



# Healthy Work: Managing Stress in the Workplace

Health and safety is good business

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## INTRODUCTION

The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 and the amendments made to it in 2002 are designed to make New Zealand's workplaces as healthy and safe as possible.

Healthy and safe workplaces are a measure of successful employment relationships that exhibit mutual trust and confidence, and promote sustainable and productive relationships. Creating a healthy and safe workplace requires employers and employees to work together systematically to identify hazards and manage them. It also requires a workplace with ongoing and effective communications between the employer and employees.

A part of creating a healthy and safe workplace is managing stress in the workplace. Stress arising from workplace factors can result from unmanaged hazards that have the potential to cause both harm and poor business outcomes.

The Health and Safety in Employment Act is promoted and enforced by the Occupational Safety and Health Service (OSH) of the Department of Labour, but other organisations can be approved to undertake enforcement in specialist areas. Currently the Maritime Safety Authority (MSA) is approved to promote and enforce the Act at sea.

This booklet identifies the approach that OSH, the MSA and other designated agencies will take when considering stress in the workplace.

Some employers and employees will be approaching the issue of stress in the workplace for the first time. Others will find that this booklet reflects the good practice they already follow in their workplace.

Working systematically to identify workplace hazards means you should not wait until an employee has a physical or mental health problem before taking steps to deal with stressors in the workplace.

The concept of hazard identification and management also means that there is only a requirement to manage work stressors or the individual's stressed situation where you can be reasonably expected to know about the stress. Even then the obligation is only to do what is reasonably practicable in the circumstances.

More comprehensive information is available through the Department of Labour's Workinfo service ([www.workinfo.govt.nz](http://www.workinfo.govt.nz) or 0800 20 90 20) or from the MSA through 0508 22 55 22 or [www.msa.govt.nz](http://www.msa.govt.nz).

## What is stress?

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There are many definitions of stress, and many theories about what causes it. Key definitions and concepts adopted by the Occupational Safety and Health Service (OSH) when it considers workplace stress are:

**Stress** – Workplace stress is the result of the interaction between a person and their work environment. For the person it is the awareness of not being able to cope with the demands of their work environment, with an associated negative emotional response.

**Stressors** – These are events or circumstances that lead to someone feeling that physical or psychological demands are about to exceed his or her ability to cope. Stressors can be of several types.

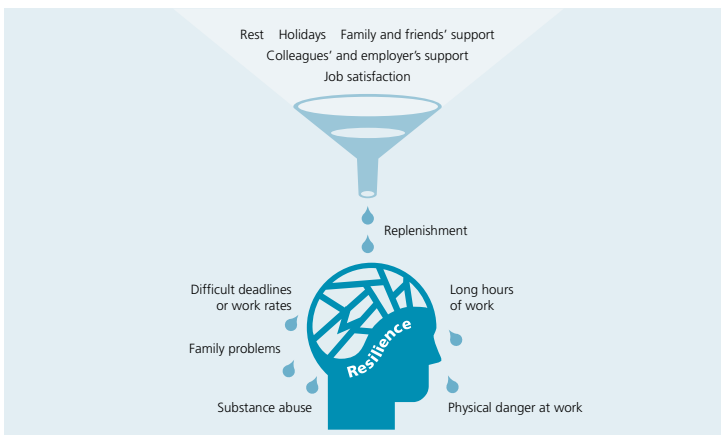
Stressors can:

- Be inherent in the job because of factors that make that occupation what it is – for example, the mixture of pressures in police work, with shift work, the threat of violence and sometimes dealing with emotionally repugnant material.
- Arise because of the way the job is organised. This may include physical factors (excess heat, noise, cold etc) as well as physiological factors that affect the body's balance (such as shift work, inadequate recuperative time etc).
- Arise out of excessive work demands such as unrealistic deadlines.
- Arise out of personal factors such as health status, relationships, ability to cope with difficult situations etc.

