

## CASE STUDY:

# Digging deeper: Understanding the psychological demands of the job



Victorian Workplace  
Mental Wellbeing  
*Collaboration*

## The Reject Shop

Founded in the 1980s, The Reject Shop (TRS) is a discount variety goods retailer employing over 5,600 team members across Australia. TRS has taken an innovative approach to better balance their workplace health and safety strategy.

This exciting shift has caused the business to assess and better understand the cognitive and psychological demands of tasks undertaken by their team. It is hoped that, once identified, understood and shared, these demands can be controlled and managed to help line managers and team members identify tasks that are appropriate and rewarding to individuals and across broader business aims.

“We are skilled at identifying physical hazards in the workplace and managing the impact of physical injury and illness and are committed to replicating this success with regards to psychological health.” National Workplace Health & Safety Manager, The Reject Shop

## Job Task Analysis

In the retail industry, the most common physical hazards are well understood and businesses like TRS have existing programs to help identify, control and train team members in managing risk.

The Reject Shop noted an increased trend of retail workers (within their business and more broadly) reporting mental health illness and injury.

Looking beyond the provision of supports like an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), TRS started talking about mental health risk factors as ‘workplace hazards’ to help team members and managers relate better and feel more comfortable talking about and identifying ways to control hazards to psychological safety.

TRS commissioned a Job Task Analysis (JTA) of the key roles in the organisation. The JTA breaks down each role into key tasks and identifies the psychological demands of each task. Working alongside specialist psychologists, TRS identified six key areas that were to be assessed for each task.

These included:

- cognitive
- interpersonal
- emotional
- knowledge
- environmental
- organisational culture.

For example, working at registers – a common retail task – requires the team member to have certain cognitive demands in using register operation sequences to run up the transaction and apply discounts. Additionally, there might be acute interpersonal or emotional demands if they are dealing with an angry customer during a disputed product refund.

### The Reject Shop workforce

“We have a large workforce with some specific needs. The Reject Shop proudly welcomes people who have limited or no prior workplace experience and in fact most of our workforce are young and in their first job.” National Workplace Health & Safety Manager, The Reject Shop

The Reject Shop have a firm understanding of their workforce and have tailored their efforts to promote team member wellbeing to the specific needs of their team members. Workforce characteristics include:

- A large workforce of over 5,600 staff
- A large number of young team members, with the majority (65%) of workers aged 15–24 years
- Many team members entering the workforce and holding their first job at The Reject Shop, e.g. transitioning from school into employment
- Team members new to management: with employees having opportunities to step into managerial roles temporarily and permanently, e.g. the managerial role is sometimes held by a senior casual on the shifts when the store manager is off work.

### Using psychological demands to improve wellbeing

“We’re making the psychological hazards in the workplace visible and part of how we do business at The Reject Shop. We want our team members to feel in control of their mental health and wellbeing, and are working hard to remove the demons, stigma and fear.” National Workplace Health & Safety Manager, The Reject Shop

Psychological demands were assessed in the first quarter of 2018 and reviewed by team member representatives in the second quarter to ensure the documents captured all scenarios and language relevant to team members completing the tasks.

This information was then embedded into workplace practices across the organisation to improve team member wellbeing, including:

- **Recruitment**

Line managers and HR specialists will use the detailed knowledge of psychological demands for each job role to better recruit fitting candidates and enable job seekers to be better informed about requirements of the job.

- **Professional development**

Identifying the psychological demands of the job will provide a clear and objective basis for discussions about roles across the organisation and the needs of the people who fulfil them. Training and support will be delivered to store managers to build their capacity to supervise, coach and develop their teams.

- **Job design**

Given a more specific awareness about cognitive demands, managers are more aware of ensuring that workers are 'job-fit' for particular tasks (i.e. appropriate training, provision of instructions, accommodation where possible for coping mechanisms) and can better rotate team members through the range of available duties to ensure that each worker is given the best chance for success.

- **Stay at work medical practitioner documentation**

The assessment helped TRS formulate templates to better communicate with treating GPs. Previous documentation predominately focused on physical capacity, whereas new changes provide a more holistic conversation about worker capacity. TRS is also using the same documentation for work- and non-work-related injuries to ensure more consistent conversations. The number of mental health claims are a small percentage of overall claims at TRS, however they are the most complex cases to return and are also more expensive on average per claim.

