# Engaging employers in preventing workplace sexual harassment

## Learning brief

# Acknowledgement of Country

**Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge and language for over 65,000 years.**

As a non-Indigenous organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is not an 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problem.' As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture,* there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

# Contents

# Purpose of the learning brief

This learning brief shares the findings from the evaluation of the Engaging Employers to Prevent Sexual Harassment project, focusing on the enablers and challenges learned during implementation.

This brief is one of two learning briefs that share learning and practice implications for prevention organisations and industry peaks seeking to support workplaces engaging in organisational change initiatives to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

It is also aimed at medium to large workplaces driving their own internal initiatives to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

# Background
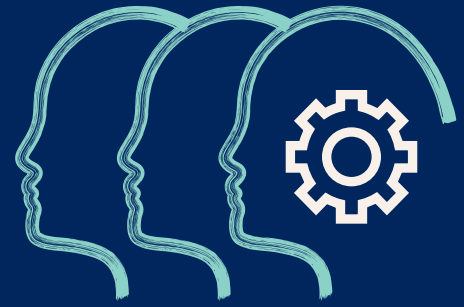
## Project details

The Engaging Employers to Prevent Sexual Harassment project[1] (henceforth Engaging Employers) implemented by Our Watch was a three-year initiative funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services to contribute to Recommendation 8 of the Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report. The Engaging Employers project commenced in December 2021 and was completed in December 2024.

Focusing on retail, telecommunications, and construction industries, the project employed three key social change strategies:

1. **Intensive support for four medium to large workplaces** to use and adapt Our Watch's Workplace Equality and Respect tools and approaches. This included the following steps:

   - Readiness assessment
   - Meeting with leadership and engaging an organisational change implementation group (normally Human Resources (HR) or Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) staff)
   - Collecting employee insights on workplace sexual harassment through surveys and employee focus groups
   - Policy review
   - Developing organisational snapshots, presenting findings from the employee data and policy review
   - Action planning: supporting organisations to prioritise targeted, evidence-based actions to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

2. **Broader industry engagement** through hosting practice forums to share best practices and learnings about preventing workplace sexual harassment, collaborating to develop and share resources, and delivering training and presentations.

3. **A national campaign** to engage and motivate employers with knowledge, skills and tools to address the drivers of workplace sexual harassment.

The campaign used a range of marketing channels, including social media, Google ads, out-of-home advertising, media, and email, and the development of resources, including case studies, animations, factsheets and more.

## Evaluation methodology

The evaluation aimed to assess the implementation and emerging outcomes[2] from the Engaging Employers project, and to identify and share key learnings for preventing workplace sexual harassment.

The Engaging Employers project used a **developmental evaluation approach** to capture project teams' learnings throughout implementation. Our Watch commissioned Cultivating Change to conduct an end of the project evaluation. The end-of-project evaluation drew on **qualitative and quantitative data** collected throughout the project by Our Watch. The evaluation team conducted reflections with project teams and 14 stakeholder interviews with organisational change implementers (normally HR and D&I staff), leaders in the four workplaces, key contacts in industry peaks, and collaborative partners.

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1   Also known as *Social change strategies to prevent sexual harassment - Recommendation 8 of Respect@Work* project

2   The evaluation focused on short and medium-term outcomes (within two years) including changes in awareness, understanding, leadership commitment, skills, confidence and resources (tools and processes) in relation to workplace gender equality and preventing workplace sexual harassment.

# What we learned
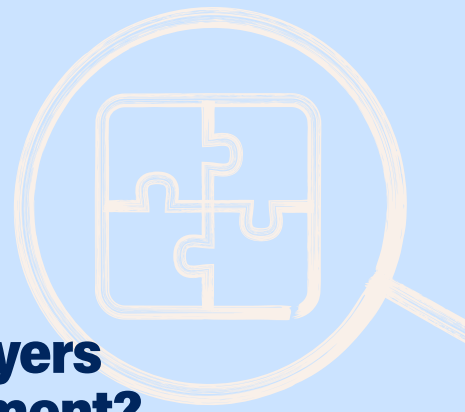
## Enablers: What works to engage employers in preventing workplace sexual harassment?

The following section highlights key enablers for effectively engaging employers in workplace sexual harassment prevention.

