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# Managing Employee Voice

Ashish Malik

## Key Learning Outcomes

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- *Define the terms employee voice, direct and indirect employee voice*
- *Identify the reasons for differences in employee voice across geographical boundaries*
- *Understand the theoretical basis for employee voice and employee participation*
- *Evaluate the contribution of employee voice*

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## Introduction

This chapter deals with the ‘O’ in the AMO framework covered in chapters “[HRM and ER: A Strategic Perspective](#)” and “[Strategic HRM & ER: Best-Practice Versus Best Fit](#)”. While employees may have the necessary skills and motivation to apply those skills to productive tasks, sometimes, the workplace environment poses conditions where employees are unable to have a meaningful say in the key aspects and conditions affecting their employment. This chapter explores the idea of providing employees a voice for creating a healthy workplace environment. The presence of a pluralist approach to managing employment relations is not only necessary for the healthy working of an enterprise, it is increasingly becoming much more widespread. Little conflict is always desirable as it allows discourse and dialogue on issues that are competing in nature and affect wide range of stakeholders. Allowing

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employees voice in matters that affects their employment conditions and quality of work life is increasingly becoming a key consideration for employees in their intention to join an organisation. In other words, it is a key element of job value proposition in a number of employer of choice campaigns. Potential applicants develop insights into the real workings of their organisation through messaging—idealistic or realistic so that they will have a say in conditions of their work. In some well-known campaigns, messages can be direct or implied. For example, what is the nature of work climate and culture that one can expect to find at the tech giant Google. What would you expect a Googler to do in their typical day? How much freedom and autonomy would they expect to have in carrying out their routine and non-routine work tasks? How much fun do they have in day? In answering these questions, the messaging approach would provide insights for potential applicants in their decision-making. In most cases, the messages are somewhere on a continuum from idealistic to realistic. Nevertheless, these subtle forms of messaging that employers provide through their recruitment campaigns, gives potential applicants an inkling into the kind of work-life an employee can expect. Information and messaging about the extent of employee voice is a key aspect from an employer's recruitment perspective, but there are other aspects to explore once an applicant decides to commence employment at a workplace.

The industrial revolution had strengthened the role of trade unions in providing employees with indirect, and sometimes the only, voice platform for settling the terms and conditions of their employment. Employees can exercise voice at an individual level or through a collective. There are forms of voice that are direct, for example, forms of voice that individuals exercise through a range of workplace participation mechanisms. It is very likely that individual voice will require some form of support through a senior person or an individual who may have strong bargaining powers. Indirect and collective forms voice often takes the form of trade unions or other formal and informal employee representative groups. Managing employee voice, therefore, is a vital aspect of work life today, as it was earlier and it provides employees with all possible opportunities to have *their say* in matters affecting their employment (Boxall and Purcell 2011). This chapter outlines the nature and extent of employee voice mechanisms that are prevalent in workplaces today and evaluates the main forms and its significance in HRM. From a strategic perspective, regardless of the nature of employee voice mechanisms—direct or indirect voice—the central matter is the degree to which employees should have a say over the decisions that affect their employment.

## **Terrain of Employee Voice**

Employee voice has been in existence for more than a century though its nature and extent has changed tremendously. Almost 60 years ago, the premier journal in our field, *Human Resource Management*, in its second issue published in 1962, had an article highlighting that 'listening is good business' for managing people. Marking the 50th anniversary of this premier journal in 2011, a special issue was dedicated

to the topic of *Employee Voice*. This issue captures the variety and the changing contours of employee voice in the last half century or so. Among other influences, the issue covered the impact of technology, attitudes of society and industrial democracy on the nature and extent of employee voice. Earlier work on individual level employee voice has been influenced by the work of Hirschman (1970), who developed the exit-voice-loyalty (EVL) framework in which dissatisfied employees express their *voice* in the form of *exiting* (leaving/quitting) or by complaining. While framework was extremely popular during the peak of the trade unions movement, alternate forms of employee voice, especially more direct forms of employee voice have increased in recent times. By building *loyalty* among employees, this framework argues that employers can reduce the incidence of voice. Loyalty has been described in the framework as a reason for not voicing one's concerns. Following this work, Gehlbach (2006) attempted to extend this framework by including the notion of *employee silence*. Gehlbach (2006) viewed employee silence as a dynamic that is contingent upon the degree of bargaining power between the employee and the employer. *Silence* typically manifests as *apathy* (wherein an employee accepts status quo and accepts the work conditions due to the power imbalance) and *enforced silence* (typically occurs when there is no real opportunity for employees to express their voice—directly or indirectly or when management elects to suppress employee voice).

