European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

EU GUIDANCE

SIX STEPS TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT AT WORK IN SMALL BUSINESSES



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About this guide

Violence and harassment in the workplace represent a serious occupational risk, not merely personal conflicts between individuals. Workers who experience such behaviour may suffer harm to their mental and physical health, including stress, anxiety, sleep problems and, in more serious cases, depression, burnout or even suicide. Such behaviour can also affect work performance and the organisation more broadly, for example through reduced confidence, distraction, mistakes at work and increased sickness absence. It can also damage the wider working environment, affecting teamwork, morale and the day-to-day functioning of the organisation.

It is the employer's responsibility to take reasonable steps to prevent violence and harassment in the workplace, respond when this behaviour occurs and protect the health, safety and dignity of workers. It is important to stress that violence and harassment can occur in any workplace, regardless of its size or sector, including small businesses. While small businesses may have fewer formal procedures or resources, they still need to manage these risks and can benefit from clear, practical guidance.

This guide provides the small business owner, employer or manager with practical support on how to prevent and respond to violence and harassment in the workplace. It explains how to identify risks, take actions and learn from experience to improve over time. It covers situations that arise between colleagues or between workers and managers, as well as situations involving customers, clients, patients, service users or members of the public. It applies to behaviour that happens in person and also through digital channels, such as email, messaging apps and phone calls. It walks the reader through a step-by-step approach to preventing violence and harassment in the workplace, offers ready-to-use tools and examples and provides guidance on how to shape them to the specific context of the organisation.

This guide is specifically built for small businesses, with realistic measures that can be applied with limited resources. Indeed, small businesses may not have dedicated human resource (HR) support or extensive time to devote to policy development. However, size can also be an advantage: decisions can be made quickly, communication is more direct and changes to everyday routines do not require multiple layers of approval.

The guide is divided into two main sections. **SECTION 1** explains what is meant by violence and harassment in the workplace and the many forms this behaviour can take, how it tends to develop, what makes it more likely in everyday working conditions and the effect it can have on your workers and your organisation. It closes with a brief reflection on the particular challenges and strengths of small businesses. **SECTION 2** sets out a step-by-step approach to preventing violence and harassment, including how to respond effectively when an incident occurs and improve your approach over time. Each step is designed for a small workplace and comes with practical tools and examples to adapt to the individual context of the company.

The guide has been designed to be used flexibly and does not need to be read from start to finish. Where the basic concepts are already familiar, **SECTION 2** can be consulted directly, and in specific situations, the relevant step can be consulted on its own.

1. Understanding violence and harassment in the workplace

Before looking at solutions, it is helpful to clarify what we mean by violence and harassment in the workplace. This section explains the main concepts, where such behaviour comes from and how it can gradually escalate.

1.1. What is meant by violence and harassment in the workplace?

Violence in the workplace is often thought to involve physical acts such as hitting, pushing or assault. In practice, however, it covers a much wider range of behaviours.

Violence tends to involve a discrete act or incident, making it identifiable as a specific event, even where its consequences are lasting. It may take the form of an act or an attempt to harm a person physically or psychologically, for example through public humiliation.

Harassment, by contrast, often involves a series of behaviours that develop over time, although sexual harassment, for example, does not necessarily have to involve repeated behaviour. This can include excluding someone, spreading rumours or sending hostile messages. It may consist of actions that, taken individually, appear minor but, when repeated, create an intimidating, hostile or degrading working environment. For this reason, harassment is often less immediately visible and may not be readily recognised, either by those experiencing it or by others.

Both violence and harassment can involve individuals from within the organisation, such as a colleague or manager, or third parties such as a customer or patient. Third-party violence may, for example, be a situation where a customer shouts at a worker, or a patient makes inappropriate comments to a nurse. Finally, violence and harassment can occur in person or through digital communication tools and may extend beyond the workplace, for example through online interactions outside working hours.



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1.2. The various ways violence and harassment affect workers

Violence and harassment can be directed at various aspects of a person's life or identity:

- **The person or their private life**, for example, by spreading gossip about someone's personal life, using teasing or sarcasm that goes too far or deliberately ignoring or excluding them.
- **Their work or role**, for example, by taking away responsibilities without explanation, giving someone only trivial or unpleasant tasks or withholding information they need to do their job.
- **Their social identity**, for example, by treating someone negatively because of characteristics, including but not limited to gender, age, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability. In these cases, the behaviour may also constitute discrimination.

When the behaviour targets a person because of their sex or gender, it may constitute gender-based or sexual violence or harassment. This is not only about inappropriate physical contact or explicit sexual advances. It may also be more subtle, and may equally include any kind of degrading comment or attitude towards someone because of their sex or gender. For example, this can involve a sexist joke

or gesture, showing or sending sexist or sexual images or messages or staring at someone in a sexual way that makes them uncomfortable. In more serious cases, it can involve pressuring or threatening someone to engage in sexual activity, including by suggesting that refusing could affect their job, or even physical sexual assault. Sexual violence or harassment can happen to anyone. However, it disproportionately affects women who are targeted by men.

Other discrimination-related forms of violence or harassment in the workplace involve behaviour that targets identity-related characteristics other than gender or sex, including but not limited to age, race, ethnicity, religion, economic status or disability. For example, this might involve making jokes about someone's accent, making stereotypical comments about someone's race or skin colour, repeatedly questioning a person's abilities because they are seen as 'too young' or 'too old' or excluding someone because of their religion or not respecting their religious practices. In practice, these identity-related characteristics often overlap. This means that some workers may be targeted in multiple ways at the same time, which can make the impact even stronger.

A note on 'grey areas'

Violence and harassment in the workplace is behaviour that is not always straightforward to identify. What feels 'unwanted', 'uncomfortable' or 'unfair' can differ from person to person. The same behaviour might be seen as harmless by one worker but inappropriate by another. In less clear-cut situations, there is no simple checklist for determining when behaviour becomes inappropriate. As soon as someone feels that their boundaries are being crossed and they experience behaviour as violent or harassing, this can have a harmful impact on their mental or physical health. This in itself is sufficient reason and a clear sign that action is needed.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU, AS A BUSINESS OWNER OR MANAGER

Violence and harassment in the workplace can take many different forms, which are not always obvious. Subtle behaviour, a dismissive gesture, a shrug or quiet but persistent pressure can be just as harmful as more visible acts and is often harder to recognise. While these behaviours are not always visible, their impact can still be significant and harmful.

1.3. How do violence and harassment in the workplace start?

Violence and harassment in the workplace typically start in three main ways:

- **Stress and frustration build up**: Workers may feel frustrated or tense due to pressures in their working environment that make their job more difficult. These may include, for example, a high workload, time pressure, emotionally difficult situations or unclear roles (see also **SECTION 1.2**). If workers are able to manage this stress in a constructive way, the situation can be resolved without further impact. However, it may also be managed in ways that contribute to the emergence of violence or harassment. Specifically, two common patterns are:
  - **Stress leads to more confrontational behaviour.** In some cases, someone experiencing stress or frustration directs it outward. They may, intentionally or unintentionally, blame someone else and take out their frustration on that person. They may then act disrespectfully or aggressively towards that person. For example, they may lash out verbally or start to over-control, such as by micromanaging their work, questioning the quality of their work, redoing tasks behind their back or ordering them around.
  - **Stress leads to withdrawal, which may trigger reactions from others.** In other cases, the person experiencing stress may withdraw rather than becoming confrontational. For example, they may become less involved, put in less effort or withdraw from social interactions at work. This may be noticed by colleagues or supervisors, who may feel frustrated and, in turn, react in a harassing way, for example by making continuous critical remarks or pressuring the person to improve their performance or behaviour.
- **Unresolved conflict**: Occasional conflict is a normal part of working life. Workers may see tasks differently, disagree on how things should be done or simply not get along. When conflict is addressed and resolved in a constructive way, it may not have further consequences. When it is not, it may escalate and contribute to the development of violence or harassment. For example, when workers force solutions, avoid conversations, refuse to listen or are not willing to compromise. In such cases, the conflict can linger and is more likely to escalate into violence

or harassment. When this occurs, the balance of power becomes important, influencing who is more likely to assume what role:

- **The person with more power tends to become the perpetrator.** The person in the stronger position in the conflict is more likely to use that advantage, intentionally or not, to get the upper hand. This can involve excluding the other person from information or decisions, closely controlling their work, setting them up to fail or openly questioning them. Over time, this can turn a conflict into a pattern of harassment.
- **The person with less power tends to become the victim.** The person in the weaker position finds it harder and harder to respond and is more likely to be the victim of such behaviour. They may feel unable to defend themselves, and what started as a disagreement can evolve into ongoing exclusion, pressure or humiliation. In other words, they are being harassed (see the important note further below for more information).

- **A company culture of harassment:** Violence and harassment can also grow out of everyday workplace culture. In some environments, harmful behaviour such as teasing, harsh jokes, exclusion or abusive supervision is quietly tolerated and/or brushed aside. Workers may be told that this is 'just how things are done here', that it is 'part of the job', or that they're expected to 'just put up with it'. Over time, this creates a working environment where such behaviour becomes normalised. Eventually, harassment may become embedded in the organisation, as this way of behaving is seen as the norm. In these settings, harassment does not necessarily need a specific trigger such as stress or a conflict. It can develop because the workplace culture facilitates it. Importantly, these three situations do not necessarily happen in isolation. In practice, they often overlap and influence each other – accumulated frustration and lingering conflict can feed into each other, while the workplace culture can strongly influence whether early signs are responded to promptly or allowed to escalate.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON POWER BALANCE AND HARASSMENT

A key underlying feature of harassment is power imbalance. The person engaging in harassing behaviour typically holds more power than the person they target, whether formal power, such as a supervisory role, or informal power, such as greater experience, stronger networks, belonging to the majority group or being closer to management.

It is this power imbalance that distinguishes harassment from 'mere conflicts' and makes it particularly impactful and harmful. When someone with greater power repeatedly targets the same person over time, the effects on that person compound. The person targeted may increasingly feel unable to stand up to the behaviour or defend themselves, leaving them in a vulnerable and inferior position. In other words, the existing power imbalance is reinforced and deepened by the harassment itself.

This dynamic also makes it more challenging for the person targeted to report and address harassment, increasing the likelihood that this behaviour continues unchecked for longer.



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1.4. How do violence and harassment in the workplace escalate?

SECTION 1.3 explained how violence or harassment in the workplace can emerge from stress, conflict or existing norms. The current section focuses on how these situations may develop over time.

Harassing behaviour typically follows a gradual, escalating process. What may begin as frustration, unresolved conflict or behaviour that has become accepted as normal can develop into a pattern of increasingly negative behaviour, with actions becoming more frequent and more severe. In other words, harassment often happens in various stages of intensity.

In many cases, behaviour initially takes more subtle forms and may not yet constitute harassment. It may seem minor at first, such as behaviour that feels disrespectful or discourteous. This is referred to as 'workplace incivility': low-intensity, ambiguous behaviour that shows a lack of respect. Examples include dismissive remarks, interrupting others, ignoring colleagues, subtle put-downs or sarcastic comments.

Incivility can occur in any workplace. However, when it is repeated and not addressed, it can become the preliminary stage of escalation towards persistent harassment. Workers often respond to rudeness with rudeness, creating a cycle of retaliation in which behaviour becomes increasingly hostile. If unchecked, this can evolve over time and result in such behaviour being normalised within the organisation. What may begin as seemingly harmless jokes or comments can gradually spread within the workplace and even evolve into a culture in which harassment is tolerated (see **SECTION 1.3**).[1]

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU, AS A BUSINESS OWNER OR MANAGER

The earlier you address harassing behaviour, the easier it is to stop it from escalating. Keeping an eye out for negative acts, even if they seem minor or harmless to you, helps prevent them from growing into violence or harassment in the workplace. However, because early signs are often subtle or ambiguous, they can easily go unnoticed. This is why it is essential to create a working environment where workers feel safe to speak up.

The three ways violence and harassment in the workplace typically emerge highlight important areas you, as a business owner or manager, can influence:

- Be on the lookout for sources of frustration, stress or conflict in the workplace, and address them early (more on this in **SECTION 1.2**).
- Lead by example: even minor negative behaviour can spiral into more severe harassment and become normalised. As a leader, your own behaviour sets the tone, so consistently model the respectful behaviour that is expected in any workplace.
- Effective leadership requires you to be directive and firm at times, but you should always treat your workers with respect and civility. The tone you set shapes the norms within your organisation.

