

Work Design Case Study 2

Retail

Example case studies illustrating organisational and team level work design, and team and task level work design



Organisational context and work situation

A large regional supermarket chain has typical grocery items but also recently introduced an online sales and delivery service. To manage this, major rostering changes and a new computerised rostering system has been introduced. This new system sets the days and times when tasks need to be done. Staff are now expected to work across multiple store departments in a single shift. Managers make sure hours are equally distributed across available staff and the organisation's roster app now requires staff to respond online with their shift availability.

The new rosters are based on this system with very little flexibility for changes at the local store level. Operating hours have also changed with the store now opening later and closing earlier. Some in-store departments have even more restricted operating hours. Customer self-service terminals have also been introduced.

The time allocations for tasks were recently updated based on the records of average times to complete standard tasks (where this information was available). A time and motion study was done for the new tasks. As a result, the time allowances either remained the same or were reduced. The new allowances have little flexibility and do not consider relevant circumstances, such as trying to do tasks during busy times when the store is crowded, and that customers frequently ask staff for help.

Limited worker consultation occurred about the changes before they were introduced. Staff report they now sometimes do not have enough time to complete tasks safely and well. This has led to stress and higher staff turnover. Supervisors have reported there are not enough experienced staff available to train new workers.

Psychosocial hazards and risks

The supermarket, through their worker consultation forums and meetings with union representatives, identified a range of psychosocial and physical risks that were contributing to stress, fatigue and musculoskeletal risks. Concerns focused on:

- Poor consultation with workers on the rostering and hours of work changes
- Insufficient staff allocated during peak periods
- Staff felt they had little flexibility or say (job control) over which departments they were allocated to and the order in which they could do tasks
- Staff that were doing the new tasks (such as picking stock for online orders) reported there had been inadequate training, making them especially anxious and meaning mistakes occurred more frequently
- Customers often being rude when there were technical problems with the self-service terminals.

Generally, staff reported they felt their supervisors did try to support them but did not have time as they too were often struggling to complete all their tasks. Staff felt store managers were not listening to their concerns.

Staff had significant concerns about the design of the new online order trolleys. These were larger with extra storage crates. While the larger size had reduced the number of 'trips' required, its size made it harder to see around (especially for shorter workers). The trolleys were generally heavier and harder to manoeuvre within aisles especially when the store was crowded.

Staff noted there were only ever a small number of staff rostered on in the alcohol department. Alcohol theft was a constant problem. They reported they were required to ask potentially underage customers for identification and to refuse service to those who were clearly intoxicated. This resulted in frequent abuse and threats of violence by customers.

Staff noted a range of design issues that made it stressful to monitor customers safety. The supermarket was located close to the shopping centre's entrance and there were two entry/exits. The sales counter was narrow which meant customers could easily reach across and take goods from behind the counter. While there was a panic alarm installed, it alerted a contact external to the shopping centre, so response times were slow and there were no safe retreat spots if workers were threatened.

Work design process and control measures to manage psychosocial risks

The store manager heard about the concerns and reviewed the tasks, daily takings and consulted workers about the issues raised. As a result, some tasks have now been rostered for times when the store is less busy. This also helped reduce aisle congestion and customer complaints.

Local site managers have greater flexibility to change staff rostering from the predetermined settings. Managers can put staff in areas which best suit them and take into account workers' skills, interests and personal circumstances. They now allow additional time to complete tasks when the store is busy. Staff have greater controls and can push back some tasks and do these later in the shift when it is not as busy.

Staff are being trained to work across multiple departments, but this is now done more slowly. Workers learn one area at a time and are allowed to master each one before moving to a new task. Training is now done during quieter periods when it is easier to concentrate. New workers are being given extra time to complete the tasks and paired with an experienced 'buddy'. Workers report they feel better supported and have appreciated the greater job control.

Wherever possible more experienced workers are allocated to the alcohol department. Restocking is now done during quieter periods when there is less likely to be issues with intoxicated customers. During busy times and when there is a risk of customer aggression around refusing alcohol service, workers are required to stay behind the sales register area. This has been redesigned to be lockable with anti-jump wires to give workers a safe retreat place. Counters have been raised and widened with moveable objects (such as a donation jar) removed from the surface

so these can't be used as a weapon. All alcohol sales workers are provided with an earpiece connected to the supermarket store security team so they can discreetly call for assistance if needed. A panic alarm directly alerting supermarket and shopping centre security teams has also been provided. Centre security and the local police have increased their patrols around the liquor store and outside the supermarket. CCTV has been upgraded across the store and high price alcohol items placed in reinforced locked cabinets.

To allow for aisle congestion and interruptions from customers, the supermarket has allocated extra time to complete online picking orders, especially when there are customers in store. Workers are rotated through heavier pick aisles to reduce their exposure to manual handling.

The online trolley provider consulted workers about the design concerns. Modifications to the trolleys have reduced the quantity of products that can fit in each crate, reducing the overall weight and force required to move it. Staff use a smaller trolley with better visibility and handling characteristics during the busiest times. Where possible, bulky and heavy items such as dog food and drinks are now 'picked' directly from the truck or into crates when required.

Staff report they feel the workloads, in terms of time pressure and manual handling demands, are now more manageable and the increased job control has increased their ability to manage their fatigue and stress.