While apathetic employees demonstrate loyalty essentially by remaining silent, however, in the latter case of enforced silence, employees have no constructive mechanisms for raising voice. This situation has the potential to cause *harm* through *neglect* of employees. Such occurrences are increasingly seen in a neoliberal approach to management in today's times. Sustained levels of *silence* can lead to serious psychological harm and lead to adverse well-being outcomes such as stress, anxiety, depression and poor resilience. Benson (2000: 453) argues that, 'for some commentators independent unions are the only source of genuine voice', others Millward et al. (2000) note that employee voice has several channels. For example, indirect voice (through trade unions) other indirect forms of voice (such as through participation mechanisms such as joint consultative committees and work councils); and direct voice mechanisms such as by raising task-related voices directly with one's manager, upward problem solving and by making complaints. For example, direct voice can be exercised in the case of unfair and inequitable treatment of employees using employee involvement and participation programs. The roots of these latter direct voice mechanisms can be traced back to the human relations movement, the Japanese total quality management approaches of employee involvement and other employee participation programs. The extent of participation depends on what the contextual conditions offer and is also a function of the extent to which the institutional environment and labour management relations are at a workplace. The higher the degree of mutual trust the more likely one is expected to witness well-developed employee voice mechanisms. Marchington and Wilkinson (2005, p. 401) advanced the idea of an 'escalator of participation' of individual employees direct participation, wherein at the lowest level of the escalator, people freely share information (typically top-down) to briefings and communications

about matters that affect work issues. At the next level, consultation focuses on interacting between managers and employees wherein inputs are sought from both parties. The higher levels of the escalator of participation relates to codetermination where both parties collectively make decisions. Finally, the last stage focuses on control or self-control, wherein individuals and teams are in control of their decision-making.

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## Impact of Employee Voice

The literature on the impacts of direct and indirect voice mechanisms is voluminous and highlights a range of employee and employer outcomes. For example, organisations that have well developed mechanisms for employee voice have noted a reduction in employee turnover rates, increased levels of employee involvement and commitment, enhanced employee well-being, developing a sense of belonging, greater levels of engagement and improved productivity (Batt et al. 2002; Hirschman 1970; Freeman and Medoff 1984; Marchington and Grugulis 2000). Both employees and employers have a role to play in making a genuine contribution through employee voice mechanisms.

Another popular framework for understanding employee voice and managing employment relations using a pluralist frame is the one proposed by John Budd (2004). Budd argues for a need to have industrial democracy at the workplace. In an democratic industrial society, firms seek industrial democracy by balancing *equity-voice-efficiency*. By fair treatment of employees, we can achieve *equity* in, for example, the distribution of rewards and administration of HR/ER practices. This debate is rooted in the political economy literature. Second, the opportunity to provide your say into decisions that affect your employment i.e. through *voice* or having freedom of speech, and indirect worker participation through unions is vital in an industrial democracy. Finally, to attain economic gains or *efficiency* by producing goods and services in a competitive environment and servicing the needs of all stakeholders (including shareholders), employers can ensure there is a right balance between *equity-voice-efficiency*. Budd argues that unlike equity and efficiency, *voice* cannot be achieved unilaterally.

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## Critical Reflections

In what is essentially a liberal market environment, where policy makers and employers promote the idea of free trade, having strong *equity and voice* is unlikely as the focus is largely going to be on increasing efficiency. It is not surprising to note then that the International Labour Organisation's idea of allowing decent work for all (Budd 2004) is unlikely as the unions are getting weaker with lower density of membership. Furthermore, the nature of equity allowed by free markets is only restricted to minimum enforced standards of a small safety net for employees. The pro-market sentiment offers limited protections such as job security to employees as employers seek greater flexibility for their workforce mix and the conditions that

govern the same. In a bid to address the situation, Budd has argued for an increased role of introducing ethics into the discussion and whether consequentialist approaches to understanding ethics is enough or should one embrace more the ideas of virtue ethics as a means of restoring some balance? The sharpest conflicts are between efficiency on one hand and voice and equity at the other in the current system.

