowledge
- staff and time
- good leadership
- feedback on work performance

- social support from colleagues.

Which resources are useful and valuable depends on the demands to be managed. Always strive for a balance between resources and demands. Consider the amount of work required and the difficulty of the tasks when planning the work. To achieve a balance, either the resources must be adapted to the demands of the work or vice versa.

The following are seven examples of measures to prevent an unhealthy workload:

1. Reduce the amount of work.
2. Change the order of priority.
3. Vary tasks so that periods of higher workload are alternated with periods of lower workload.
4. Find other ways of working.
5. Create opportunities for recovery.
6. Increase staffing levels.
7. Add new knowledge.

Many people talk of “excessive demands” as a work environment issue, but it can be difficult to define what this is. The following are some examples of excessive demands:

- Over an extended period of time, breaks cannot be taken or overtime is required to keep up.
- The work needs to be carried out at high intensity.
- The quality of the work performed is impaired.

Employees need to be provided with the right conditions to alert their employer that the workload is becoming or has become unhealthy. The Swedish Work Environment Act requires that work be adapted to people’s different conditions. This applies to both physical and mental conditions.

As a manager, you can remedy imbalances by engaging in regular dialogue with your employees. In these discussions, you can detect signs and signals of an unhealthy workload. Then try to identify the causes and take measures accordingly.

Sometimes decisions on measures may also need to be dealt with at another level or in a different part of the organisation than that in which the unhealthy workload has been observed. For example, if the unhealthy workload is due to cooperation with other departments, it may be difficult for the line manager to address the issue on their own.

3. Opportunity to influence

The *Opportunity to influence* section is about the opportunities employees feel they have to influence their work and how it is performed.

Having the opportunity to influence your work is a resource that can help you manage the demands of the work. A work situation in which there are no such opportunities entails a greater risk of stress and ill-health. An example of such a work situation could be where the work is micromanaged and employees are unable to control the pace or use their professional judgement to prioritise or manage demands.

The extent to which employees are able to influence their work situation depends, of course, on the occupation in question. Some occupations and tasks require very detailed guidelines on how to perform the work. This can limit the opportunities for individual employees to influence their work. Other occupations offer greater opportunities to do so. Consider how things look in your organisation and what is possible within the scope of the job description, the team's objectives and the objectives of the organisation.

Some tasks cannot be influenced. In such situations, it can be useful to get employees involved in the planning stage of the work. This can be a means of mitigating the risks associated with tasks that cannot be influenced.

Taking part in planning is particularly important in times of change. It is obviously necessary to set aside time for such participation in order for it to work.

4. Support

The *Support* section looks at both the social support and other support functions employees feel they have.

A key resource in the social work environment is social support in the workplace, i.e. the support that an employee can obtain from colleagues and managers. Social support can make it easier to manage the demands of the

work, thus acting as a counterbalance to an unhealthy workload. It is a resource that can help motivate and engage the team while also contributing to learning and development.

There are different ways to provide social support. Social support can be:

- emotional support, where someone listens and provides support in difficult situations;
- information;
- practical knowledge, where colleagues provide support and help by contributing their experience and expertise.

The type of social support employees need depends on the demands or issues they need to manage or resolve.

Some tasks require support in the form of guidance to avoid unhealthy workloads. This may include situations in which there are demands to solve complex tasks, ethical dilemmas arise or the employee is exposed to an emotional burden. The guidance also helps these employees develop professionally.

For example, mentoring can be an effective form of support when new employees are undergoing induction.

Many organisations have online or administrative systems in place intended to support the work being performed. Ensure that help or support functions are available to assist employees in using the systems. Otherwise, this type of system risks causing stress and presenting an obstacle to the work. Get your employees involved and have them give feedback as soon as you introduce a new system. This can be a good way to investigate how the system will impact the work, along with any risks involved.

5. Recovery

The *Recovery* section is about employees' opportunities to rest and recover.

Employee well-being requires both a good night's sleep and periods of recovery during working hours. The concept of recovery thus includes how work affects opportunities to rest between shifts, as well as the opportunities available for recovery during the working day.

There are several health risks associated with long hours, shift work and night work. The risks of accidents and mistakes also increase. Employers must therefore ensure that work is scheduled, staffed and organised so that employees can get sufficient rest and recovery between shifts. A longer rest period is needed after several night shifts or split shifts, for example.

It is important to pay extra attention to recovery time in situations where employees have the opportunity to perform their work at different times and in different places, known as flexible work or working without boundaries.

Being able to take short breaks is crucial to both physical and mental recovery. Such recovery breaks are particularly important when the work is intense and demanding.

Employees should, as a matter of course, feel energised and rested at the start of the working day and have the energy to do other things at the end of it.

6. Leadership

The *Leadership* section looks at the extent to which employees feel they receive the feedback and support they need from their manager, and that they have sufficient progress meetings with their manager.

The manager's task is to lead and allocate the work to ensure that employees can perform the tasks required to achieve the organisation's objectives, but also to provide the support and feedback employees need.

Good leadership includes:

- providing feedback on employee performance;
- clarifying what effort is expected;
- inspiring and motivating employees and heightening their commitment to their work;
- knowing how to prevent risks and ensure the work environment promotes health to a greater extent.