### Harness workplace data to get leadership buy-in and action.

Workplace data was collected through people surveys, employee focus groups, and policy analysis and presented in "organisational snapshots" prepared by Our Watch. The evaluation found that having workplace data available through organisational snapshots provided new insights and broke down the myth that sexual harassment happens elsewhere. Data insights enabled an increased understanding of issues specific to an organisation's workplace and were pivotal for gaining leadership commitment and organisational action.

### Tailor processes aligned to existing work practices.

Large to medium organisations are busy and complex. The Workplace Equality and Respect processes and tools needed to be adapted to the operating context of each workplace. Strategies included incorporating workplace sexual harassment survey questions into existing organisational surveys and platforms, and adapting action planning processes to occur alongside or as part of the workplaces' standard planning approaches.

### Structured yet flexible processes supported the change journey.

Having a plan and a structured process to work through was important to achieve progress. However, the steps need to be sequenced in a way that responds to context and is useful in progressing organisational change.

Having tools and processes that guided data collection, resulting in an organisational snapshot, was an important early process and lever for other activities. For example, training and leadership engagement were planned early in workplace engagement. However, sequencing needed to be adjusted to collect workplace data first, as this was critical in gaining leadership commitment and focusing training based on priorities.

### Framing matters.

Prevention concepts and actions must be framed so that industry and businesses understand. For some workplaces, that meant talking about the prevention of sexual harassment as an occupational health and safety risk and how that connects to positive duty legislation or a broader gender equality agenda. Identifying what drives a workplace to act is important to getting traction.

### Simplify language and translate concepts for your audience.

Complex concepts, such as intersectionality, can be difficult to convey. Engaging with workplaces to simplify language and use terms that the audience can understand is essential. Developing one-page fact sheets, providing industry practice toolkits, and sharing advice on translating concepts into actions were essential to increasing understanding of the issues and enabling changes to occur.

> "It's been a very important report for us [Organisational Snapshot]. We're still referring to it now. Gosh, what 7-8 months later in the discussions with the Board."
>
> **WORKPLACE 4**

> " …[Our Watch] helped us brainstorm and break down the process end to end… It was that process that helped us to develop a plan and strategy for how we are going to try to meet our positive obligations, I don't think we would have got the plan that we got if we hadn't had their [Our Watch] help from the get-go."
>
> **WORKPLACE 2**

Additional insights for prevention sector organisations supporting workplace sexual harassment prevention efforts:

## Foster capacity through partnership and mentoring.

A partnership and mentoring approach with workplaces, based on mutual recognition of expertise, fosters trust over time and allows for the flexibility needed to adapt resources and processes to different industry contexts. This approach enables organisational change implementers and leaders to feel safe and supported in discussing challenging issues and building their expertise.

## Facilitate peer learning forums.

Facilitating practice forums was a useful approach to sharing learnings and insights, enabling workplaces and broader industry stakeholders to learn from each other and gain advice from facilitators. This approach helped build awareness and understanding of the issue of sexual harassment and actions to prevent it in target industries.

> "Want to be a leader in this space, got positive duty obligations, but grouping this under the umbrella of safety was a big defining moment for us."
>
> **PRACTICE FORUM PARTICIPANT**

> "it's that deep subject matter expert... in this space...can be quite a taboo topic, particularly in boardrooms and leadership teams and things... providing that language... support us in having trauma-informed approach ensuring that it's a very safe place for us as practitioners as well to be talking to them and building our own expertise through the program"
>
> **WORKPLACE 4**

# What worked in the national campaign to influence employers?

✓ **Having data and examples of workplace sexual harassment prevention were essential for media interest and engagement.** This was generated through a workplace sexual harassment survey led by the media team. Some of the workplaces opted out of engaging in public-facing actions, including providing case studies for the campaign (see challenges below).

✓ **Message testing in campaign development informed creative concepts, language and strategies to reach the target audience.**

✓ **Using data analytics across phases of the campaign to identify which channels were most effective.** The use of LinkedIn proved the most effective channel to engage workplace leaders.

✓ **Using a range of resource formats to allow the target audience to choose how they engaged with the content and how they learned.** Resources were housed on a dedicated Lead the Change website and included factsheets, guides, infographics, animated videos, posters and one-pagers.