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## Illustrations and Skills Sandpit

What is also apparent is that a number of managers have started to adopt a hybrid approach wherein aspects of both direct and indirect voice mechanisms implemented collectively seem to deliver better outcomes for both the employer and employees. While there are no magic formulas for an ideal combination, a lot depends on the work culture, degree of trust and willingness between the parties for a genuine employee voice to employees. A stepped approach, similar to the escalator of participation can be gradually introduced, to build, over time, trust and hybrid forms of employee voice that are most effective for a given context.

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## Concept Integration with Cases and Learning Activities

The following case study provides a short scenario of conflict at workplace. The case explores how conflictual situations have an adverse impact on the wellbeing of employees. This is a much too common a situation in a number of high pressure roles typically found in the financial services industry.

### **Conflict in the Workplace and Need for Wellbeing (A)**

*Dr. Vidya S. Athota and Dr. Stephen Treloar, University of Notre Dame, Australia.*

#### **Work design at a Sydney Office**

The workers at head office traditionally get along quite well but in recent times tempers have become a little frayed and outbursts of anger have emerged. On the fourth-floor, there is a team of around 80 people, comprising journalists, sub-editors, office support personnel and clerical support people. It is an open plan style of office layout with extensive use made of approximately two-metre high partitions with various nests of work stations in combinations of four to six workstations per unit.

It is an old building in Sydney's CBD and the windows face west. Senior executive staff are on the sixth-floor and have more modern office facilities, including air conditioners with individual and separate control settings for each office. While the entire fourth floor has so called climate control ducted air conditioning system, it is over 20 years old and probably in need of

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updating. Due to limited budget, preference was not given for updating air conditioners. The environment at workplace was not up to the standard.

Conflict has escalated between small groups of staff members on this floor whom claim, “the air conditioning is too cold”, or conversely, others are complaining “the air conditioning is too hot”. Outbursts have included “I can’t work in this bloody heat any longer”, and “people keep changing the temperature setting on the control and should leave it alone!”. Furthermore, some of the staff members come from different parts of the world including the United States, UK, China, India and Japan. Some of the staff members wanted warm and some other preferred cold air conditioning. One of the staff member suggested that weather at his home country was warm and so he likes to have warm air condition while working. Another staff member mentioned that he was from Edinburgh and prefer cold air conditioning. These conflict preferences caused uneasiness and promoted some kind of uncomfortableness among some staff members.

An otherwise harmonious workplace on the fourth-floor is being eroded by this long standing and ongoing problem although complaints seem to have intensified since there were rumours emerging about possible redundancies at head office, due to the growth of digital media and its threat over traditional print media. Office kitchen became central place for discussing these rumours. Some staff members using their lunch time discussing about possible redundancies. Some senior members of the company are open for redundancies. The senior members thought that it would be easy for them get job in other palaces based on their seniority and redundancy was actually win-win deal for them. Some non-senior staff members were started to look for jobs in other companies and unable to give complete attention to the workplace activities. The negative attitude of these staff members was quite noticeable. Moreover, union representations have been made claiming the business is operating outside the legislation relating to workplace health and safety. There have even been ‘talk of a work stoppages’ (strikes)” to be called at “no to little notice.” The frustration of the staff members was reaching to its peak. Negative emotions of the staff members produced negative attitudes towards work commitment. Union representatives called for an emergency meeting to discuss the situation. Request for the Union membership was dramatically increased. Majority of the staff joined in Union in order to protect their jobs and any other consequences of redundancy. Meanwhile, overall productivity was dramatically decreased in the company. The staff members were visibly not unhappy and showed no commitment to work related activities.

On the fifth floor of the same business, another workplace issue has arisen. The 50 workers who work on this floor are involved in pre-press layout, artwork and photography of the same newspaper group that covers all regional newspapers in the group. The Manager for the department has a reputation of being “old school” and routinely yells and raises his voice in angst against