1.5. Main drivers and everyday working conditions

To fully understand why violence or harassment arise, it is important to consider the everyday conditions in which people work. Research shows that these issues are rarely explained solely by individual behaviour or so-called 'difficult personalities'. While individual factors can play a part, the strongest influences are usually in the work context, including how work is organised, led and managed. Specifically, there are four main aspects to consider:

- **The job:** how much work someone is expected to handle, whether deadlines are realistic, whether workers receive clear information about their roles and responsibilities and whether the physical working environment is appropriate.
- **The team:** how workers are managed day to day, whether they feel supported, how openly they communicate with one another and how disagreements or tensions are responded to when they arise.

[1] Violence coming from persons outside of the organisation usually does not follow these same patterns. Often, it is directly linked to risks in the working environment itself – see **SECTION 1.6**.

- **The organisation:** the wider working environment, including the values and norms that shape how workers treat each other, how the organisation is structured and run, what rules and procedures are in place and whether leaders set a good example through their own behaviour.
- **External contacts:** in some sectors, the behaviour of clients, patients, customers or members of the public and how these contacts interact with workers can also create risks, especially where workers deal directly with people in stressful or unpredictable situations.

At the **job level**, the risk of violence or harassment may increase when workload and time pressure are high, the workforce is stretched or work is constantly rushed. These pressures can increase stress and frustration and make conflicts more likely to escalate. Unclear roles and conflicting instructions can also fuel frustration and blame. Additionally, workers who fear losing their job, having their hours reduced, not having their contract renewed or being denied future opportunities may feel less able to speak up, report problems, challenge inappropriate behaviour or set boundaries. This can create a power imbalance that makes them more vulnerable to harassment, especially if they depend heavily on the job or believe that raising concerns could lead to negative consequences. The work set-up matters too: lone working, working in areas where colleagues cannot easily see or hear what is happening and working late can increase vulnerability. Physical features of the workplace, such as blind spots, screened-off spaces, back rooms, long corridors, poor lighting or a lack of an easy way to call for help, can also increase the risk, particularly in public-facing work.

At the **team level**, weak, unfair or authoritarian management can normalise inappropriate behaviour and undermine trust, especially when issues are ignored, handled inconsistently or managed aggressively. In small teams, effective day-to-day management plays an important role. This means, for example, organising shifts and responsibilities fairly, ensuring that new workers are properly introduced and supported, communicating expectations clearly, maintaining regular contact with team members and addressing concerns through timely and constructive feedback. When these basic management practices are lacking, resentment can build quickly. Poor conflict management can increase the likelihood that disagreements escalate into harassment. When workers do not feel supported by colleagues or managers or when teams lack cohesion, problems can escalate more easily because workers are less likely to support one another or intervene.

At the **organisational level**, the work culture and the way work is organised help shape what is considered acceptable. In small workplaces, the behaviour that leaders tolerate can quickly become the norm. If rude comments, exclusion, mocking or harmful ‘banter’ are brushed off, these behaviours can become increasingly accepted and gradually develop into more serious, systematic harassment. This is more likely where policies are inadequate or poorly implemented, reporting procedures are unclear or responses are inconsistent. Highly competitive or ‘macho’ cultures that reward dominance and toughness can further blur the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and increase the risk of harassment. How a company is organised also matters: very rigid hierarchies can give some workers too much power over others, while in very decentralised workplaces, it may be unclear who is responsible for addressing problems. Rapid growth or organisational change can create confusion about roles and responsibilities. Where communication is unclear, frustration and conflict can rise, increasing the risk of harassment.

Violence from individuals outside the organisation is more common in some sectors, such as care work, small retail businesses, hospitality and security. It may involve one-off incidents which do not follow the same pathways as internal harassment and can be harder to predict. Some risks arise from situations that workers cannot fully prevent or control, for example when a person is under the influence of alcohol or drugs, in severe psychological distress or intentionally behaving in a threatening or violent way. However, third-party aggression can also arise from situations that the organisation can influence, particularly when concerns or complaints are handled poorly, for example through slow complaint handling, unclear communication or a lack of empathy. The way services are provided, workforce capacity at peak times, clear rules and effective complaint handling can all reduce the likelihood that frustration escalates into violence or aggression. This does not in any way justify violent behaviour: violence is never acceptable, regardless of the quality of service or the circumstances.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU, AS A BUSINESS OWNER OR MANAGER

Violence and harassment in the workplace are not just 'people problems', they are often shaped by everyday working conditions that you can influence and improve. As a business owner or manager, you can reduce the risk by looking closely at how work is organised, how workers are supervised and supported and whether the physical working environment helps workers feel safe.

Workplace culture plays an equally important role. Culture is shaped by more than just written rules. It reflects what leaders visibly recognise and reward, what behaviours are tolerated or challenged and how consistently policies and procedures are applied. Transparent decision-making, clear consequences for unacceptable behaviour and fair and accessible reporting procedures all send a strong signal about what is and is not acceptable in the workplace.

Realistic workloads, clear roles, regular communication and safe working arrangements can make a real difference, particularly in small businesses, where the tone set by those at the top is felt by everyone.



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1.6. Consequences for workers and for the organisation

Violence and harassment can have serious consequences for workers, employers, managers and the organisation as a whole. In small businesses, the effects can be felt more quickly and widely than in larger organisations. When a worker is affected, there is often no easy replacement and no spare capacity to absorb the disruption. Colleagues may have to cover the affected worker's duties, deal with a difficult atmosphere or support the person affected, all while keeping daily operations running. Pressure on the whole team builds quickly. The effects are not limited to those directly involved in the incident. They can also affect customers, clients, service users and other people who depend on the organisation's services. Mistakes become more likely, customer service can suffer and managers may find themselves dealing with the fallout of the incident rather than running the organisation. What begins as harm to one individual can spread into wider team tensions, reputational damage and financial strain, affecting the organisation as a whole.

Consequences for workers

For an affected worker, violence and harassment can take a serious toll on their mental and physical health. They may feel tense, anxious or on edge, not only during incidents but also before work or when anticipating the next difficult interaction. Over time, this can undermine self-confidence, leading the worker to doubt their own judgement or blame themselves for what happened. The strain can affect many parts of daily life, such as concentration, sleep and decision-making, and the affected person may find it increasingly difficult to switch off and recover after work. If the situation continues and the affected person feels unsupported or unable to speak up safely, stress can become overwhelming, contributing to persistent anxiety, exhaustion or depression. In more severe cases, a person experiencing violence or harassment may develop trauma-related symptoms, including intrusive memories, hypervigilance, avoidance and emotional numbness. In the most serious cases, suicidal thoughts can occur. Work behaviour changes too: the affected person may withdraw, avoid certain tasks or colleagues, take more

sickness absences or leave the organisation altogether, particularly if they feel that the behaviour is not being addressed and the situation is unlikely to improve.

The impact often extends beyond the person experiencing violence or harassment. **Bystanders**, i.e., those who witness incidents, may also feel unsafe, stressed or uncertain about how to respond, and trust within the team can erode over time. Physical health can be affected as well, with sleep problems, ongoing fatigue, headaches, stomach complaints and raised blood pressure becoming more common. If bystanders feel that they cannot speak up safely or that concerns will not be taken seriously, the ongoing stress can lead to exhaustion and burnout.[2]

In small workplaces, these effects rarely affect just one person. They can quietly spill over into working relationships, team dynamics and life at home, affecting the wider workplace even when the situation is not openly acknowledged.

Consequences for the organisation

In small businesses, even a single incident can quickly affect the whole workplace. When workers feel unsafe, disrespected or unsupported, trust within the team can weaken, cohesion can break down and a hostile working environment can develop. Compared with a larger organisation, there is no buffer, no spare capacity and no additional layer of management to absorb the disruption. The effects are felt immediately and by everyone.

The practical consequences for the organisation can be significant. Workers who feel unsafe or demoralised tend to be less motivated, less willing to support colleagues and less committed to the organisation. The overall pace of work may slow down and the team may achieve less with the same number of workers. Sickness absence may increase as stress and exhaustion make it harder for workers to keep working as usual. Concentration may suffer too, leading to more mistakes and poorer service, particularly in customer-facing roles where calm, patience and reliability are essential.

Workers may also seek to protect themselves by limiting their exposure to situations they find distressing. They may request changes to their shifts, ask not to serve certain customers, avoid tasks that feel unsafe or seek to reduce contact with colleagues involved in the situation. While these requests are often entirely understandable and may be necessary for the worker's well-being, they can create real difficulties in a small team where there is limited flexibility to redistribute work or adjust work/shift schedules without putting additional pressure on others.

Managing the aftermath of an incident of violence or harassment absorbs time, energy and resources that small teams cannot easily spare. Business owners or managers may find themselves firefighting, reshuffling rotas, handling complaints, mediating between colleagues or trying to keep operations running, rather than focusing on the organisation itself. The longer the situation continues without a clear and fair response, the more disruptive and costly it may become.

Reputational consequences can also follow, and in a small business, these can be particularly damaging. Trust is often built through personal contact, local visibility and word of mouth. If customers, prospective workers or business partners gain the impression that the workplace is unsafe or that problems are not being handled properly, confidence in the organisation can erode quickly. In close-knit professional and local networks, this kind of reputational damage spreads fast and can be difficult to undo. Depending on the nature of the incident and how it was handled, there may also be legal or insurance implications that add further cost and complexity.

Worker retention is another significant and often underestimated consequence. Workers generally do not want to remain in a workplace where violence or harassment is tolerated, ignored or handled poorly. In practice, those who leave first tend to be the most capable, employable and experienced workers whose skills, reliability and institutional knowledge are the hardest to replace. Losing such workers increases pressure on those who remain, risks deepening existing problems and can set off a damaging cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to reverse. It is also worth noting that business owners or managers who hesitate to act because the person involved is a valued or hard-to-replace member of the team are taking a significant risk: failing to act rarely preserves what is valued and typically drives away the very people a team cannot afford to lose.

[2] Burnout is a syndrome resulting from chronic work-related stress, with symptoms characterised by feelings of exhaustion, feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy.

What this means for you, as a business owner or manager

If you own or manage a small business, violence and harassment in the workplace can quickly become your problem as well as your workers' problem. In a small team, there can be little room to absorb absence, conflict, falling morale or loss of trust. This means that you need to pay attention continuously, respond quickly and create a working environment where problems can be raised safely and addressed fairly. Doing so is not only about the well-being of an individual worker and meeting your responsibilities as a business owner or manager, but also about ensuring the continuity of your organisation.

1.7. Prevention of violence and harassment in small businesses: main challenges and strengths

This section turns to the reality of small businesses when it comes to the prevention of violence and harassment in the workplace, highlighting both the difficulties they may face and the practical advantages they can take advantage of.

Common challenges faced by small businesses

Time and money are often tight and business owners or managers may feel that investing in prevention of violence and harassment is competing with the immediate pressures of keeping the organisation running. Working relationships are also frequently informal, with an emphasis on 'common sense' rather than written rules, which can leave workers uncertain about what is expected and what to do when something goes wrong. Many small businesses do not have access to specialist HR or legal support, meaning that the business owner or manager may have to handle sensitive situations without training or guidance. Because teams are small, speaking up can be especially difficult: workers may worry about social fallout, retaliation or simply that everyone will know if they raise a concern. It is also worth acknowledging that acting against a perpetrator who is a valued or hard-to-replace member of the team can feel daunting. This is a real challenge, but one that cannot justify inaction, since tolerating harmful behaviour carries its own serious consequences.

Strengths small businesses can build on

Small businesses often have fewer management layers and fewer formal procedures, which means that concerns can be raised more directly and decisions can be taken more quickly, sometimes within days. The business owner or manager also tends to have a clearer view of what is really happening day to day; in a small workplace, early warning signs can be easier to notice, especially when workers feel able to speak up for themselves and/or for others. Because teams are close-knit, small changes can have a big impact: a simple ground rule, a clearer rota or a better way to respond to customer aggression can quickly improve the tone of the whole workplace.



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2. A step-by-step approach to preventing and responding to violence and harassment in the workplace

The second section of this guide translates the understanding built in the previous section into concrete actions. It has been written with small businesses in mind, where time, workers and resources are often limited and where policies need to be simple and usable. The aim is not to create a complicated system or add a disproportionate burden to an already busy schedule. The guide focuses on what is most useful, what is manageable and where a small change could make a real difference.