# Challenges

## What are the challenges to supporting organisational change?

A few challenges identified during the evaluation process are useful learnings when planning and undertaking organisational change initiatives to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

### Keeping momentum:

This work is intensive and relational. Hence, it requires a dedicated team to progress the change agenda. Large workplaces are busy and complex, often with siloed structures or dispersed staff, making collaboration and cross-team coordination challenging. A high staff turnover in organisations can also disrupt or stall progress, making it difficult to maintain momentum and transfer knowledge. Having a dedicated working group to steer the process, engage in regular check-ins to share learning, and identify the next steps was critical to keeping momentum.

### Need to manage perceived risk:

Some workplaces were concerned that talking publicly about sexual harassment, even if focused on positive actions, was a risk. This perception inhibited workplaces' desire to engage in public-facing actions, such as the campaign. Understandably, workplaces have a strong focus on brand risk and bringing in corporate communications and legal and risk teams early in the process could help build confidence in the process and demonstrate the benefits to the business.

### Uncovering industry and workplace-specific challenges:

For tailored approaches to be developed and effective, it is necessary to understand a workplace's unique operations and barriers to implementing workplace equality and respect. For example, one workplace had a highly casualised and young workforce who found it difficult to engage in organisational processes, including data collection, because of their working arrangements and limited engagement with usual workplace communication platforms.

### Capacity for data analysis:

Workplaces' capacity to collect and analyse data on workplace sexual harassment was limited—this is often outsourced to external providers.

Significant resources were required to support workplaces in data collection and analysis and provide insights needed to understand the experiences of sexual harassment within their workplaces.

### A "safe to speak culture" is required:

Some workplaces had low attendance rates in focus groups, particularly for groups of staff whose voices may already be marginalised. This highlighted the need to assess whether workplaces had safe-to-speak cultures at the outset of the process to be able to tailor approaches.

### Training must be tailored:

Workplaces were not interested in broad training sessions, with a strong preference for tailored training responding to priorities derived from workplace data and action plans.

Training needs to be designed specifically for the target audience and learning preferences, acknowledging that many leaders and staff have limited time to allocate to training sessions.

# Implications
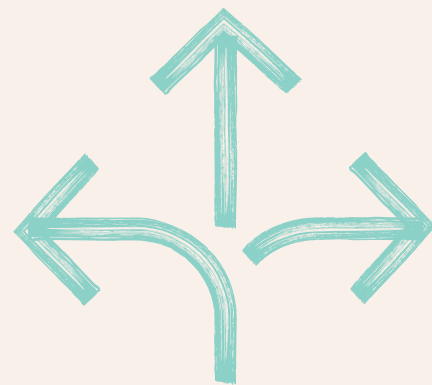
The following practice implications are presented in different stages.

## Scoping/design

- Assess the workplace's ability to collect and analyse data during planning. If in-house capacity is limited, consider external support, as workplace data is crucial for driving change and setting priorities.

- Identify industry-specific challenges, including how the workforce is structured and how staff engage in organisational processes.

- Identify entry points that resonate with the industry and workplace.

- Collaborate with workplaces to develop language that leaders and staff easily understand.

## Engaging and establishing relationships

- Demonstrate credibility by using evidence and profile.

- Build in time to understand the workplace's capacity and culture.

- Invest in relationships and build trust through regular meetings, mentoring, and coaching.

- Establish relationships with corporate communications and risk teams early to get broader buy-in for public-facing communications.

## Planning a process

- Have a structured process to support the organisational change journey. This includes regular check-ins to keep momentum and ensure actions are sequenced and paced effectively.

- Identify organisational processes that workplace sexual harassment prevention work can align with.

- Tailor all processes and resources to the workplace for maximum effect.

- Build in reflection and learning processes to ensure you are on track.

## Data collection

- Before collecting employee insights, assess whether there is a safe-to-speak culture within the workplace. If not, it may be difficult to do so.

- Trust can be built through trauma-informed processes and leadership role-modelling and encouragement; it can take time.

## Sharing and connecting

- Find ways to bring together teams, workplaces or industries to share learning and approaches, such as through practice forums.

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**Our Watch**
Preventing violence against women

## Useful links and resources

Workplace Equality and Respect resources for free tools and resources will support you through the Workplace Equality and Respect process to address gender inequality and prevent violence against women.

**ourwatch.org.au**