## How (and why) does stress affect us?

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Stress is a complex issue and no two individuals will be affected in the same way by either work requirements or the work environment. Employers should be alert to signs of stress in their employees. But employers can only manage stress or fatigue situations they can reasonably be aware of. So employees experiencing workplace stress should tell their employers about the stress they are experiencing. There should be systems in place that give employees confidence that if they report their situation to their employer, manager, or supervisor everything possible will be done to deal with their problem. In practice, it can be helpful to think of stress in terms of a simple 'bucket' model:



The bucket model suggests that stress and fatigue result when a person's reservoir of personal resilience is drained faster than it is replenished. Things like interesting work, supportive relationships, good health and rest fill the bucket. Difficult working conditions, conflict at work, emotionally draining work, excess (or not enough) work and difficulties at home can drain the bucket. You are coping when you maintain the balance between these factors.

As the bucket model shows, there's no point in 'filling the bucket' if stressors keep draining it quickly. Control of stressors is frequently needed – to 'plug the holes', or at least reduce their size – in order to prevent stress building up.

## But we can't live without some stress in our lives, can we?

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A life with no challenges would be very dull. In that sense, some stress is good for us. There is evidence that a lack of challenge at work can be just as stressful as work that is reasonably demanding – physically or mentally.

Even so, a balance between stimulation and rest is required. Whether stress is 'good' or 'bad' depends on personal tolerance levels and adequate recovery time.

This common-sense approach tells us that prolonged and/or profound stress – or prolonged and/or profound exposure to stressors – can be bad for a person and an organisation. Indications of a negative (as opposed to a merely challenging) situation are, for example, where a previously effective work group becomes dysfunctional.

The right balance can change with time. For example, a challenge, when mastered, may become a monotonous, routine task that a person finds stressful for that reason alone.

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## Stress due to causes outside work

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Things outside the workplace – family problems, a second job, or poor mental or physical health – can cause stress. These factors can be more significant when they operate in combination with workplace factors and adversely affect an employee's ability to cope at work.

By definition, employers have no direct control over (nor responsibility for) non-work factors. However, if an employer knows about non-work sources of stress, steps may need to be taken to prevent harm where the safety of people in the workplace – the employee included – may be an issue.

Employers should have simple and practical mechanisms in place to assess and deal with an employee's temporary impairment, whatever the source, if that temporary impairment places that employee or anyone in the workplace at risk of harm.

## Individual differences

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Individuals have different tolerances or susceptibilities to workplace stress (different sizes of personal resilience 'buckets'). This will depend on a number of personal factors as well as:

- the amount of support they get from personal and work relationships
- the demands of the work
- the individual's health status
- the interest and meaning she or he finds in the job.

There is no reason to expect that a person's resilience will be constant with time: as a person changes or has temporary difficulties, there will be times when resilience is less or greater.

Just because one person can cope when another person cannot doesn't mean that the one is 'right' and the other is 'wrong' or 'weak'. For example, some people lose their hearing more quickly than others when exposed to noise; but exposure to excess noise for prolonged periods will eventually make everyone deaf. So noise standards are set at a level that protects the great majority of the employees working an average working day for an average working lifetime. In addition, employers have a responsibility to protect more sensitive employees who may develop problems sooner than others do.

Acceptable levels of workplace stressors should not be established according to what the 'last survivor' can cope with, or by what bothers the most vulnerable. As with all health and safety systems, the standard procedure is to identify stressors that are known hazards and to take all reasonably practicable steps to manage them so that they do not harm people at work.

## What are the effects of stress?

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Short-term stress may make a person aware of being challenged and motivated. This is the 'some stress is good for you' effect. Prolonged awareness of not coping, however, can lead to harm both for the person and the organisation.

Prolonged unrelieved awareness of not coping, or of significant fatigue arising from stress can result in:

- immediate safety problems (such as "I was so 'stressed out' that I didn't see the warning light flashing")
- long-term health problems such as depression, 'burnout', heart disease and self-abusive behaviours (such as overuse of alcohol).

A stressed individual may:

- become 'down', anxious, irritable or clinically depressed
- lose confidence, talk about sleeping badly, have slow reactions, or behave oddly
- have deteriorating relationships with colleagues
- be irritable or indecisive, or perform poorly or be more error-prone
- drink more alcohol than usual or turn to other recreational drugs
- complain about their health and, for example, get frequent headaches.

