

# Psychosocial health, workplace productivity



Compiled by  
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APRIL 28, 2026 marks World Day for Safety and Health at Work, and this year's theme — 'Let's ensure a healthy psychosocial working environment' — challenges businesses to confront a risk that is largely invisible, rarely measured, but increasingly shaping productivity, workforce stability, and business performance.

In today's environment, how people experience work, not just where they work, is quickly becoming a defining factor in whether businesses can sustain growth.

### Unseen risk in the workplace

Workplace health and safety frameworks have traditionally focused on physical hazards.

However, global institutions including the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are now emphasising psychosocial risks; how work is designed, organised, and managed.

These include high job demands, low control, job insecurity, long working hours, and poor workplace relationships.

While less visible than physical hazards, their impact is cumulative and far-reaching.

A key challenge is that these risks remain under-measured, particularly in smaller and developing labour markets.

What is not measured is rarely prioritised.

### The productivity link

The productivity impact of poor psychosocial health is increasingly quantifiable.

While absenteeism is often the most visible outcome, the larger and more persistent cost to businesses is presenteeism — where employees are physically present but operating below full capacity.

The ILO estimates that 12 billion working days are lost globally each year due to depression and anxiety, highlighting the scale at which mental health affects labour productivity.

More detailed longitudinal research reinforces how this plays out at the enterprise level.

A recent study published in the European Journal of Health Economics found that employees experiencing moderate to high psychological distress had significantly higher rates of absenteeism, presenteeism, and underemployment, all of which directly reduce workplace output.



Participants during a recent World Day for Safety and Health at Work mini conference in Suva. Picture: JONA KONATACI/FILE

There is growing consensus, supported by international research, that presenteeism contributes an even greater loss of productivity than absenteeism.

The same study found that psychological distress resulted in additional annual productivity losses of up to \$AU3600 annually, per employee, driven largely by reduced performance while at work.

At a global level, the World Health Organization estimates that mental health conditions already cost the global economy trillions of dollars annually, with the majority of these costs linked to lost productivity rather than direct healthcare expenditure.

### Intensifying the risk is Fiji's operating context

These workplace realities are unfolding against a backdrop of mounting national health and social pressures that are directly affecting the labour force.

The Fiji 2025 Steps Survey highlights that non-communicable diseases (NCDs) remain the single greatest health challenge in Fiji, accounting for over 80 per cent of all deaths, while national data also shows that 11.6 per cent of adults experience symptoms of depression.

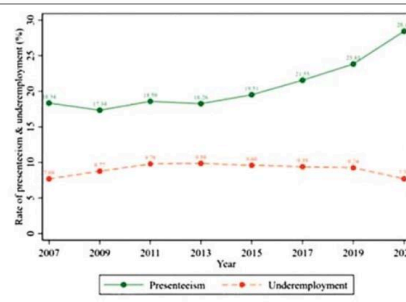
At the same time, Fiji is confronting a growing HIV burden, with health authorities and partners including the WHO highlighting the need for strengthened responses, alongside an escalating drug problem increasingly impacting communities and workplaces.

Taken together, these trends are not isolated public health concerns, they are workforce issues.

They influence attendance, reliability, cognitive performance, and long-term participation in the labour market.

For employers, this translates

Fig 4 Trend in the proportion of presenteeism and underemployment



Trend in the proportion of presenteeism and underemployment. Picture: SUPPLIED

into a workforce that is not only smaller, but under increasing health and social pressure.

### A shrinking and more competitive labour market

These pressures are further intensified by underlying labour supply constraints in Fiji's economy.

According to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, unemployment remains relatively low at around 5.7 per cent, indicating limited spare capacity in the domestic labour market.

In practical terms, this suggests that most available labour is already engaged, leaving businesses with fewer options to draw from when recruiting or expanding their workforce.

At the same time, outward migration continues to place additional pressure on the availability of skilled workers, particularly in critical occupations such as health, trades, and professional services. This dynamic is reflected in Fiji's reliance on overseas em-

ployment income.

World Bank data shows that personal remittances account for over 7 per cent of GDP, underscoring the scale of labour mobility and the ongoing contribution of Fijians working abroad.

For employers, the combined effect is a smaller and more competitive talent pool.

This increases competition for skilled workers and places greater pressure on businesses to not only attract but also retain employees in an already constrained environment. When viewed alongside rising health and social pressures affecting the workforce, this constraint becomes even more significant — as businesses are increasingly required to do more with a workforce that is both limited in size and under strain.

### Why a proactive approach makes business sense

Not every business can compete on wages alone.

However, every business can

influence the quality of its work environment.

Addressing psychosocial health does not necessarily require high-cost interventions.

It begins with:

- Designing manageable workloads
- Strengthening leadership and communication
- Building a culture of fairness, respect, and trust
- Providing flexibility where operationally feasible

These are practical, scalable actions that can deliver measurable improvements in engagement, retention, and productivity.

In Fiji, wellness programs are a common practice across the multiple businesses we spoke to — programs such as:

- Wellness through movement programs: early finish to move the body through sports or exercises,
- *Talanoa* by the *talanoa* programs: access to senior management via open, relaxed, *talanoa* style discussions,
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP): confidential counselling and support for employees and their families to manage work or personal challenges,
- Wellbeing initiatives, events, activities, informal gatherings, etc. and
- Flexible working i.e. early/late starts, work from home days, etc.

The theme of this year's World Day for Safety and Health at Work is a timely reminder that workplace health must evolve alongside the realities of modern work.

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