The guide is structured in six steps. Each step contains an aim, describing the goal or expected outcome. Steps 2 to 6 also contain a two-part action plan – starting points and longer-term actions – providing practical suggestions to implement each step.

These suggestions are not a checklist that every organisation must complete in full. They are better understood as a set of options that you can choose from, depending on the size of your organisation, way of working and the kinds of risks or challenges you face.

Finally, each step concludes with a good practice example box, which exemplifies the action plan in a realistic, small business-oriented organisational context.

Depending on the situation, you can skip to the section of the guide you feel is most relevant to your current needs. However, if you are starting from scratch, following the steps in order will help you build a comprehensive approach toward violence and harassment prevention and management.

2.1. Principles to keep in mind throughout the approach

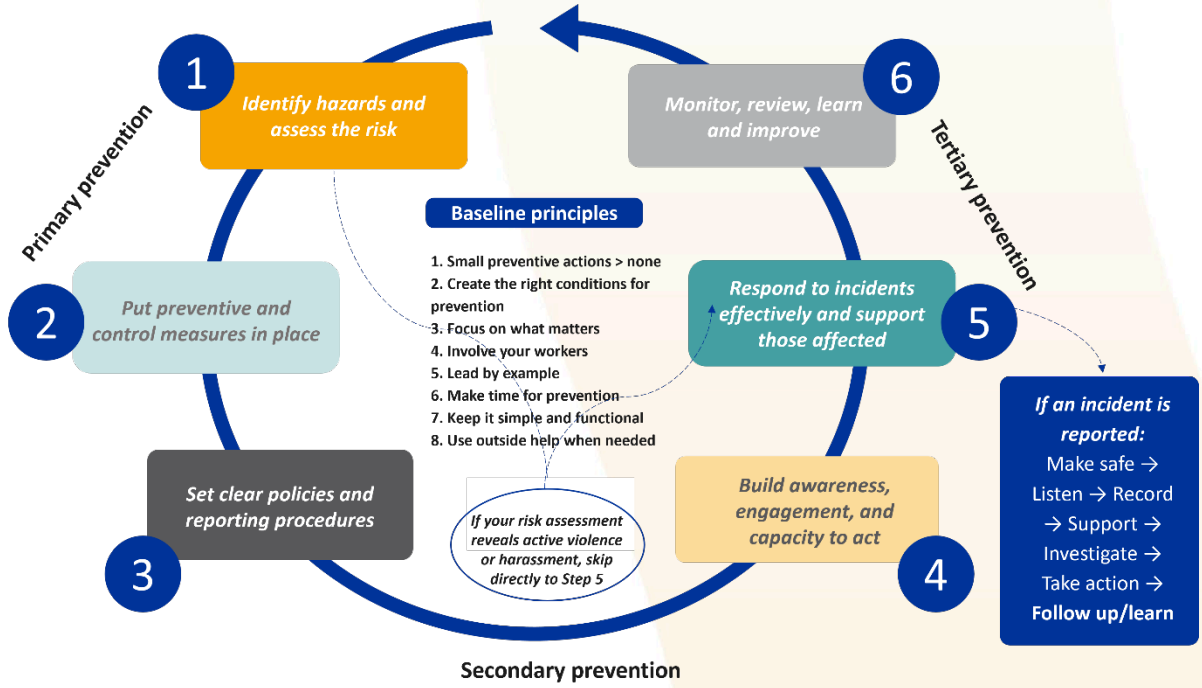
As you begin the practical section of this guide, keep these eight principles in mind. These should remain central as you progress through the steps, and you can always return here as a reminder of the main points.

1. **Small preventive actions are better than none.** This is the most important guiding principle of the guide. Organisations should not remain passive, but should take action to reduce and manage the risk of violence and harassment in the workplace. While not every action will be equally effective, taking thoughtful, realistic and context-sensitive steps is an important starting point. Importantly, organisations do not need to address everything at once. Choosing feasible, organisationally relevant actions and sustaining them over time will gradually help create a safer workplace.
2. **Create the right conditions for prevention.** Analysing your workplace culture – its norms, values, communication styles and openness to change – helps identify where there may be barriers to preventing and responding to violence and harassment, as well as areas that are already working well. This creates the conditions for your actions to be more effective.
3. **Focus on what matters.** Consider the risks that are real for your organisation, as not all of them will be. For example, an organisation that works face-to-face extensively with customers might face a higher likelihood of third-party violence, compared to digital risks such as cyber harassment.
4. **Involve your workers.** Including your workers in every step or action you take can help build commitment, trust and shared responsibility for the prevention of violence and harassment. As you will see later in this guide, workers are valuable assets and should be actively involved in the process.
5. **Lead by example.** As a business owner or manager, you set the tone. Workers look to you as a model, not only in what is said but in day-to-day behaviour. Show that prevention is a priority through words and actions, and model safe conduct. Failing to do so can be counterproductive: if violence or harassment is seen as a legitimate response, it may lead to further retaliation rather than constructive resolution.
6. **Make time for prevention.** Regular, brief discussions help keep violence and harassment prevention a priority.

7. **Keep it simple and functional.** Clear expectations, an easy way to raise concerns and a fair response process matter more than a 'perfect' document that covers everything on paper.
8. **Use outside help when needed.** In cases where you may not feel comfortable responding to violence or harassment on your own, the use of external support, such as a sector body, occupational safety and health service, mediator or adviser, can give neutrality and protect relationships in a small team. Remember that some incidents of violence may need to be reported to the appropriate external authorities.

2.2. How to use this guide

Figure 1: A six-step approach to preventing and responding to workplace violence and harassment in small businesses

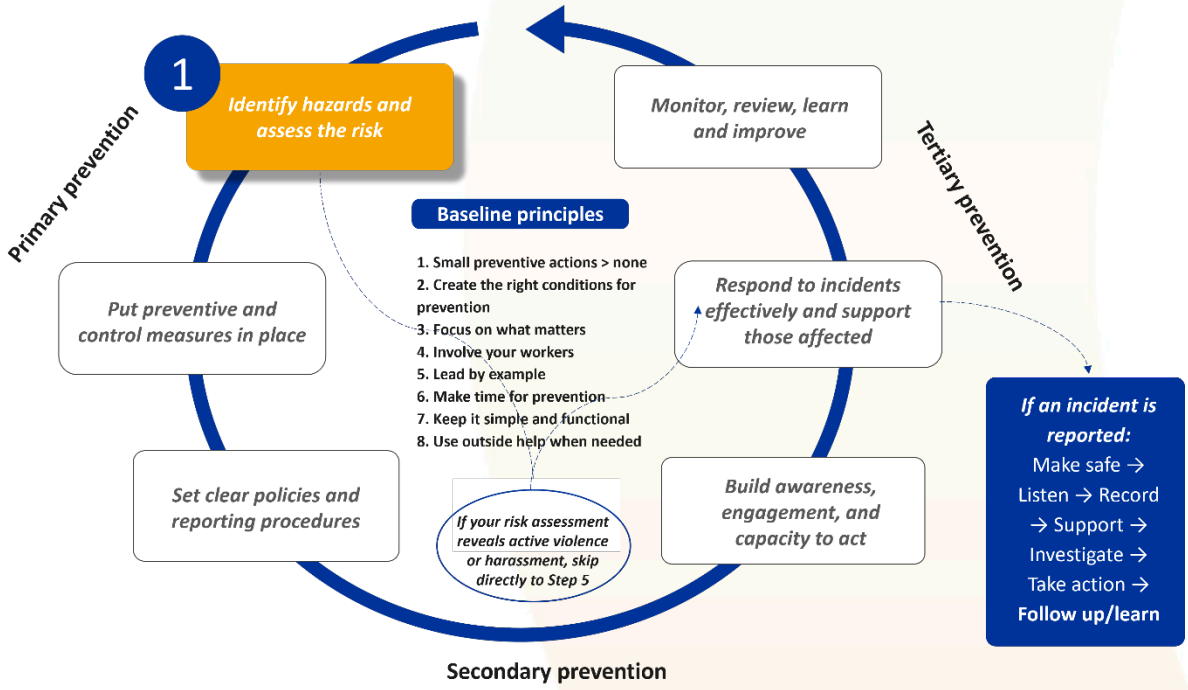


Source: authors' own elaboration.

The infographic above shows the steps you will take throughout this guide, progressing through the **three pillars of prevention**:

- **Primary prevention** refers to actions you can take to prevent violence and harassment before they occur. **STEPS 1** and **2** in the guide take you through conducting a risk assessment and implementing measures to eliminate or reduce these risks.
- **Secondary prevention** focuses on early intervention to prevent escalation. Even when harm has already been done, you can still take steps to limit further impact. **STEPS 3** and **4** guide you on how to develop, communicate and implement a comprehensive policy on violence and harassment for your organisation.
- **Tertiary prevention** aims to manage the long-term impact on those affected, support recovery and prevent recurrence. **STEPS 5** and **6** explain how to respond appropriately to an incident and how to monitor and review policies and procedures to ensure they remain effective. **STEP 6** loops back into **STEP 1**, as the risk assessment should be updated following any incident. This circularity demonstrates that violence and harassment prevention is a recurring, ongoing process – not a one-time endeavour.

Step 1 — Identify the hazards and assess the risk



Aim

The first step supports you in conducting a **risk assessment**. This is a systematic and organised way of understanding what risks may exist in your workplace.

A risk assessment is important because it creates a starting point you can use to decide what steps to take next to reduce those risks. It consists of two steps: (1) identifying hazards and (2) assessing the risk, which is the likelihood that those hazards cause harm.

The first step of a risk assessment involves identifying **hazards**. Hazards are situations or conditions in the workplace that could lead to harm. These could be physical places, specific tasks or interactions or even times of day.

Some examples of hazards include:[3]

- Tasks involving lone work, cash handling or time pressure.
- Stressful or emotional encounters between workers or with external contacts, such as customers.
- High-risk times, such as evenings, peak periods and ends of shifts.
- Physical features, such as poor visibility, isolated areas, entrances/exits after hours or neighbouring premises that may pose risks.

You can walk through your workplace and observe daily practices to identify such hazards. To complement this, you can ask your workers about previous incidents, near misses[4] or even situations that felt unsafe or 'just not right'. This conversation can focus on work experiences or times where workers feel most stressed or want more support. How you choose to ask your workers depends on the context of your organisation, the number of workers and the sensitivity of the information discussed. A short survey, group discussion or one-to-one chats can identify hazards previously unseen to you.

[3] For more on hazards, see **SECTION 1.5**.
[4] A near miss is a situation that could have gone badly but did not, either due to chance or a proactive response.

The second part of a risk assessment involves looking at each hazard in the workplace and judging how much **risk** it actually poses. Some hazards may be urgent, others less so – it depends on your specific context. You should consider two elements in this phase:

- How likely is it that this hazard could actually cause a problem? (likelihood)

and if it does,

- How serious would that problem be? (impact)

For example, in a restaurant, tensions or conflicts between workers may occur relatively frequently, but their impact is often more limited. In contrast, physical violence or aggression from a customer may occur less often, yet when this behaviour does occur, the consequences can be far more serious. This is why both likelihood and impact need to be considered together: it is their combination that helps determine which risks should be prioritised.

A risk assessment may vary, depending on the type of organisation and the work it carries out. It is important that you know your organisation well and tailor your assessment accordingly. For example, enterprises that work across multiple locations, such as those providing in-home services or making deliveries, may have more contexts to consider. Similarly, organisations with significant contact with clients or members of the public should consider third-party violence, while organisations with a digital presence, including company platforms and private communication, should consider cyber harassment. Remember to involve workers both in identifying hazards and prioritising risks.

The end of this section includes a table illustrating how risk in the workplace can be assessed. The OiRA (online interactive risk assessment) tool developed by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)[5] is another tool available to support you in conducting a risk assessment.

Finally, after any incident, update your risk assessment and feed it back into the **STEP 6** review. You will learn later in **STEP 6** about the importance of monitoring and evaluating your prevention strategy and adapting it when necessary. If an incident does occur as a result of a new risk or one that you had not previously considered, make sure to update your risk assessment as a part of your overall review.