An organisation where workplace stress is prevalent may demonstrate:

- numbers of staff with low morale
- high absenteeism and staff turnover
- poor employment relations
- low quality work and low productivity
- high (or rising) accident and illness rates
- high (or rising) numbers of customer complaints, or customers taking their business elsewhere
- increasing use of Employee Assistance Programme services, and grievance procedures. (Although the provision of an Employee Assistance Programme will tend to indicate an organisation that has recognised the necessity of dealing with employee stress, it will not necessarily help to tackle the causes of stress at work)
- increasing numbers of employees saying they are under stress.

## Causes of unnecessary workplace stress

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At times work can be expected to be tiring and stressful to some extent, and a degree of legitimate tiredness can be expected at the end of the working day. But where stress or tiredness are excessive or gets worse each day – particularly when people don't have enough time off to make a full recovery – then, if work demands are involved, these will need to be examined.

Causes of workplace stress may be job content and how the work is organised. In such cases simply providing an employee, or employees, with 'stress management advice' may not be an adequate response. Improved work design can free up employees' resources to concentrate on getting the job done, to do the tasks better, or to look further ahead to find out how to meet new challenges.

Employee participation in health and safety issues can be a good way of getting both informed comment and employee buy-in to proposed solutions or prevention methods.

Unnecessary work-related stress can emerge from two types of factors:

- job context (how the workplace is organised)
- job content (what the job involves)

The following table summarises some of these factors, which can place unreasonable demands on people at work:

## Some features of poorly organised work resulting in unnecessary stress

### A: The context in which the work takes place

<b>Work characteristic</b>	<b>Conditions possibly stressful to an employee</b>
<b>Organisational function and culture</b>	<p>Rigid work practices – people unable to work out their own solutions to the day-to-day problems they encounter in the workplace</p> <p>Poor communication within the workplace</p> <p>A non-supportive work culture – concerns and requests are dismissed without consideration</p>
<b>Role in organisation</b>	<p>Role or task ambiguity/uncertainty (for example, employee unsure about what they should be doing)</p> <p>Role conflict from imprecise or conflicting job demands</p> <p>Responsibility for people beyond the individual's capacity</p>
<b>Career development</b>	<p>Career uncertainty or stagnation (where the employer has no jobs with greater responsibility or content to offer)</p> <p>Poor status or status incongruity (a mismatch between qualifications/ability and job demands)</p> <p>Lack of rewards (status, self-esteem, recognition)</p>
<b>Decision latitude/control</b>	<p>Little opportunity to participate in decision-making</p> <p>Lack of control over the speed and scheduling of work</p>
<b>Relationships at work</b>	<p>Physical isolation</p> <p>No formal employee participation system</p> <p>Poor relationships with supervisors and fellow workers</p> <p>Interpersonal conflict and violence at work</p> <p>A lack of social support at work</p>
<b>Life/relationships outside work</b>	<p>Conflicting demands of work and home life</p> <p>Dual career problems (for example, having two jobs or juggling schedules with a working partner)</p>

## B: The content of the work

<b>Work characteristic</b>	<b>Conditions possibly stressful to an employee</b>
<b>Task design</b>	Lack of variety and/or short work cycles, fragmented or tedious work Under-utilisation of skill Constant customer contact
<b>Workload or work pace</b>	Lack of control over work rate/pacing Work over-load or under-load High work rate or time pressure
<b>Work schedule</b>	The disruption to body processes caused by changes in shift work patterns especially when these are badly designed Inflexible work schedules Unpredictable working hours or long or unsociable working hours
<b>Work context</b>	Inherently hazardous No two-way communication on workplace issues

Extreme levels of these factors may produce a stress reaction in some people. In such cases, the work may need to be re-organised to allow for this reaction. Where this occurs it involves balancing operational issues, achievability and cost against the hazard that the reaction creates for the individual or workplace. In some cases, the employee may have to take responsibility, as where family pressures, out of work activities and the like are affecting work performance.

Achieving the right balance can involve trade-offs and contradictions. For example, resolving a task's ambiguity may result in work practices that are too rigid; increasing the variety of work may leave some people with greater responsibility than they either want or can deal with.