### Working in retail

“Retail is a very exposed industry... our staff are constantly working directly with the public and customer abuse and violence is common.”  
National Workplace Health & Safety Manager,  
The Reject Shop

Underpinning TRS’s efforts to promote team member wellbeing is an understanding of the challenges of working in retail. Retail is a great place to work, but many factors impact on team member wellbeing, as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Factors that impact on retail workers’ mental health and wellbeing**

Factor	Description
Customer abuse	Research by the SDA Union shows that over 85% of workers in retail, fast food and warehousing have experienced abuse from customers at work, and the amount of physical and verbal abuse directed at workers is increasing <sup>1</sup> . Workers routinely have customers swearing and yelling at them, spitting in their faces or threatening them, which impacts on their physical and psychological health.
Casualised workforce	In retail, workers are employed on a largely casual basis. Casual, or insecure work, is associated with poorer health outcomes, including stress <sup>2</sup> , emotional exhaustion <sup>3</sup> , depression and anxiety <sup>4</sup> and even heart disease <sup>5</sup> .
Shift work	Retail workers often work short shifts. Shift work has been shown to increase risk of poor health <sup>6</sup> . Additionally, retail trading hours are long and include evenings and weekends. At certain times of the year, extended trading periods means retail shops are open 24-hours a day, 7 days a week.
Transitory workforce with high staff turnover	Many workers move in and out of retail and rarely choose it as a long-term career path. Retail workers typically leave after 10 months, with an average annual industry turnover of 41% <sup>7</sup> .
Isolated workplaces	Large retail chains often have numerous stores that are isolated from head office, so staff are not directly supervised or easily trained. The Reject Shop currently operates over 350 stores Australia-wide, including 85 in Victoria.

<sup>1</sup> [www.sda.org.au/no-one-deserves-a-serve-sda-launches-major-national-campaign-to-stop-abuse-of-retail-and-fast-food-workers-this-christmas/](http://www.sda.org.au/no-one-deserves-a-serve-sda-launches-major-national-campaign-to-stop-abuse-of-retail-and-fast-food-workers-this-christmas/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/search/workplace-stress-in-victoria](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/search/workplace-stress-in-victoria)

<sup>3</sup> [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02678373.2015.1075624](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02678373.2015.1075624)

<sup>4</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/occmed/article/65/2/110/1488809>

<sup>5</sup> [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0021915012008891](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0021915012008891)

<sup>6</sup> [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/shiftwork](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/shiftwork)

<sup>7</sup> [www.insideretail.com.au/blog/2016/11/30/retail-employee-churn-rate-on-the-rise/](http://www.insideretail.com.au/blog/2016/11/30/retail-employee-churn-rate-on-the-rise/)

### Benefits

“We are committed to supporting our team members as they encounter psychological hazards at work. We also want to support them in responding to non-work hazards too. Undertaking a Job Task Analysis is the start of our journey. We’re committed to embedding this knowledge into our business and are confident and excited to see what benefits we’re able to achieve.”  
National Workplace Health & Safety Manager,  
The Reject Shop

The Reject Shop expect their team members to understand the psychological demands of the job. Promoting team member wellbeing will deliver many benefits over time, including:

- ✓ Increased confidence and capacity of managers to support team members and address psychological hazards

- ✓ High team member morale
- ✓ Positive workplace culture
- ✓ Decreased interpersonal conflict
- ✓ Enhanced performance
- ✓ Increased productivity
- ✓ Reduced staff turnover
- ✓ Reduced incidence of mental health issues
- ✓ Reduced number of mental health-related claims
- ✓ Improved return to work timeframes for team members experiencing compensable and non-compensable mental health injury and illness.

[www.rejectshop.com.au](http://www.rejectshop.com.au)

**The Victorian Workplace Mental Wellbeing Collaboration** is a partnership between SuperFriend, VicHealth and WorkSafe Victoria. We are working together to help workplaces create positive and supportive work cultures and environments by focusing on organisational leadership and encouraging workplaces to implement positive mental wellbeing strategies that enhance existing policies and processes.

**For more information, please visit:**  
[www.leadingwellvic.com.au](http://www.leadingwellvic.com.au)

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