Managers and supervisors must have knowledge of the work environment rules applicable to the organisation and of the physical, organisational and social conditions that pose risks of ill-health and accidents. Managers should have the conditions to put this knowledge into practice to prevent risks. The manager also needs to have authority in the form of resources and mandates to complete

the tasks related to the work environment responsibility they have been delegated.

Regular progress meetings between managers and employees should take place throughout the year, with a longer employee performance appraisal focused on feedback and development once a year.

Managers are also employees, and it is important that the organisation includes the managers' work environment in systematic work environment management. Management needs to lay solid foundations for managers' leadership. Important aspects to consider include the manager's own workload, the size of the team, and the number and difficulty of the manager's administrative or operational tasks.

Does the manager receive the guidance and support that the work requires? Having your own mentor can be a good resource. Other key aspects that influence the manager's conditions are induction, training and professional development.

7. Knowledge and development

The *Knowledge and development* section looks at professional development opportunities for employees, as well as opportunities for them to use their knowledge in their work, and how they can develop through this.

All employees must be provided with sufficient knowledge to perform their work in a satisfactory and safe manner. Without such knowledge, it is more difficult to manage the demands of the work, which increases the workload. Being able to use your knowledge and skills at work can also help increase motivation and further boost skills and knowledge.

Learning and development can take place in day-to-day work by giving employees the opportunity to reflect on their work and share experiences with each other. So, it is important that the workload leaves space for reflection, individually and together. Receiving feedback on work performed is also a way to learn and develop.

Regular discussions about skills should be held to make sure that the employee has the knowledge and skills the work requires. One such occasion is the annual employee performance appraisal.

If the tasks require it, knowledge needs to be supplemented through various forms of professional development. Changes and developments in, for example, working methods and technology may require such professional development, as may changes in the organisation that require employees to handle new or modified tasks and working methods. A lack of knowledge and skills at work leads to poorer performance. Knowledge and skills are also an asset to the organisation.

8. Psychological safety

Psychological safety is about feeling part of an accepting community that also values what you do and who you are. It concerns the individual's experience of being able to take personal risks in a team without being ridiculed, ignored or penalised. It means having the courage to ask questions, come up with new ideas, admit mistakes or ask for help – without fear of negative consequences. Unlike trust, which is more individual and relationship-based, psychological safety is a group experience in which most people feel the same way.

The term 'psychological safety' was coined by Amy C Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School.

To experience psychological safety, employees need to be able to show who they are and be themselves without fear of negative consequences – either in terms of relationships with colleagues or career consequences.

Psychological safety is established through a climate of respect, sensitivity and support in which mistakes are viewed as part of learning. Psychological safety fosters cooperation, innovation and well-being in the team.

The employer and managers at different levels have a role to play in establishing psychological safety. In a psychologically safe workplace, managers show appreciation, play down mistakes and encourage different perspectives. The leadership is empathetic, with managers showing compassion and curiosity. They invite people to participate by encouraging questions, listening actively and being inclusive. By showing it is safe to speak up without being rejected or penalised, employees feel confident enough to speak openly about mistakes and learn from them. Managers are also clear about objectives, purpose and expectations in relation to work effort and cooperation.

9. Offensive behaviour

The *Offensive behaviour* section is about employees' perceptions and experiences of offensive behaviour in the workplace.

Offensive behaviour can mean many different things. It is actions directed at one or more members of the team in a way that is perceived as offensive, or that excludes a member of the team from the workplace community. A person subjected to offensive behaviour is more likely to suffer from ill-health.

If an employee feels they have been subjected to some kind of offensive behaviour, the manager and the employer's actions should be based on the employee's experience. In other words, their actions should not be based on the perceptions of others on the team, or the person who engaged in the offensive behaviour.

Offensive behaviour can be physical or mental, verbal or non-verbal. Offensive behaviour can occur in real-life contacts or online. Examples of offensive behaviour include:

- no longer saying hello to or ignoring someone;
- ostracising someone;
- speaking ill of someone and spreading false rumours;
- making patronising or offensive comments;
- behaving aggressively or blowing up at someone;
- making fun of someone;
- exercising excessive control over someone;
- withholding important information;
- making someone feel guilty and ashamed.

The behaviour or actions do not have to be deliberate or intentional to be serious. Even unconscious actions or behaviours such as banter, group dynamics and cultures can lead to someone being humiliated or harmed. The employer is obliged to clarify what is unacceptable in the workplace.

Offensive behaviour tends to increase with high workloads and stress. This may be due to time constraints, unresolved conflicts or unclear roles and mandates. The employer must work to counter conditions in the organisation that may contribute to offensive behaviour. So, work actively on the working climate, psychological safety and clear communication regarding how to organise work.

If situations arise in which someone has been subjected to offensive behaviour or suffered harm or ill-health in the workplace, the employer must, under the obligation to investigate set out in the Swedish Work Environment Authority's Statute Book, in the WEM section (SAM-AFS), investigate whether there are conditions in the work environment that may have contributed to the situation, and take measures to prevent such behaviour from happening again.

If there is to be an investigation into victimisation in the workplace, it is important that the person has sufficient competence to do so. The person also needs to be able to act impartially and have gained the trust of those concerned. If the person does not meet these requirements, the employer needs to contact occupational health services or an equivalent expert resource for this purpose. An investigation is in itself a risk that must be taken into account.