Good practice example 1

A small care service consults workers to identify high-risk situations with clients and adapt work routines accordingly

A home care provider with 12 workers provides medical support to older adults in several neighbourhoods. Although no serious incidents have been reported, worker turnover is increasing and several workers have mentioned feeling ‘on edge’ after certain home visits. As part of a risk assessment, the manager asks workers to share situations where they have felt particularly stressed. Workers identify several recurring patterns, including lone work during early morning and late nights, tight scheduling providing limited opportunity to recover between visits and certain clients who make uncomfortable remarks to female workers. Afterwards, the manager had a meeting with workers to talk about this list of identified hazards and discuss other potential hazards within their work context. Next, each hazard was given a score in terms of likelihood (low, medium, high) and the potential impact of this hazard (low, medium, high). This allowed the manager to make a first list of priorities. Finally, the priorities were set.

[5] https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-resources/oira

Table 1. Sample risk assessment table

Risk assessment			
Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Priority
Lone working during early mornings and late nights	high	low	4
Tight schedule	high	medium	2
Difficult clients / uncomfortable interactions	low	high	3
Frustrations about work of colleagues	medium	low	5
Gossip about colleagues	high (occurred recently)	medium	1

STOP HERE

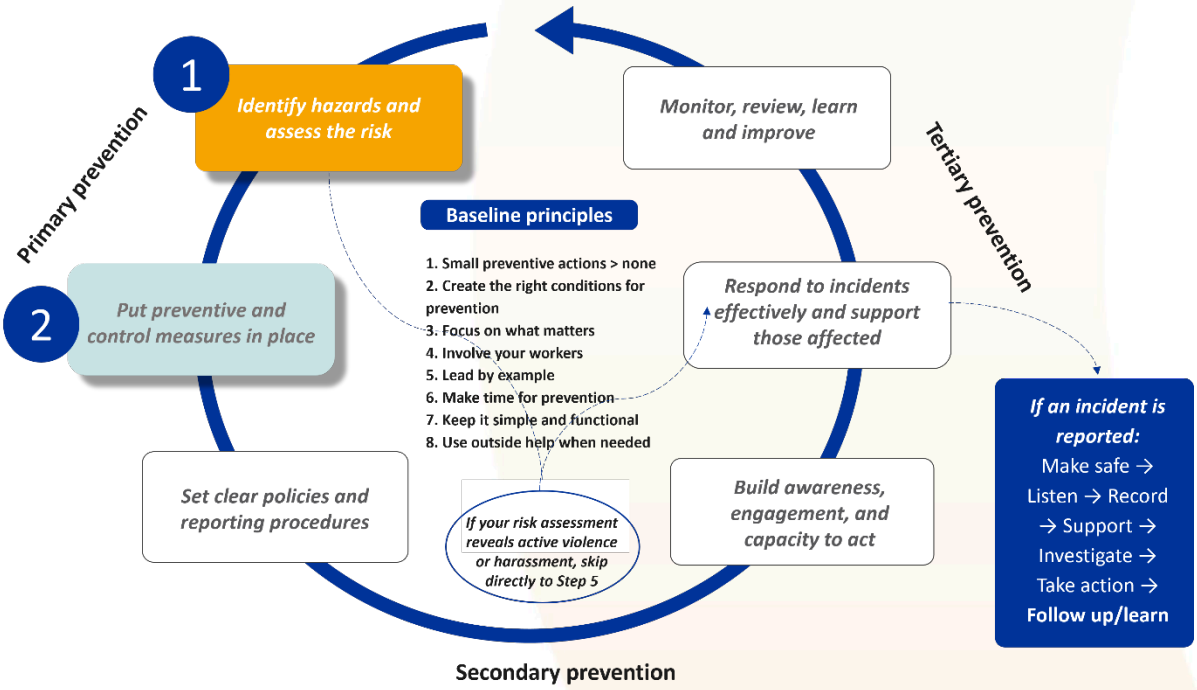


© Pixel-Shot / Adobe Stock

Urgent situation? If your risk assessment has revealed that violence or harassment is currently occurring or has recently occurred, turn immediately to **STEP 5** (tertiary prevention) to respond effectively and support those affected. Once the situation has been addressed, return to **STEP 2** and work through the full prevention process as normal.

If no active or recent incident has been identified, continue directly to **STEP 2**.

Step 2 — Put preventive and control measures in place



Aim

Just as there are many different kinds of risks, there are also many ways of responding to these risks. Preventive and control measures are actions that are taken to either ensure that workers are not exposed to hazards in the first place or to minimise the exposure to or harm caused by a hazard.

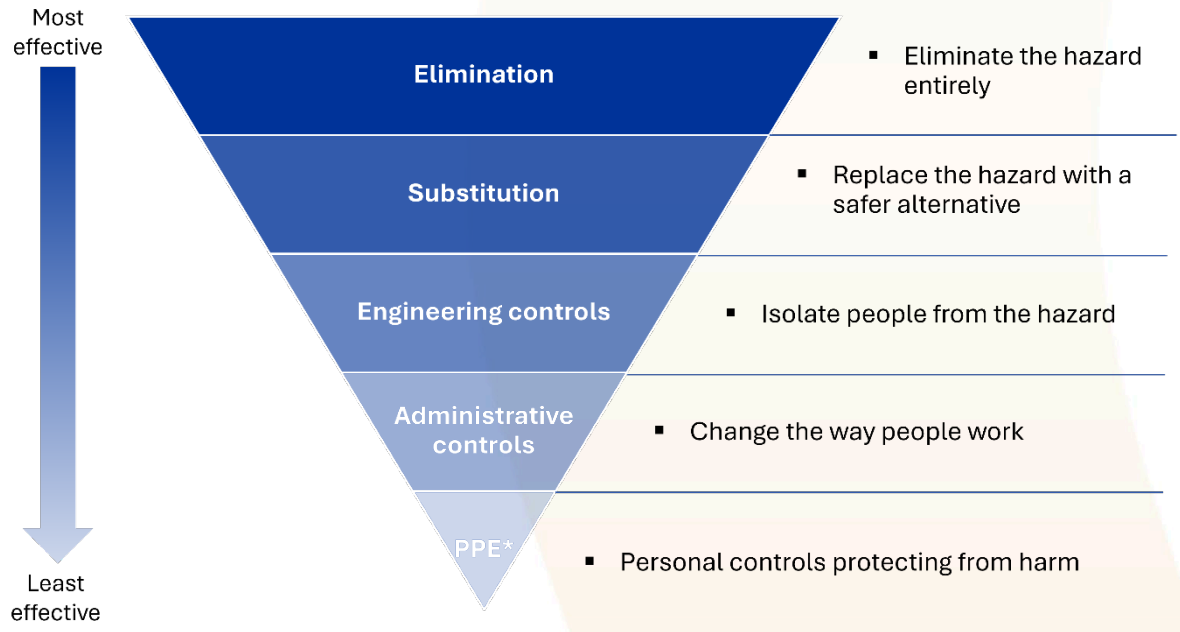
Areas in which you can implement preventive and control measures include:

- How work is managed and led
- How work is organised
  - Internal and external communication, both verbal and written
  - Practices and systems of working
- The physical and social working environment

In an ideal situation, you would be able to eliminate the hazard entirely, but that may not always be possible. For example, you cannot entirely remove the risk of customer violence in a restaurant. In such cases, the 'hierarchy of controls' can be a useful framework, as it ranks different categories of control measures according to their expected effectiveness in preventing or reducing risks.

Figure 2: Hierarchy of controls

The concept of the hierarchy of controls helps choosing the most effective response to a risk possible. The hierarchy consists of five levels, ranked from most to least effective. Measures higher up should be applied whenever possible, with lower levels only applied if higher-level ones are not feasible.



Source: authors' elaboration.

** PPE in the traditional understanding of the hierarchy of controls refers to personal protective equipment. In the context of violence and harassment in the workplace, this category can be understood more broadly as measures that provide workers with additional protection or support when exposure cannot be fully eliminated.*

At the top of the hierarchy are elimination and substitution. Elimination involves removing the hazard entirely, while substitution involves replacing it with a safer alternative. These two steps are high-level organisational principles that often require longer-term structural changes. Then, engineering and administrative controls involve reducing the risk through modifying the working environment and organisation of work. Finally, lowest on the hierarchy is the provision of personal controls, i.e., individual protective measures relying on individual action to be effective. However, this level of control alone is not sufficient and should always be applied in combination with other measures.

An overview of the definitions and example controls for each level in the context of violence and harassment are provided below in Table 2.

Table 2. The hierarchy of controls in the context of violence and harassment in the workplace

Hierarchy level	Definition	Examples of preventive and control measures
Elimination	Remove organisational conditions that create risks of violence and harassment.	Eliminate lone working in high-risk situations by ensuring the presence of additional workers. Eliminate excessive workload by ensuring adequate workforce capacity, reducing time pressure and sources of tension.
Substitution	Replace high-risk situations or ways of working with safer alternatives.	Replace individual performance targets that create competition or pressure with team-based targets that encourage cooperation. Replace unscheduled walk-in contact with appointment-based systems to reduce unpredictable or confrontational encounters.
Engineering controls	Design the physical working environment to reduce opportunities for risks to occur.	Improve lighting and install cameras in low-visibility areas. Install physical barriers, such as counters or protective screens, to reduce direct contact in high-risk situations.
Administrative controls	Adapt working practices to reduce prolonged exposure to hazards.	Implement job rotation mechanisms to prevent prolonged exposure to high-risk interactions. Establish a buddy system to ensure that workers can support each other in managing difficult situations.
Personal controls	Provide individual resources for workers to use when exposure cannot be fully controlled.	Provide workers with personal alarms or communication devices to call for assistance in case of incidents. Train workers in de-escalation techniques and maintaining personal boundaries.

The importance of following the hierarchy of controls can be illustrated through the example of customer aggression in a shop or service setting. An organisation could respond by providing workers with training on how to de-escalate conflict. This is a personal control, as it relies on the worker to manage the risk. However, in stressful situations, training may not always be applied effectively, highlighting the limits of controls that depend solely on individual responses. Measures higher up in the hierarchy tend to be more effective because they reduce the risk at source or through the working environment. For example, installing a screen or barrier at the counter (engineering control) changes the working environment and reduces workers' exposure to aggressive behaviour, making incidents less likely to occur in the first place.

Combining preventive or control measures across various levels of the hierarchy can further strengthen prevention. For example, alongside changes to the physical working environment, introducing an administrative control such as a buddy system, where workers work in pairs or regularly check on one another, can ensure that workers have support if physical measures are not sufficient. In any case, the measures put in place should always be tailored to the specific context of the workplace.

Starting points

➔ Model and practice good leadership behaviour

Research shows that how business owners, employers or managers manage and support their workers day to day can make a significant difference in preventing bullying and other harmful behaviour. Central to this is communication: how you listen, give feedback, handle difficult conversations and make workers feel heard. Build your skills in both conflict management and effective communication, whether through training, mentoring or learning from peers. Demonstrate respectful behaviour, show genuine motivation to prevent violence and harassment and comply with existing organisational or sectoral guidelines. Address tensions early and directly rather than waiting for them to resolve on their own. Doing so sends a clear signal to your workers that their safety and well-being matter.

➔ Organise work to reduce preventable sources of stress

As discussed in the first section of this guide, the build-up of stress and frustration can cause conflict between workers and increase the risk of violence and harassment. Some improvements you can make in addressing work organisation include:

- Manage workload realistically: avoid excessive demands by prioritising tasks, setting realistic deadlines, distributing work fairly and ensuring that enough workers are available at peak times.
- Avoid lone working whenever possible – research has demonstrated that working alone or in isolation can increase the risk of violence or harassment.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities to reduce role conflict. This is especially relevant in a small business, where roles may not be as clearly defined.

➔ Make your working environment safe

The working environment plays a large role in both how likely violence or harassment is to occur, as well as how well you and your workers can respond to it. Consider implementing control measures, including but not limited to:

- Improve visibility and lighting in both public and worker-only areas.
- Install security measures such as video surveillance and alarm systems.
- Separate workers from members of the public with fixed or movable barriers, such as high counters, furniture, windows or screens.
- Arrange furniture and design the workspace to ensure visibility and avoid restrictive movements.
- Label exits clearly, ensuring there are no areas where workers can be trapped.

➔ Prepare for third-party risks

Where workers interact with customers, clients or patients, prevention means anticipating frustration and understanding the root cause of it. Delays, unclear information, feeling treated unfairly or long waiting times can all contribute to frustration or anger. Adjust processes to reduce these sources of frustration, where possible. When not possible, plan for simple de-escalation strategies and exit options to protect workers. You can also introduce a buddy system, where workers work in pairs in high-risk situations. This system can also provide support for workers as they have a designated person to turn to. Another strategy can be to develop a shared code word to discreetly alert a colleague to a conflict with a customer.