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workers. He has also been known to use colourful language at times in making a point. He meets the criteria for bullying at workplace. He goes on heavy on the staff who come from Asian countries. It appears to be the manager assumes that immigrant staff members do not speak against their authorities. It seems like the manager taking advantage of this opportunity. He also meets the criteria for racial discrimination. The morale was low among majority of the staff members. Some of the staff members openly talking about leaving the company. Absenteeism has noticeably increased and there are reports that a claim for bullying and harassment will shortly be lodged with the Fair Work Commission (the legislative arm of the Australian industrial relations authority). There has also been an increasing number of staff either arriving late for work, or taking breaks longer than their allocated time. The department manager prides himself on his “third-generation Australian heritage” and at times expressed views that might be considered racist, especially against those from certain Asian countries. Some observers note that there seems to be “one rule for Aussies, and another rule for Asians”. The department manager has banned the cooking (heating) of brought-from-home Asian dishes in the adjoining lunch room, due to the “pungent smell they emit”. Furthermore, Asian staff members felt that they were disadvantaged in promotion opportunities. One of the staff member was working for 10 years in same company without a promotion despite many Aussie staff members were promoted to senior levels. Staff members from Asian background were exhibited withdrawn behaviours on several workplace situations. They have come to terms with that their career will be negatively impacted. Aussie staff members were able to see discrimination was taking place in the company. It was clear overall productivity was effected due to lack active role all the staff members at the company. Overall, majority of the staff members emotional wellbeing was at its peak and far from happiness at work.

Finally, on the executive sixth-floor. The offices are lavishly furnished, with quality carpet, artwork, indoor plants and above all, superior air-conditioning that has separate control panels for the ten different offices, and reception area. Three years earlier there were 18 senior executives working in the business, located on this floor. With the downturn in business across print media business, the executive staff has been reduced down to just 10 executive people. While all remaining executive are relatively well paid, there is now an unwritten “rule” that executives are virtually on call, 24 h a day in the event of an emergency, or ‘breaking news story’. Executives are now working an average of 60 h per week and as they are equipped with laptops and mobile phones, they are expected to be “contactable” as required. The boundaries of work-life balance dramatically decreased. Some executive were working hard during the weekends. This has put tremendous pressure on their families. A small number of executive feel anxious and continue to think about work related things during weekends. The average age of executives is 55 and there

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are signs of burn-out beginning to appear with some of the more senior executives. The wellbeing and happiness of the executives was not in its best. The owner of the business is an Australian living in London and this newspaper group is one of many for which he owns. It is now only marginally profitable. Despite all the existing problems there were no specific policies to promote organisational health and safety, and wellbeing.

### Questions of the Case Study

1. What is occurring in this case and identify the parties affected by events reported in the case.
2. What are the general responsibilities of parties for workplace health, wellbeing, and safety in the workplace? How might these be addressed in the case?
3. What steps should be taken to address any undesirable phenomena?
4. What steps should be taken in promoting fairness in promotion opportunities?
5. What are the risk management exposures revealed in the case? And, how might these be addressed?

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## Conclusion

The three competing concepts of *equity*, *efficiency* and *voice* need to be managed and balanced in an employment relationship. The effectiveness of implementing employee voice depends on whether there is true intent or voice is simply deployed as a managerial add-on. If it is the latter, then it has the potential to become a fad and a means of gaining control over employees. The organisation will, in such instances, find it hard to win over the trust and buy-in of its employees—both of which are critical in gaining employee commitment and managing organisational change. Some might even argue that achieving balance in these competing goals is simply not possible in a *laissez-faire* market environment and a relatively weak institutional set of labour protection standards. Free markets demand efficiency and weak labour standards reduce equity, both of which will have an adverse impact on employee voice.

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## Glossary

**Employee voice** refers to the conditions where employees are allowed to have a meaningful say in matters affecting their terms and conditions of employment. This may be through individual or collective mechanisms and can also be direct or indirect.



**Industrial democracy** is an idea that is rooted in the political economy literature and argues that workers should further their emancipation and involvement in workplace decisions that have an impact on their conditions of employment.

**Trade unions** represent a lawful and an institutionalised form of employee representation for the purposes of bargaining the rights and responsibilities of employees towards their organisation. They can operate at a worksite level through an industry to a national level and sometimes may have a wider role than setting the terms and conditions of employment. For example, a number of trade unions in the services industry also provide a platform for skills and professional development and other benefits to their members.

**Work councils** is another form of institutionalised employee representative council that seeks to protect the conditions of employment of workers in an organisational setting.

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## Key Questions and Learning Activities

**Question. 1** Discuss to what extent is employee voice an important consideration in your decision to work at an organisation?

**Question. 2** If given a chance, would you undertake a role of employee participation representative and engage in collaborative decision-making? Provide a brief rationale for your choice.

**Question. 3** Trade unions are losing their might and more hybrid forms of employee voice will be needed in future to provide sustainable conditions of employment that offer decent work. Discuss the above statement.