Particular types of work may be intrinsically more difficult to cope with than others, for example:

- work that is emotionally repugnant or draining (e.g. social work in a clinic for sexually abused children, working in some branches of medicine, police work)
- work that requires long periods of intense concentration (e.g. judges clerks)
- work that has high consequences of error (e.g. air traffic control, nursing)
- work that is inherently hazardous (e.g. forestry, mining, quarrying).

Employers in such areas need to be particularly vigilant for signs of workplace stress in their employees and, where it occurs, have in place effective methods to counter the stress reaction.

The nature of the work itself is not the only factor that may result in a person perceiving 'unreasonable demands'. For example, when people are in a job that doesn't suit their skills or personality, stress may continue to affect them no matter how well the work is organised.

It is common and perfectly normal experience for people to find more satisfaction when they move on to a job that suits them better.

Increased pressure and demands in the workplace may arise because of the expectations and behaviour of members of the public, over which employers may have little control. Employers do not have to cocoon employees from such demands, but they should take whatever steps are practicable in the circumstances. Employees can usually make good suggestions.

## Taking a realistic approach

Look at your organisation or workplace and determine where it mainly fits in the table below. Remember it will be rare to fit perfectly into each category. Whether the aim is to eliminate, isolate or minimise stressors will depend on the type of work and the people who do the work.

The following table illustrates four categories of work, each requiring a different approach to dealing with any stress that may arise:

Category	Description	Stress prevention programme focus	Resources required
1. Healthy work	Work that is enjoyable, interesting and stimulating, with many elements of healthy work such as task variety and personal control over how tasks are performed	Any significant stressors that do show up can probably be eliminated through primary, secondary and tertiary prevention methods on page 14	Good management practice – the healthy work approach set out in the table on page 15
2. Self-generated stress at work	Someone creates their own stressors because of personal choices such as refusing to ask for help, refusing reasonable change or partying all weekend	Alert supervisors to ensure that the person is better managed	Good employment relations practice to resolve the problem
3. Badly organised work	Work that is free from intrinsic stressors that characterise category 4 work, but is poorly organised so that it spreads over a much longer period of time than necessary	Aim to eliminate, isolate and minimise stressors that relate to time and other organisational pressures through a combination of prevention methods. Employers should ensure that their work organisation and structure do not match the factors identified in the table on pages 10-11	Good management practices – the healthy work approach set out in the table on page 15

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Category	Description	Stress prevention programme focus	Resources required
4. Inherently stressful work	This kind of work could involve emotionally draining or repugnant activities, require intense, prolonged concentration, or have very high consequences of error	This work will involve stressors that may, at times, be intense and unmanageable. The programme will be unable to eliminate or isolate most of these stressors and will aim to minimise them. Employers in this category would be expected to be proactive in assessing and controlling stressors	Work in this category would require a comprehensive stress prevention programme. Employers and employees should consult the comprehensive OSH guide to stress and fatigue, available from <a href="http://www.workinfo.govt.nz">www.workinfo.govt.nz</a>

Employers and employees can make use of a number of prevention methods to eliminate, isolate or minimise stressors. These are set out in the following table:

Prevention level	Approach	Outcome
Primary prevention	Create a healthy place of work and control stressors so that to the extent possible the work is interesting, rewarding and within the person's capabilities	<i>Elimination</i> of the hazard where that is practicable
Secondary prevention	Improve the fit between the person and the job by staff selection, on-the-job training, performance feedback and monitoring of problems, and, where requested or required, establish employee participation in health and safety to enhance the above	<i>Isolation</i> of the hazard by ensuring that only adequately trained and equipped personnel deal with it
Tertiary prevention	Help the person experiencing stress or deal with the harm that may have resulted from it	<i>Minimisation</i> of the hazard

## Providing healthy work is a shared responsibility

As with all aspects of the employment relationship, preventing and resolving issues arising from workplace stress are a joint employee/employer responsibility. The table below provides suggestions:

Desired feature	Suggested focus for employers	Suggested focus for employees
Healthy and safe workplace design and environment	A well-designed and participatory health and safety programme e.g. provide sufficient lighting and warmth; control noise; provide well-designed equipment using ergonomic principles	Participate in the health and safety programme; report hazards; take such responsibility as possible for personal comfort and safety; follow instructions
Workplace collaboration	Ensure employees have the opportunity to be involved in workplace health and safety and other matters, where appropriate	Participate effectively and co-operatively with the employer and fellow employees
Appropriate rewards	Let employees know how they contribute to the organisation; acknowledge work well done and suggestions made	Maintain skills and knowledge; have a realistic sense of self worth; acknowledge others' accomplishments
A supportive workplace	Expect realistic output levels; offer support in difficulties; acknowledge skills and expertise	Ask for help when you need it; accept support when you need it; give support when needed
Good change management	Understand that change can be tiring and threatening, and therefore affect morale; have good communication and consultation strategies during times of change	Accept that change may be inevitable and necessary; participate in communicating about and helping to manage change
Personal progress	Provide opportunities to work well and improve performance; match individuals to task requirements; provide opportunities for progress in the workplace	Maintain skills and knowledge; learn from mistakes; contribute to the organisation's goals; be willing to accept the change and knocks that are necessary for personal growth
Workplace hierarchies	Don't allow hierarchies to dominate the workplace	Don't play status-related games; take responsibility for personal tasks; use discretion wisely

## What are the keys to providing healthy work?

The features of healthy work are those we would all like to see in our own work. To prevent and manage workplace stress, employers and employees must be able to distinguish between:

- which stressors are work-related and which are not
- which workplace demands are reasonable and which are not
- which stressors are unavoidable or outside the employer's control, and which are avoidable
- what, for the individual, is a genuine stressor, and what is merely a challenge
- the features of healthy and unhealthy work.

The table below provides some ideas for employers and employees:

Desired feature	Suggested focus for employers	Suggested focus for employees
A balance of effort and rest	Make sure there are sufficient breaks in periods of intense physical and mental effort, and adequate recovery time outside work	Know limitations; do not accept pressure or create it by 'competing'; use recovery time wisely; have a life outside work.
A variety of tasks; interest and stimulation	To the extent possible, provide a variety of tasks for each employee; match the right people to the right tasks	Do not be afraid to try something new. Where practicable share less interesting tasks with other employees
A sense of personal control	Provide employees with the means to take some control over the way they do their work – perhaps the order in which they do tasks, or the means used to accomplish them	Take responsibility for personal tasks; use discretion provided wisely; respect the employer's position when there is no latitude available
Workplace collaboration	Ensure opportunities are provided for employee involvement in matters such as workplace health and safety	Participate effectively and co-operatively with employers and their representatives
Relationships	Provide fair mechanisms to identify and reconcile workplace relationship difficulties and conflict, such as opportunities to meet and exchange views; promote dialogue and treat everyone impartially	Work on maintaining healthy personal relationships; understand the difference between giving way and giving in

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<b>Good communication</b>	Have strategies for communicating about work; promote honest feedback in both directions; praise success at work	Contribute to a positive atmosphere in the workplace; avoid criticising destructively or undermining colleagues; ask necessary questions
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## What if a problem emerges?

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As with all health and safety issues, managing stress in the workplace is a joint responsibility of employers and the employees. Neither party can assume these issues can be left to the other, and both must co-operate to prevent problems and resolve them if they do arise.

Managing problems around stress and fatigue requires the same skills and behaviours as managing any other employment relationship problem:

- The parties need to communicate, to work together in good faith and to focus on a solution that both find satisfactory. This is where a robust employee participation system can add significant value through ensuring dialogue.
- Dealing with problems before they escalate is always best practice. The Act is about assessing the potential for harm and taking some practical steps to avert that harm. Hoping the issue will go away increases the risk of harm occurring, and may also cause attitudes and poor practices to become ingrained.
- As with all problem solving, the first step is to ensure that you have all the facts, and that you have looked at them calmly and carefully. The second is to talk the issue through with everyone involved, and identify not just the obvious cause but also any underlying causes.
- Employees affected by stress or feelings that they cannot cope may especially benefit from having a supporter present during any discussions. The workplace health and safety representative, a trusted colleague, a union representative or a family supporter can help make sure the issues are clear and all possible solutions are considered.
- Employers who need assistance can consult an Employers' Organisation.