Longer-term actions

➔ Encourage broader professional development for workers

Supporting professional development increases competence, confidence and commitment to the job, which are protective factors against workplace aggression. As a business owner or manager, you should provide professional development opportunities for your workers, such as a leadership training.

➔ ROTATE TASKS, WHERE IT HELPS

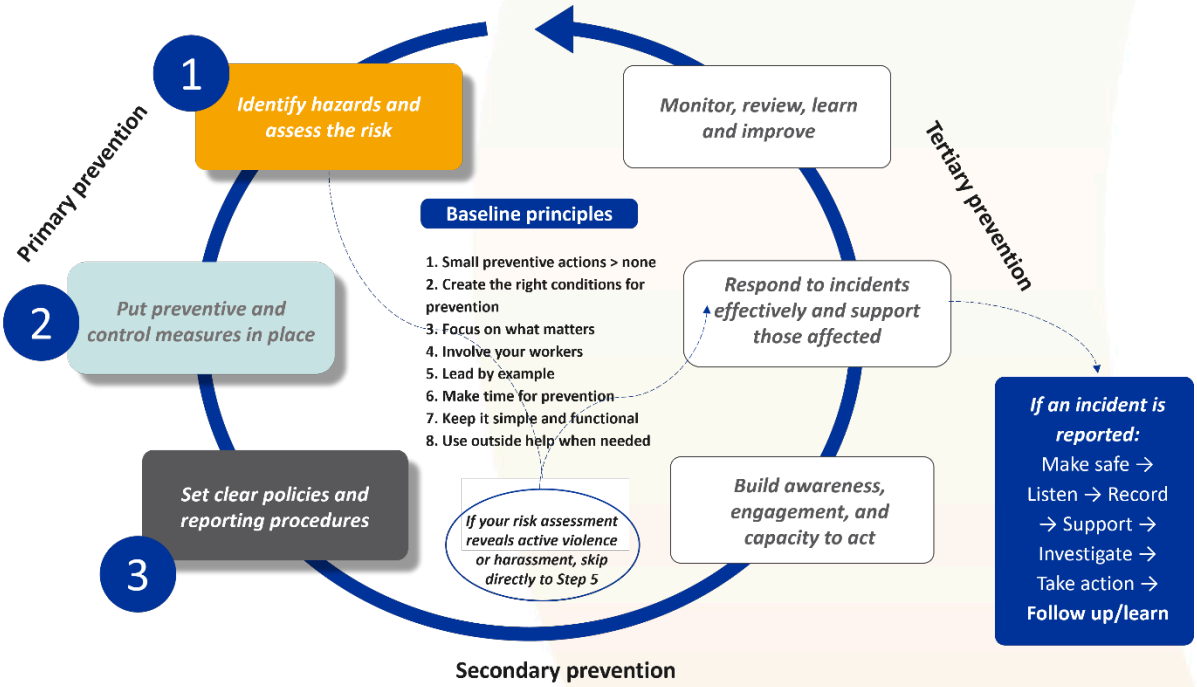
If feasible, rotating tasks can prevent exposure to high-risk situations for prolonged periods. For example, a worker who consistently operates the cash register may be more vulnerable to violence than someone in the stockroom, due to the nature of that role. This is important because exposure to a higher risk of violence and harassment can itself be a source of stress. Giving workers the chance to recover from demanding situations allows them to build up energy and become more resilient over time. It can also help to prevent cliques forming in worker groups, lowering the risk of bullying or exclusion.

Good practice example 2

A small hospitality business changes workforce arrangements and introduces clear guidelines to identify the reasons why customers are angry and how to address it

A 15-person café experiences frequent customer frustration during their peak hours of breakfast and lunch. Workers report being blamed for long waiting times to be seated and to order. The employer reviews peak-time workforce arrangements and finds that, due to schedule availability, newer team members are often being paired together. This results in delays, as the new workers are less familiar with the work systems and thus are less efficient. To remedy this, the employer implements a buddy system pairing experienced workers with new team members during the busiest periods, and adjusts shifts to reduce overload so that no one worker is working multiple busy shifts in a row. To clearly communicate with customers, the employer implements signage to explain ordering procedures and display up-to-date waiting times. Together, the manager and team members agree on simple de-escalation phrases, such as: '*I realise this is really frustrating for you*'; '*I understand how you're feeling*'; and '*Here's how I can best assist you given the circumstances*.'

Step 3 — Set a clear policy and reporting procedures



Aim

Once you have assessed the risks and implemented preventive and control measures, the next step is to prepare you and your workers to effectively respond in a variety of scenarios. This includes recognising and addressing workplace incivility before it escalates, knowing how to respond appropriately to violence or harassment and supporting those affected (which will be further discussed in **STEP 5**).

This step discusses how to build an effective policy. Essentially, this is a document that explains your organisation's stance on violence and harassment and the procedures you use to effectively respond to such behaviour.

It is important that your policy applies to everyone connected to your organisation: managers, workers, clients and other key parties. Make sure your policy aligns with local laws – you can seek advice from legal experts, sector organisations or occupational safety and health representatives when crafting it. To encourage worker commitment and participation, be sure to consult your workers as well. There are many online **RESOURCES** and templates available, but the most important thing to remember is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. An effective policy is one which you and your workers agree to uphold, and which addresses your specific work context.

Starting points

➔ CREATE A SIMPLE POLICY OR CODE OF CONDUCT

A policy should contain the following components:

- **A statement of commitment** from the business owner or manager, showing that you take the prevention of violence and harassment seriously, helps workers build engagement among themselves. Set out a 'zero-tolerance' approach. Be clear that violence and harassment are not accepted and that every incident will be followed through. A 'zero-tolerance' policy around violence and harassment means taking people's words seriously, but also undertaking a fair investigation and making a proportionate response to the level of harm done. False accusations

or exaggerated claims fracture trust among teams, and can contribute to the bullying or ostracism of a worker.

- **Definitions and examples** of unacceptable conduct (see **SECTIONS 1.1** and **1.4**). This should include behaviour by workers, as well as customers or clients, if relevant.
- **Clear information** on how workers can raise a complaint and how that complaint will be investigated. Explain how confidentiality will be protected as far as possible and make clear that retaliation against a worker for raising a concern will not be tolerated. For example, stress that a worker speaking up will have no impact on their role or hours.
- **Clear steps** explaining how the policy will be communicated (see **STEP 4**), implemented (see **STEP 5**), reviewed and monitored (see **STEP 6**). Make procedures easy to understand and reference for workers – for example, following a 'what to do' or step-by-step format.

➔ DEFINE ROLES AND POINTS OF CONTACT

Designate a dedicated person to lead your organisation's efforts in preventing and tackling violence and harassment. In small businesses, this might be the business owner or manager. Where possible, also appoint a **worker confidant**, who is a trusted person that workers can approach for confidential advice. This should not be someone in a position of formal authority, as power plays a significant role in the willingness and ability of workers to report harassment (see **SECTIONS 1.2** and **1.3**). Work collaboratively with this worker confidant to craft policies and response mechanisms and clearly define all roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, consider that taking on this role can add additional stress for the selected worker, and contribute to burnout. It is thus your responsibility as a business owner or manager to support the worker confidant. This can be done by offering or directing them towards training in relevant response skills.

➔ MAKE IT EASY AND SAFE TO REPORT CONCERNS

Even where complaints procedures do exist, they are not always used as intended, often due to low worker trust. Good reporting procedures have multiple easily accessible channels, such as both a digital and physical mailbox, promise credible follow-ups with clear timelines and maintain confidentiality as far as possible. You can create an incident log to keep track of reports (more information is provided in **STEP 5**) and store this in a secure and private location.

Longer-term actions

➔ ADD MORE DETAILS TO YOUR POLICY OVER TIME

In addition to these core components, other elements can be included in your policy to strengthen it:

- A short explanation of the impact and consequences violence and harassment can have on individual and team well-being in the workplace. For examples, see **SECTION 1.6**.
- A summary of the legal rights and responsibilities of workers and employers in preventing violence and harassment in the workplace. For example, local legislation or relevant international standards, such as ILO Convention 190.[6]
- Information on the preventive measures already in place. By explaining the major risks identified in **STEP 1** and the responses in **STEP 2**, workers will be better equipped in supporting preventive action.

➔ MAKE RESPONSIBILITIES CLEAR ACROSS THE TEAM

Building on your actions taken with the worker confidant, make sure that the rest of your workers also understand their roles and responsibilities in preventing or responding to violence or harassment. This is particularly important when responding to third-party violence. For example, workers who deal directly with customers or members of the public should know who they can reach out to for immediate support. This will ensure that responses can happen faster thanks to clearly established lines of communication.

[6] https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190

➔ ADD AN INFORMAL RESOLUTION OPTION ALONGSIDE FORMAL ROUTES

Depending on the concern, it may be best resolved informally rather than through formal complaint procedures. Informal resolution means a structured but low-level way of addressing a concern without starting a formal procedure. This is an early-stage option that is not appropriate for serious or repeated violence or harassment, but rather for early tensions, isolated incidents or behaviour that could stop quickly once addressed. Informal resolution should always be voluntary for the affected worker, and you together can decide what the best response route is. This could include, for example, a private conversation with the person involved, a facilitated conversation involving the manager or worker confidant or an agreement about future conduct.

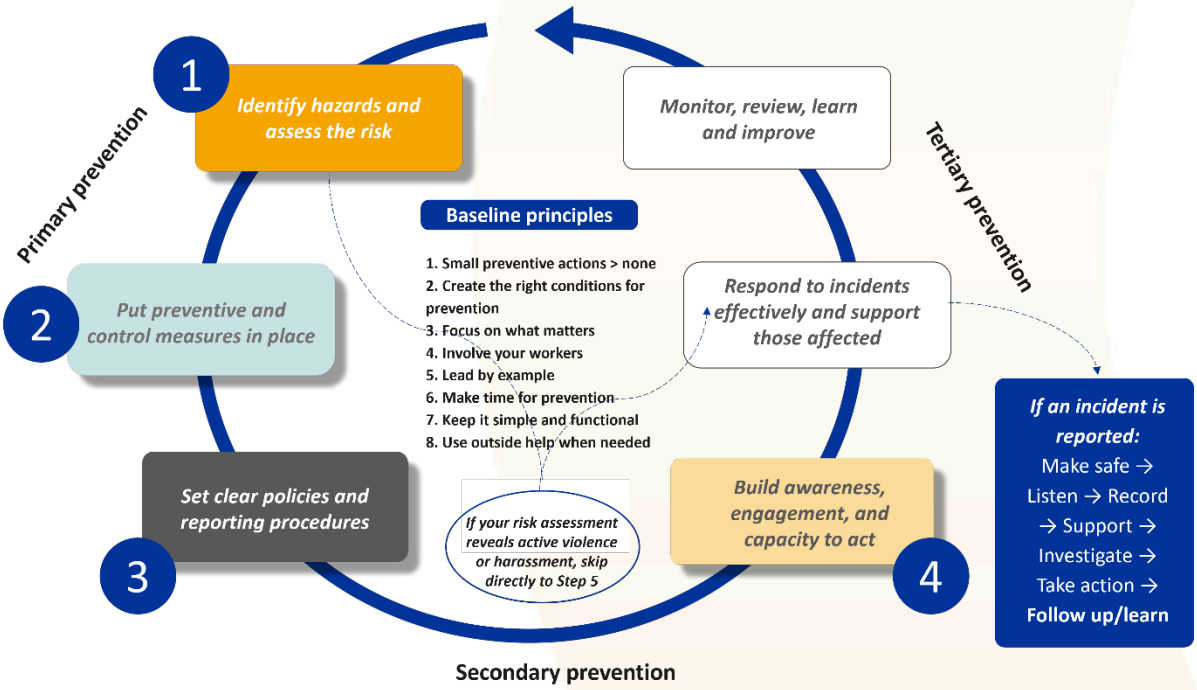
Informal resolution routes are especially helpful for small businesses as they are flexible and less administratively burdensome, but they still need structure. Your policy can help provide this by defining who can support the conversation, how agreements will be followed up and when the matter should be handled via a formal route, for example if violence or harassment is repeated or escalating.

