

# Organisational and social work environment

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The Swedish Work Environment Authority provisions on  
organisational and social work environment, with general  
recommendations on application thereof

## **Translation**

In the event of disagreement concerning the interpretation  
of this text, the printed Swedish version shall have priority.

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### ORGANISATIONAL AND SOCIAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

The Swedish Work Environment Authority provisions on organisational and social work environment, with general recommendations on application thereof

The Swedish Work Authority's Statute Book (AFS in Swedish) publishes the Authority's provisions and general recommendations.

The provisions are binding regulations. The general recommendations have a different legal status than provisions. They are not binding, but contain recommendations on the application of the provisions indicating how someone can or should act in a certain respect. They can, for example, inform you of suitable ways of meeting the requirements, and they demonstrate practical solutions.

Note that references to statutes always relate to the original number of the statute. Later amendments and reprints may exist.

As regards amendments and reprints of National Board of Safety and Health and Work Authority statutes, please see the latest Register of Provisions and General

Utgivare: Anna Middelman

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# Organisational and social work environment

AFS 2015:4

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

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

### Purpose

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

### Scope of application

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

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

### For whom these provisions are intended

**Section 3** The employer is responsible for ensuring that these provisions are followed. The employer has the responsibility for these provisions being followed. Those who hire a workforce are placed on an equal footing with employers.

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

## **Definitions**

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

### **Demands of the job**

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

### **Victimisation**

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

### **Unhealthy workload**

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

**Organisational environment** Terms and conditions for the work that include:

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

**Resources for the job** Aspects of the job that help to:

1. achieve the objectives of the job, or
2. manage the demands of the job

Resources may be: working methods and equipment, skills and staffing, reasonable and clear goals, feedback on work performed, opportunities for control at work, social support from managers and colleagues, and opportunities for recovery.

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

## **Systematic Work Environment Management**

**Section 5** The Swedish Work Authority's provisions on systematic work environment management contain rules concerning work environment policy and knowledge



requirements, and also require the employer to regularly investigate and assess what risks may arise at work. The provisions also include regulations requiring the employer to take corrective measures to manage the risks.

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

## **Knowledge**

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

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

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

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

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

## **Objectives**

**Section 7** Beyond what applies in accordance with section 6 and sections 9–14 in these provisions, the employer shall have

objectives for the organisational and social work environment. The objectives shall be aimed at promoting health and increasing the organisation's ability to counteract ill health.

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

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

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

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

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

## **Workload**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Working hours**

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

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

1. shift work;
2. night work;
3. split shifts;
4. extensive overtime work;
5. long shifts; and
6. extensive opportunities to work at different times and places, with expectations of being constantly reachable. The employer should particularly ensure that employees have the opportunity to rest and recover. The employer should also keep in mind that scheduling of working hours affects the risk of accidents.

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

## Victimisation

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

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

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

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

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

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

The employer shall make the procedures known to all employees.

**General recommendations:** Victimisation is usually reported to a manager when the person affected has not successfully resolved the situation. If the employee cannot turn to their immediate manager, they can turn to a manager higher up the management chain. Employees may also contact the health and safety representative.

Quick intervention may be necessary to assess the situation and prevent it from deteriorating, as well as to ensure that point 3 is addressed. The employer can assign the task of providing support and help to occupational health services or another specialist in the field.

The Work Environment Authority's provisions on systematic work environment management state that if an employee suffers from workrelated ill health or has an accident at work, and if a serious incident occurs at work,

the employer should investigate the reasons in an effort to prevent ill health or accidents moving forward.

An inadequate investigation of victimisation may be harmful to both the work environment and employee health. The situation should therefore be investigated by someone who has adequate expertise, is able to act impartially, and is trusted by the involved parties.

The purpose of work environment legislation is to prevent ill health and accidents, but it does not regulate compensation or guilt issues.

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

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

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WORK  
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