Two Services of the Department of Labour also have expertise:

- The Inspectors and medical advisors of the Occupational Safety and Health Service can provide information and assistance.
- The Employment Relations Service can offer information on problem solving. Where external input can assist, mediation services are available.

Both services can be contacted through the Department of Labour's Workinfo service ([www.workinfo.govt.nz](http://www.workinfo.govt.nz) or 0800 20 90 20).

The Maritime Safety Authority can also provide information to employers and employees in their area of expertise.

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## When things go wrong

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OSH and the MSA employ a range of professional staff, including Health & Safety Inspectors. Inspectors investigate matters of health and safety, including stress complaints, and can take a variety of actions if necessary to ensure compliance with the HSE Act. As part of their activities, they may investigate the management of workplace stressors.

The approach they will take is to recognise that 'stress' is not an illness, but is a sign of a person not coping with their situation or environment. This means that the Inspector will be examining the presence of stressors in the workplace and the systems, if any, which are in place to manage or eliminate them to prevent serious harm. The following questions would be part of any investigation where serious harm is alleged:

1. Is the alleged serious **harm** supported by a reputable medical diagnosis?

'Stress' is not a medical diagnosis. A certificate stating that someone is unwell from stress would not be proof of serious harm for an OSH investigation, but could be an indication of an emerging problem. Employers should investigate such instances carefully. Work-related stress has contributed to findings against employers in New Zealand cases, but only where there was clear

evidence of harm that resulted from a defined medical condition. For example, a court found a probation officer's heart disease and a police photographer's post-traumatic stress disorder were the consequence of workplace stress.

2. Is there clear evidence of **recognisable stressors** that the employer knew about, or should have known about because of the nature or content of the work? For example, is the work intrinsically stressful because:
  - it is emotionally draining or repugnant?
  - it requires intense, prolonged concentration?
  - it has very high consequences of error?
  - it is inherently hazardous?and/or
  - is the work stressful because of the way it is organised?
3. Is there clear evidence of some significant hazard that has led directly to the harm? For example:
  - Is the work too difficult for the individual concerned?
  - Is the workload unrealistic?
  - Are there factors such as persistent bullying in the workplace?
4. Is there clear evidence that there were no pre-existing conditions or there was no significant personal contribution to the harm? For example, did the 'harm' exist before the person commenced that work? Were there significant out-of-work stressors? Did the person accept more than their share of work in spite of repeated instructions from management not to do so?
5. Is there clear evidence of a lack of employer action or inappropriate employer action? Did the employee make any complaints or suggestions? On becoming aware of the report of stressors, did the employer investigate and take appropriate and practicable steps to manage the stressors?

If it is recognised that harm has occurred because of a failure to have systems in place to recognise stress, or because known stress was not responded to, the normal range of actions under the Act can be considered by Inspectors.

## Help and information

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Dealing effectively with health and safety in the workplace results from establishing both good employment relations policies and safe work design. That is, employers and employees look at the issues that confront them in a proactive way that draws on their experience in the workplace.

The Occupational Safety and Health Service has a range of publications available, and the Employment Relations Service can also provide publications on problem solving. Both organisations work closely together to ensure that problems are resolved at the earliest opportunity. Both of these Services of the Department of Labour can be contacted through the Workinfo contact centre on free phone on 0800 20 90 20.

Employers can obtain assistance through their local Employers' Association or Organisation, such as:

Employers and Manufacturers Association (Northern) Inc –  
adviceline@ema.co.nz

Employers and Manufacturers Association (Central) Inc –  
ema@emacentral.org.nz

Canterbury Employers Chambers of Commerce – info@cecc.org.nz

Canterbury Manufacturers Association – cma@cma.org.nz

Otago/Southland Employers' Association – maree@osea.org.nz

Employees can obtain information through their union or the CTU at [www.union.org.nz](http://www.union.org.nz).

Employers and employees in the maritime area can obtain assistance and advice from the Maritime Safety Authority on (04) 473 0111 or toll free on 0508 22 55 22 or through the website at [msa.govt.nz](http://msa.govt.nz).

This booklet is a guide only and may not be accurate for all situations. It should not be used as a substitute for legislation or for legal or other expert advice.

*February 2003*



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TE TARI MAHI