Good practice example 3

A micro manufacturing firm creates a one-page policy and a clear reporting procedure with confidentiality safeguards

A small metal workshop with eight workers has no formal HR function. Most communication is informal and issues are usually sorted out directly between workers when they arise. After an argument escalates into shouting, the employer realises that, while they assumed that all workers understood that bullying was not acceptable, nothing was written down or formally decided on how to report concerns safely. As part of developing a policy, the employer conducts a toolbox talk with workers. They ask practical questions to gain an understanding of expected behaviours, who workers think they should report to and any perceived barriers. Based on this discussion, the firm produces a one-page policy setting out clear behavioural standards and a reporting procedure. The employer is named as the primary contact, and a trusted senior worker is chosen as a worker confidant. Confidentiality safeguards are set down in writing, stating that both the person making the report and the person whose behaviour has been reported will be treated fairly and all information will be digitally secured. The policy is printed, discussed with workers and included in induction materials for any new workers.

Step 4 — Build awareness, engagement and capacity to act



Aim

At this stage, workers will have already been involved in developing the policy and should therefore be familiar with its content. However, written commitments need to be translated into practice. This step focuses on how to communicate the policy effectively, while strengthening awareness, engagement and the capacity to respond in everyday situations.

Before engaging in training or awareness-raising activities, it is important to understand workers' views and their awareness of violence and harassment, including existing response procedures. This can be assessed through open discussions or short surveys, providing a clearer basis for building engagement in a targeted way. Taking this step helps avoid generic approaches and supports the development of preventive or control measures that reflect the specific context of the workplace.

Training does not need to take the form of extensive full-day sessions. It can instead be approached through shorter, more focused meetings to communicate the policy and response procedures. For example, you can conduct **toolbox talks**, which are short, informal and focused safety meetings held at the start of a shift or specific task. These talks typically focus on a single topic, and often share anonymous insights from previous incidents or near misses. Toolbox talks can help make the issue more concrete and relevant, showing how it arises in practice. While **STEP 5** provides more detailed guidance on response tools for business owners and managers, training should also include basic response skills for workers.

Starting points

➔ MAKE TRAINING ACTIVE AND SKILL-BASED

Active training, such as hands-on activities, discussions and group exercises, is the most impactful form of training, as it builds knowledge and skills in parallel. Consider taking an hour to host a small practical seminar, incorporating mock situations and role-plays to develop communication and conflict management skills with your workers. There are many ready-to-use solutions online, such as the

International Labour Organisation's training course for enterprises.[7] In practice, these solutions should be adapted to your own context by keeping training concise, accessible and interactive.

An example of a session you could provide on bystander intervention is included below:

Bystander intervention training example

Overview and background

As described in **SECTION 1.6**, persons who have experienced violence or harassment are not the only ones who may be affected. **Bystanders**, or individuals who observe violence or harassment in the workplace firsthand, can suffer too. This can include a range of persons, including co-workers, managers or supervisors, trade union representatives and other individuals to whom incidents are reported. Co-workers who are informed of incidents through workplace channels can also become bystanders.

Because nearly anyone can be a bystander, it is important to prepare your workers for how to react when violence or harassment occurs. Mobilising bystanders to prevent and respond to violence is particularly effective because it can contribute to broader cultural change. The responsibility of response is shared collectively and not just placed on the business owner or manager. This means that everybody plays a role in the prevention of violence and harassment.

The role of a business owner or manager in supporting bystanders is twofold. First, policies and procedures should include protection against reprisal or retaliation for bystanders, not just those experiencing violence or harassment. Bystanders should feel comfortable intervening without fear that their safety or status at work will be threatened. Second, support measures for bystanders should also be considered, as they too can also experience psychological or physical harm. Support measures could include providing access to helplines or external resources, or following up yourself after an incident.

Session outline

Learning objectives:

By the end of a session of bystander intervention training, participants should be able to:

- Spot early signs that something is wrong.
- Use simple ways to step in safely.
- Support someone after an incident.
- Know when to get help from a manager or external support.

Outline:

- **5 minutes**: Warmup by introducing the topic and setting some ground rules. Explain that the session is about what workers can do as bystanders to respond to violence or harassment if they see it happening. The goal is to develop simple, helpful and safe ways of responding.
- **15 minutes:** Introduce the 5Ds of bystander intervention. The 5Ds are a research-backed framework that offers bystanders safe solutions to intervene in situations without escalating them or causing further harm. Introduce these five options to your workers, as well as some example phrases:
    - **Direct** – this is the most straightforward option. If the situation is physically safe for both the bystander and affected person and seems unlikely to escalate, and if your worker is comfortable, they can respond directly to harassment by addressing the inappropriate behaviour. The key to direct intervention is to keep it short, succinct and not engage with

[7] https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/%282024%29%20VH%20training%20manual%20for%20enterprises-Final%20%281%29.pdf

further debate or dialogue. Bystanders can also use 'I' statements to turn the focus from the affected person.

Examples:

- *'I don't like those kinds of jokes and I don't find them funny. Can you please stop?'*
- *'That kind of behaviour is not acceptable here.'*
- *'They've asked you to leave them alone. Please respect that.'*
- *'I know you might not want to offend anyone, but that kind of language is really hurtful.'*

- **Distract** – interrupt the situation without calling attention to the problem directly. if it is safe to do so, bystanders can give the affected person an opportunity to leave the situation or can join the conversation and change the subject. Where possible, use ordinary workplace interactions and give the person engaging in the behaviour an easy way out.

  Examples:

  - '*Hey, can you help me in the back?'*
  - *'I need you at the register.'*
  - '*Your order is ready.*' (to a customer)

- **Delegate** – get help from someone else. This can be the business owner or manager, colleague, worker confidant or external support such as security or emergency services.

  Examples:

  - *'Hey, I think the man in the red hat is making Anna uncomfortable. Can you go over there and offer to take his order while I check in with her?'*
  - *'I need backup, we have an unsafe situation. Do you know where the worker confidant is?'*

- **Delay** – if it is not possible to respond in the moment, it will still be possible to respond and support the person affected after the incident. This is discussed further in Steps 5 and 6.

  Examples:

  - *'Hey, I saw what happened over there. Are you OK?'*
  - *'Would you like me to sit with you/accompany you somewhere?'*

- **Document** – this D should only be done if other responses are already underway, for example with another bystander already intervening. Documentation can be either recording or taking notes on an incident of violence or harassment, which is further discussed in Step 5. You should also go over your internal reporting procedures, as well as who to contact externally, if necessary, such as occupational safety and health services, sector bodies or other authorities. For more details, see Step 3.

It is important to clarify that not every action is appropriate for every situation. For example, if an act of physical violence is occurring, distraction or direct intervention may not be safe for the bystander to engage in.

- **20 minutes:** Group brainstorm – choose the best action(s). Describe several short, realistic scenarios. You can use previous experiences or near misses as examples or draw from the risks you have identified as being the highest priority.

  For each scenario, ask your workers:

  - *'What is the concern?'*
  - *'As a bystander, which action (of the 5Ds) would you choose first?'*
  - *'What exact words or behaviours would you use?'*

Example scenarios:

- A regular customer keeps flirting with a cashier, who looks uncomfortable.
  - **Distract** – ask the cashier for help finding something in the stockroom and offer to serve the customer.
    'I can serve this gentleman here, could you go in the back to see if we have any more milk? I can't seem to find it.'
- A worker is being pressured to accept a ride home from a colleague at the end of a night shift, after they have already said no.
  - **Direct –** '*They already said no. Please respect their wishes*.'
  - **Delay** (to the affected person) – '*Are you feeling OK? Would you like me to walk with you to the bus stop?'*
- Sexually explicit photos are sent to a colleague without consent.
  - **Delegate** (to the manager or worker confidant) – '*Hey, my colleague told me they received this message from John yesterday and it made them uncomfortable. What can they do?'*

NB: If you have a large enough group and workers are comfortable role-playing, you can also split them up into pairs or small groups and ask them to act out the scenario. This allows workers to put their knowledge into practice in a safe and supportive setting.

- **10 minutes:** Finish by reminding workers that, as bystanders, their safety matters too. They should ask themselves before intervening: 'Is it safe for me to step in? Who else can I call if not?' Remind workers how and where they can report an incident or seek support. For example, from you as the business owner or manager, the worker confidant, occupational safety and health services, HR or external authorities such as police.

➔ STACK TRAINING ON TOP OF YOUR STEP 2 CONTROLS

Training works best when it supports the other preventive or control measures already in place. It is usually less effective on its own if the underlying causes of violence and harassment have not been addressed first. Think about the controls you introduced in **STEP 2,** such as improving the working environment or changing working practices. Then consider how training can help workers put those measures into practice. For example, if you introduce a buddy system, you can strengthen it by training workers in how to communicate clearly and respond calmly in difficult situations.

➔ MAKE SURE THAT ALL GET THE SAME INFORMATION

It is important that your organisation's approach, including your policy, is consistently communicated to all relevant persons. This includes workers, clients and relevant business partners. Your policy should also be understood by everyone, including individuals with disabilities and those from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, such as migrant workers. To keep the message consistent, share relevant information through different channels. This could include posters, as well as your own intranet and team meetings.

Longer-term action

➔ REPEAT KEY MESSAGES THROUGH SHORT REFRESHERS

For a message to truly stick, workers may need to hear it a few times. Repeat key messages through short refreshers in written form, such as posters displayed in the workplace, and clear verbal communication. This demonstrates your commitment and helps workers maintain their knowledge and skills.

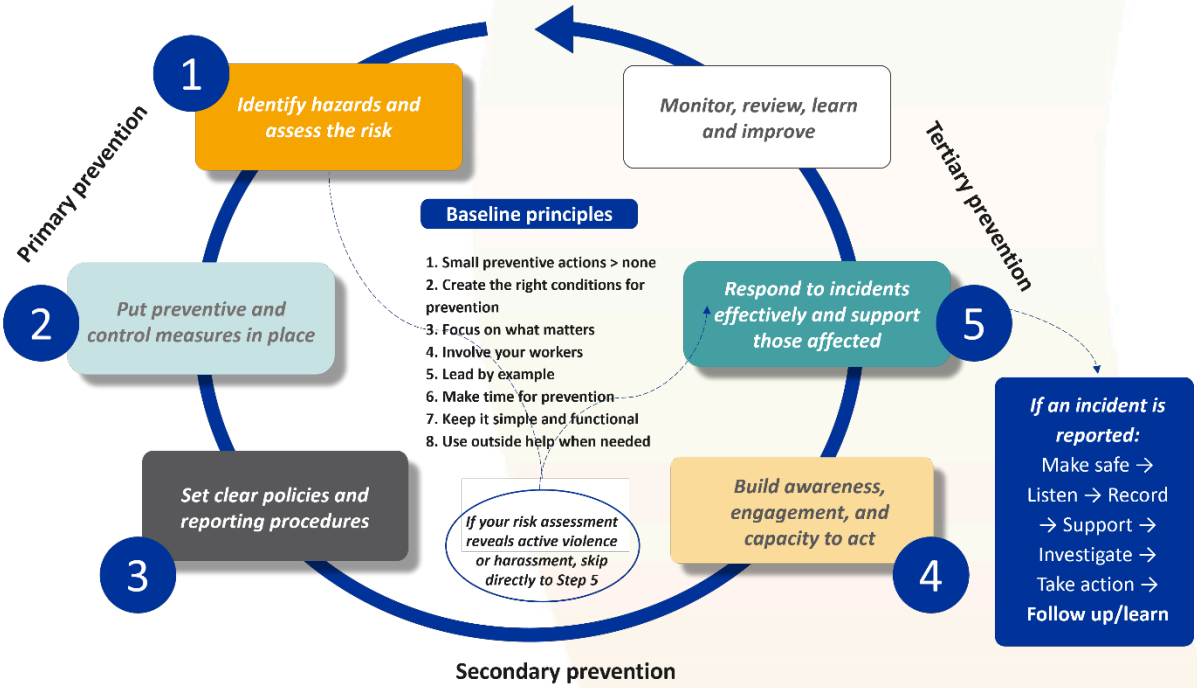
Good practice example 4

A small hospitality team practices responding to negative customer behaviour and internal communication challenges

A 10-person café/bar employs a mix of permanent and seasonal workers, with additional seasonal workers employed in the summer to meet increased demand. There has recently been increasing tension during busy shifts, including concerns about the interactions between seasonal workers, customers and other members of the team. Several messages posted in the group chat after shifts have included comments with a sarcastic or dismissive tone.

There is an existing handbook on best practices, but it has not been updated or recently referenced. To remedy this, the employer sets up a meeting an hour before an off-peak shift to hold a toolbox talk about communication practices. They start by explaining why the discussion matters, as customer pressure and unclear communication norms can escalate into bullying if left unaddressed. They then facilitate a discussion wherein workers agree on standard phrases to use when customers become impatient or rude, so that individuals do not have to improvise under stress and communication is standard between permanent and seasonal workers. The team also practices giving feedback to one another in a more respectful, kinder manner through role-plays. The employer concludes the session with a reminder of the rules for digital communication – to not send messages after a certain time of night and to redirect feedback to face-to-face communication. A short summary of the policy as well as the sample phrases are posted in the break room as a refresher.

Step 5 — Respond to incidents effectively and support those affected



Aim

Even with effective preventive measures in place, incidents of violence and harassment may still occur. This step explains how to respond to an incident, how to support those affected and how to address the behaviour in a fair and proportionate way.

A number of key principles should guide the response at every stage of the process. These include acting promptly and calmly, prioritising safety, ensuring fairness, protecting confidentiality as far as possible and preventing retaliation.

In a small business, the way you respond to an incident can have an immediate impact. A slow, emotional or unclear response can increase harm, damage trust or foster tension in the team. A calm, prompt and fair response can help protect workers, contain the situation and show that violence and harassment are taken seriously.

The first priority is always safety. Make sure the person affected is safe, stop the behaviour where possible and take steps to prevent the situation from escalating. After that, focus on fairness: listen carefully, gather the facts and avoid making assumptions. Throughout the process, protect confidentiality as far as possible and make clear that retaliation or exclusion as a result of the complaint will not be tolerated.

Not every incident requires a formal process, as discussed in **STEP 3**. However, every incident should be handled consistently. The action points below explain the process in more detail, but it can be summarised as follows:

- Take immediate action.
- Take the incident seriously – listen and reassure the person affected by violence or harassment.
- Record what has been reported and any action taken.
- Provide support and temporary protection.
- Check the facts and investigate proportionally.
- Decide what action is needed and address any inappropriate behaviour.

- Follow up and take steps to prevent retaliation.
- Learn and improve (see **STEP 6**).

Importantly, this is not a linear sequence – some of these steps can and should occur in parallel as a thorough response to violence and harassment is multifaceted.

Starting points

➔ TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION

If a worker is in danger or feels unsafe, or if the situation is escalating, deal with this first. Stop the behaviour and, if it is safe to do so (the bystander training described in **STEP 4** offers some examples), separate the persons involved if needed and arrange for a safe way for the affected worker to leave the situation. Where the incident involves members of the public, such as customers or patients, you may need to refuse service, ask the person to leave or call for assistance, depending on the level of risk.

➔ LISTEN AND EXPLAIN THE NEXT STEPS

When a worker reports an incident, how you respond is important. Listen without interrupting, thank them for telling you and avoid questions that sound like blame, such as 'Why didn't you just…?'. Instead, ask simple factual questions: what happened, when it happened and who was involved. If it is the person that has experienced the violence or harassment making the report, you can also ask what they need most now and how they can be best supported.

Explain what will happen next in clear terms. Explain who will handle the matter, what information may need to be gathered, when and how the person who made the report will be kept updated and what support is available. Be transparent about the limits of confidentiality. Some details may need to be shared in order to investigate the matter fairly, prevent further harm or meet legal obligations. In any case, information should be shared only on a need-to-know basis.

➔ RECORD WHAT HAPPENED

Whenever an incident is reported to you, make a clear record as soon as possible. This includes reports of bullying, harassment, threats or intimidation. In a small business, information about an incident can quickly circulate through informal conversations. Making a written record as soon as possible helps ensure that decisions are based on accurate information rather than memory or hearsay.

To do this, use an **incident log** to record the relevant details, including the date, time and location of the incident, who was involved, what was said or done and any witnesses. Keep the record factual and avoid labels such as 'bully' or 'liar'. You can record how the person affected describes the impact, for example, 'The worker said that they felt threatened', without drawing conclusions about the outcome. Store the record securely and only share it with those who need access in order to act. Good record-keeping helps you identify patterns, provides a clear account of actions taken and reduces the risk of disputes about what was said or done.

➔ SUPPORT THE PERSON AFFECTED

Support should begin as soon as a concern is raised and should not wait until any investigation has concluded. The person affected may need practical, emotional, legal or medical support, regardless of the outcome of the investigation. In a small business, the support available may be more limited than in a larger organisation, but there is often more flexibility than employers initially assume. The most important principle is to ask the person affected what would help them feel safe and able to continue working, rather than making assumptions about their needs.

Depending on the circumstances, several types of support may be relevant:

- **Protective measures**: These are practical measures designed to prevent further harm, either on a temporary basis while the matter is being addressed or as longer-term arrangements following its resolution. They may include adjusting shifts or workstations, revising reporting procedures, avoiding lone working, limiting one-to-one contact or setting clear rules about contact. Protective measures may also be needed in digital environments, such as adjusting account permissions or restricting contact through messaging platforms, email or social media.

Organisational protections may also include allowing the person affected time off to access medical, psychological or other support services.

- **Psychological and emotional support:** A calm, respectful response is an important first step in providing psychological and emotional support. Listen without blaming, thank the person for speaking up, reassure them that the concern will be taken seriously and explain what will happen next. Avoid pressuring the person to provide more detail than they are ready to share. If the organisation has a designated worker confidant or similar trusted contact, make them available as an additional point of support throughout the process. Where needed, connect the person affected with appropriate professional or external support. Depending on the circumstances, this may be a counsellor, occupational health service, employee assistance programme, victim support organisation (including services specialising in sexual or domestic violence), a trade union representative, a helpline or another trusted external adviser.
- **Information on rights and sources of legal support:** The person affected may need clear information about their rights, options and the steps that may follow. Explain the internal reporting procedures, how confidentiality will be handled, who will be involved and how decisions will be made. Refer to the policy and reporting procedures from **STEP 3**. Where the behaviour may involve discrimination, sexual harassment, threats, stalking, assault or another criminal offence, refer the person affected to relevant external bodies, such as a labour inspectorate, equality body, legal advice service, victim support service or the police. The decision to pursue a particular route should normally rest with the person affected, unless there is an immediate safety risk or the employer has a legal obligation to act.
- **Medical care:** Depending on the nature of the incident, the person affected may require first aid, emergency medical assistance or support from an occupational health service. This may be needed not only in cases involving physical injury, but also where the incident has affected the person's mental health. As discussed in **SECTION 1.6**, violence and harassment can lead to problems with sleep and concentration, increase anxiety and affect a person's ability to work. Medical or professional support may therefore be appropriate even where no physical harm has occurred.

Support should be practical, proportionate and reviewed over time. What helps immediately after the incident may not be enough later on. Check whether the support is appropriate, whether the person affected feels safe and whether any further adjustments are needed.

➔ INVESTIGATE PROPORTIONATELY

Decide who will handle the matter and ensure they can act impartially. In a small business, consider whether an external adviser may be needed to provide additional independence or neutrality.

The level of investigation should be proportionate to the severity of the incident. For a less serious, isolated incident, such as a hurtful comment or verbal altercation, the fact-finding process used to create the incident log may be sufficient. However, for serious or repeated incidents, or where accounts differ, a more structured process may be needed. In these cases, review any documents related to the incident and develop a list of interview questions. Speak to the people directly involved, including the person affected, the person whose behaviour has been reported, as well as any witnesses.

During interviews, use a private setting and speak to people individually. Explain the purpose of the interview, how the information will be used, who will have access to it and how confidentiality will be handled. Encourage interviewees to provide factual information and make it clear that it is acceptable to say when they are unsure about a detail or cannot remember something clearly.

➔ RESPOND TO THE FINDINGS

Once the facts have been established, decide what action is needed and how the behaviour should be addressed. The response should match the severity of the behaviour, including its impact, whether it was repeated, whether there was a power imbalance and whether similar issues have happened before.

For a first, less serious incident, it may be appropriate to explain why the behaviour was unacceptable, set clear expectations for future conduct and agree how the situation will be followed up. Coaching or closer supervision may also be appropriate where this could help the person understand the impact of their behaviour. Where behaviour is repeated, serious or clearly abusive, involving bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination, threats, stalking or physical aggression, a firmer response is needed, and informal resolution will not be sufficient.

Consider whether the incident should or must be reported to the appropriate external authorities, particularly where the behaviour may constitute a criminal offence such as assault, stalking or coercive behaviour. Depending on the jurisdiction, the incident may legally require reporting. Situations may arise where the employer has a legal obligation to report an incident, even when this is not the preference of the person affected. If this occurs, it is important to clearly explain why the incident must be reported, what information will be shared and to whom and stress that confidentiality will be maintained to the highest extent possible within legal obligations.

Before taking serious formal disciplinary action, particularly suspension or dismissal, seek advice from an employer organisation or legal adviser. Employment law varies between countries, and errors can have significant consequences.

Whatever action is taken, continue the record-keeping process started when the concern was first raised.

Longer-term actions

➔ USE A STRUCTURED INVESTIGATION CHECKLIST

A simple checklist can help ensure a consistent approach when responding to violence or harassment in the workplace. Ideally, this should be developed in advance as part of your prevention and response arrangements. However, it can also be refined over time based on experience from previous incidents.

The checklist should cover key elements such as who will handle the matter, what immediate actions should be taken, who needs to be consulted, how notes and records will be stored, how any digital evidence such as emails or messages will be handled and how decisions and outcomes will be communicated.

A consistent checklist helps ensure that incidents are handled fairly and transparently, while reducing the risk of important steps being overlooked, particularly in situations requiring a rapid response.

➔ MAINTAIN A LIST OF USEFUL EXTERNAL CONTACTS

Having a readily available list of external contacts can make it easier to respond quickly and appropriately when an incident occurs. Depending on the nature of the incident, you may may need to access specialist advice, support services or external authorities at short notice.

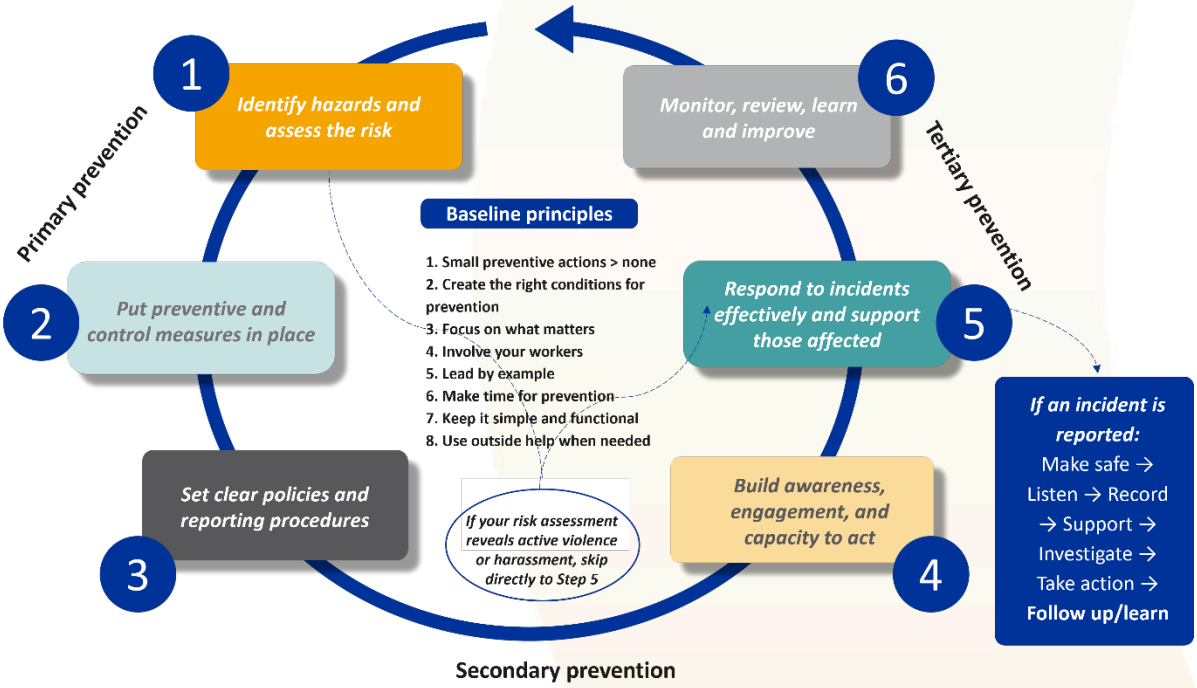
The list could include occupational safety and health services, labour inspectorates, employer organisations, trade unions or worker representatives, counselling services, equality bodies, victim support services, domestic abuse services, sexual violence support services, emergency services and legal advice providers.

Good practice example 5

A small logistics firm handles a complaint fairly and supports the affected worker by changing work patterns

An 18-person logistics firm receives a complaint from one worker who says they have been shouted at and humiliated during loading tasks. The worker also shows the employer several aggressive late-night messages from a work group chat. The employer meets with the worker privately, thanks them for raising the concern, checks whether they feel safe and explains what will happen next. As an immediate protective measure, the employer changes shift pairings so that the affected worker does not have to work alone with the person whose behaviour has been reported. The worker is put in contact with the firm's worker confidant, who was appointed during violence and harassment prevention training earlier that year. Because the complaint involves repeated behaviour and digital messages, the employer asks an external adviser to help keep the process fair. The employer and the adviser speak separately with the worker who raised the concern, the person whose behaviour was reported and two witnesses. Screenshots of the messages are saved, and all notes are stored securely in a locked filing cabinet. The investigation finds that that the organisation's behaviour standards were breached. The employer issues a formal warning, sets clear behaviour requirements and arranges coaching on respectful communication. The firm also changes peak-time planning so that workers are not left unsupported during loading and introduces clearer rules for work group chats. At the next team meeting, the employer gives a general reminder about respectful behaviour, reporting procedures and the organisation's commitment to protecting workers who raise concerns, without revealing the identities of those involved in the incident.

Step 6 — Monitor, review, learn and improve



Aim

The purpose of this step is to make sure that your arrangements for preventing and responding to violence or harassment continue to work over time, rather than being something you address once and then set aside. In small businesses, circumstances can change quickly: workers may take on several roles, priorities may shift and informal practices may gradually replace agreed procedures. For this reason, it is useful to establish a simple habit of reviewing what is working and what is not. This does not need to be a complex process. It should simply ensure that expectations are still clear, workers still know how to raise concerns, reporting procedures are still trusted and accessible and responses continue to be handled in a fair and consistent way.

It also involves learning from what happens, without turning each review into a search for blame. Complaints, concerns and near misses can help identify situations where the risks are higher, for example during busy periods, in lone working situations, in customer-facing roles, where digital communication boundaries are unclear, where supervision is inadequate or where new workers have not been properly inducted. Taking time to reflect on what happened, what made the situation worse and what helped resolve it can help you make practical improvements before similar issues happen again.

Over time, this can also build trust. When workers see that speaking up leads to real changes, even small ones, they are more likely to raise concerns early. This helps create a workplace where respectful behaviour becomes part of everyday practice, while ensuring that your approach can adapt as the organisation, workforce and customer relationships evolve.

Starting points

→ AGREE REVIEW RESPONSIBILITIES

It is helpful to decide in advance who will be responsible for reviewing incidents after they have been addressed and how this review will take place. This helps ensure that learning does not depend on who happens to remember the incident, has time available or considers the issue urgent enough to revisit.

This does not need to involve a formal committee or create unnecessary paperwork. In a small business, it might simply mean checking in regularly with one or two persons who have responsibilities linked to people management, safety and health or worker well-being. However, it is important to consider who is involved in the review. In small teams, personal relationships and loyalties can unconsciously influence judgement and decision-making. Where possible, involve someone who is sufficiently removed from the situation to provide an independent perspective. Consider whether your own relationship with anyone involved could affect your assessment of the situation.

➔ STRUCTURE YOUR REVIEW EFFECTIVELY

Once an incident has been handled, take time to reflect on what happened and what could reduce the likelihood of a similar incident occurring again.

Protect confidentiality as far as possible and focus on the situation rather than on assigning blame. Consider the situation from various angles by asking: who, what, where, when, why and how? Follow the steps of this guide for structure:

- Assess what contributed to the problem (the underlying risks), including what triggered or escalated it (**STEP 1**).
- Consider how well the reporting and response procedures worked: whether the person affected knew how to raise their concern and whether the response was consistent with the policy and procedures in place (**STEPS 3, 4 and 5**)
- Consider whether the support and protective measures put in place were effective and appropriate over time (**STEP 5**).

Findings from this review should be incorporated back into the list of risks identified in **STEP 1**.

➔ RECORD LESSONS LEARNED

Write down the main lessons or key takeaways of the review in a short 'lessons learned' note. This can form part of the incident log mentioned in **STEP 5** or be kept as a separate confidential file. Briefly document what happened in general terms and what was learned.

Then agree on a few action points: identify who is responsible for each action and a set a realistic timeframe for completing it. Keep the actions realistic, practical and visible. For example, this could mean updating reporting procedures, clarifying how workers should respond to abusive customers, adjusting a task or shift pattern that regularly creates tension, improving supervision at certain times or revising rules for group chats and digital messaging.

Writing these points down helps avoid repeating the same discussion every time a concern arises. It also makes follow-up easier, as those responsible can check whether agreed actions were actually completed within the agreed timeframe.

➔ TRACK A FEW ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS

Choose a small number of indicators that help you see whether the organisation's prevention and response approach is working as intended. Focus on how the approach is functioning, not only whether risks exist. In this way, this differs from **STEP 1** (risk assessment) but can draw from the findings of this step. For example, if **STEP 1** identifies third-party aggression as a risk, **STEP 6** would check whether workers know the reporting procedures and feel safe to speak up, whether incidents involving customers or other members of the public are properly recorded and whether workers feel that appropriate support is available when they need it.

In a small business, even small signs can be useful if they show that the same type of issue is recurring. The aim is not to collect data for its own sake, but to identify trends and use this information to improve how violence and harassment are prevented and addressed.

Longer-term actions

➔ HOLD A SHORT ANNUAL REVIEW

Once a year, review your overall approach to preventing and responding to violence and harassment in the workplace. This can be done through a short discussion with workers, a survey or a review by the business owner or manager and the worker confidant. Useful questions could include:

- Do workers understand what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable?
- Do they know how to report concerns?
- Do they feel confident that concerns will be handled fairly, with confidentiality protected as far as possible?
- Have new risks emerged since the most recent risk assessment?
- What one or two changes would help make the workplace safer and more respectful?

The aim is to identify what is working well, understand what has changed and agree on practical improvements for the year ahead.

➔ TRAIN NEW WORKERS AND REVIEW ARRANGEMENTS WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGE

As discussed in **STEP 4**, make information about respectful behaviour, reporting procedures and the basic steps for responding to concerns part of the induction process for all new workers, including temporary, seasonal, part-time or agency workers, where relevant. Do not assume that workers will simply pick this up informally.

Also, whenever the organisation changes – for example through new tasks, workers, customer groups or ways of working, such as the increased use of digital communication channels – review your arrangements for preventing and responding to violence and harassment in the workplace. Organisational changes can create new risks, unclear roles, communication gaps or uneven understanding of existing procedures. Reviewing your arrangements helps ensure that they remain relevant and effective.

➔ DRAW ON EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Use what already exists rather than trying to create everything yourself. Sector bodies, employer organisations, trade unions or worker representatives, occupational safety and health services, professional advisers and national authorities may all be able to provide templates, practical guidance or examples that are relevant to your organisation. For small businesses in particular, it can be helpful to look at what similar organisations are doing and adapt ideas that are feasible and workable. Outside support can also be useful when you are unsure how to respond to a complex or sensitive situation or want an independent view on whether your current arrangements are effective.

Good practice example 6

A small professional services company keeps its approach effective by learning from an incident and updating everyday routines

A nine-person professional services company has a short policy on respectful behaviour, reporting concerns and digital communication. New workers receive a short induction explaining what behaviour is expected, who they can speak to, what confidentiality means in a small team and what happens after a report is made.

After a concern is raised about repeated late-night messages from a senior colleague, the manager follows the response process set out in the policy. Once the matter has been addressed, the manager writes a short lessons learned note. The review shows that the group chat rules were unclear, junior workers did not know whether they were expected to respond to messages outside working hours and the reporting procedure had not been discussed with workers since induction.

The manager agrees on three key actions: update the digital communication rules, remind all workers that non-urgent messages should not be sent outside of working hours and repeat the reporting procedures at the next team meeting. The issue is discussed in general terms, without naming the people involved.

At the annual review, the employer checks whether the updated rules are working and asks workers whether any other communication practices are creating pressure or discomfort. The company uses this feedback to update its risk assessment and induction materials. Over time, workers see that concerns lead to action, which makes them more willing to speak up early.

3. Conclusions

Violence and harassment in the workplace are not issues that should only be addressed after a serious incident occurs. In small businesses, the best approach is usually a practical one: identify risks early, make clear what is and is not acceptable, make it possible for workers to speak up, respond in a fair and consistent way and keep learning as you go. This is not about creating a complicated system or having a perfect policy on paper. It is about putting a few clear and workable arrangements in place so that workers know what to expect and so that concerns do not get ignored until they become harder to manage.

This guide has shown that effective prevention comes down to getting the fundamentals right. That means being clear about what respectful behaviour looks like, making sure roles and expectations are understood and showing that concerns will be taken seriously. When an incident occurs, the way you respond matters a great deal. Taking the time to listen, writing down the key facts, protecting confidentiality as far as possible and handling the situation fairly can help rebuild trust and reduce the chance of the problem happening again. Just as importantly, each incident can tell you something useful about the risks in your organisation, whether that is workload pressure, lone working, customer interactions, unclear boundaries in digital communication or inadequate day-to-day supervision. Looking back at what contributed to the issue can help you make small but meaningful improvements.

Violence and harassment prevention should not be treated as a standalone concern, separate from the broader management of psychosocial risks. The conditions that make violence and harassment more likely, including excessive workload, inadequate supervision, unclear roles and unresolved conflict, can also contribute to stress, burnout and poor well-being more generally. Addressing these issues as part of everyday work organisation, rather than a specific compliance exercise triggered by a serious incident, is both more effective and more sustainable. Prevention of violence and harassment is not an additional burden on top of running the organisation, but an integral part of responsible management and good business practice.

The step-by-step approach described in this guide is designed to help you take practical action, even if time and resources are limited. You do not need to do everything at once. You can start small: one clear rule, one simple way to report concerns, one short conversation with workers or one basic checklist for responding when a concern is raised. From there, you can build in ways that are appropriate for your organisation. The examples and practices set out in this guide are there to help you adapt the ideas to your own situation. What matters most is not perfection, but steady follow-through and a willingness to keep improving over time.

The most important step is simply the next one. Choose a starting point that feels realistic for your organisation, involve your workers and put one or two concrete actions in place. Then take a little time to see what is working, adjust where needed and build from there. In small businesses, even modest steps can make a real difference when they are clear, consistent and followed through.

4. Tools and resources

For further practical support, EU-OSHA provides free tools and resources that link directly to the approach described in this guide:

- OiRA (Online interactive risk assessment)[8] – free and practical risk assessment tools designed for small businesses.
- Occupational safety and health in micro and small enterprises[9] – tailored guidance for managing occupational safety and health with limited capacity.
- E-guide to managing stress and psychosocial risks[10] - practical guidance, examples and measures you can adapt.
- Psychosocial risks and mental health at work[11] - background information, tools and links to related materials.

Additional resources for third-party violence broken down by sector can be found here[12]. For guidance on preventing violence and harassment in the digital environment, see Safe Work Australia's guide[13].

Finally, for country-specific guidance, EU OSHA's National Focal Points provide specific support, contacts and signposting to the relevant inspectorates. Check the National Focal Points Index[14] to identify the relevant contact for your country.

[8] https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-resources/oira
[9] https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/safety-and-health-micro-and-small-enterprises
[10] https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-resources/e-guides/e-guide-managing-stress-and-psychosocial-risks
[11] https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-mental-health
[12] https://osha.europa.eu/en/legislation/guidelines/multi-sectoral-guidelines-tackle-third-party-violence-and-harassment-related-work
[13] https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/workplace-bullying-and-harassment/employers
[14] https://osha.europa.eu/en/about-eu-osha/national-focal-points/focal-points-index