### Learning Activity: Conflict in the Workplace and Need for Wellbeing (B)

*Dr Stephen Treloar and Dr Vidya S. Athota, University of Notre Dame*

#### **The Insurance Arm of a Leading Australian Bank**

My name is Stephen Treloar, sometimes I get approached to provide executive coaching direct to employees of companies and organisations, whom make contact with me (rather than being contracted by an employer) – this was the case with Jennifer. Jennifer was personally financing her own executive coaching, unlike the norm where executive coaching is financed by the employer. The Bank owned and operated its own insurance company as part of its widening of services to its customers, whilst the insurance company operated under its own insurance name brand, it was staffed by employees of the bank who were ‘seconded’ to work exclusively for the insurance company

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but under separate employment arrangements. The aim of the bank was to promote high performance work practices. But in reality not enough resources were provided to the staff members.

Jennifer was the newly appointed Claim Manager and was second in command in the business unit, she reported to the General Manager (of the insurance company), and had six direct reports. Jennifer was personally responsible for considering and approving all claims, with claims over 1 million dollars being referred to the General Manager for sign-off approval. The insurance company was a relatively new arm of The Bank in having traded for less than 5 years. The company management did not conduct personality assessment if Jennifer was suited for the job. They assumed that Jennifer would be able to perform the high demand job.

Jennifer needed assistance in how to handle a situation which was having dire consequences on her health, well-being, and happiness in the job. During a particularly heavy period for insurance claims (there had been widespread damage caused by an abnormal number of bushfires) Jennifer reported she had been working 7-days per week for the past four consecutive months and was tired and weary! Based on the nature of the job, Jennifer needed pay attention to all details in the application. This required all her personal and family time to spend on reading the applications and assessing them. The boundaries between work-life balance were significantly decreased. She has been preoccupied her weekends and majority of evenings about work related issues. During these stressful times, she did not realise the severity of emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, Jennifer brings her stress and anxiety related issues to the work place. Fellow staff members started to observe this in Jennifer. It was clear that Jennifer health was going to be effected.

She was the delegated officer to assess and approve (or disapprove) claims, and was overwhelmed with both the workload and expectation from her employer. Jennifer clearly understood the consequences of disapproving (or reducing the value of claims) on claimants, for whatever reason but was also been driven to ensure the insurance business remained profitable with claims only approved in accordance to strict conditions of the insurance company's own underwriter pursuant to its agreement.<sup>1</sup>

Jennifer was on an annual salary of \$80,000 (plus super) and had been promoted from within the insurance company, taking over from her predecessor who had suddenly left the company due to ill-health. This was a significant promotion for Jennifer and she wanted to do a great job and be recognised for

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<sup>1</sup>It is normal practice for insurance companies to cover their own insurance exposure by having an Insurance Underwriter "underwrite" claims against it to spread the risk of exposure across a much wider base of insurance providers. However, claims must be considered considering the terms and conditions of the underwriting, as well as complying to statute law, including consumer legislation.

her efforts and didn't mind doing "whatever it takes". It was her first appointment into a management role and was formerly a Claims Officer for the same company, on an annual salary of \$55,000 (plus super). There was no provision for overtime, nor was there any "time off in lieu" provided for in her new role. In her former role, she was employed under an Enterprise Agreement, whilst in her management role was employed under a Contract of Employment. There were certain promises made about the possibility of performance bonuses in her new role but these were not specifically included in her Contract of Employment. She was hopeful this might be amended once she had "proven herself". No bonuses had been offered to her or had been paid, nor had she been offered any time-off in lieu or other inducement or recognition for her service.

Jennifer was almost 12-months into her new role and was happy with being promoted to the job, however, when the bushfire season hit, she was deluged with work and, as earlier reported, was working 7 days per week for the past four consecutive months. She was exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Moreover, the pressure from work somewhat confused her thinking and had completely forgotten an important family reunion celebrating her parents 40th wedding anniversary. Jennifer was planning to arrive late in the afternoon on a Sunday after attending work that day but had "some-how" completely overlooked the occasion, despite having an entry in her diary. This caused a great deal consternation with her immediate family whom (wrongly assumed) she failed to recognize the importance of the occasion. Given the nature of her provider, Jennifer was able to access a housing loan of just 1.5% PA enabling her and partner to purchase a unit in the burgeoning Sydney market. She was also able to exceed the normal borrowing ratio of loan given in recognition of the nature of her employment.<sup>2</sup> The downside was she felt "trapped" inasmuch as committed to a mortgage through her employer knowing that if she left her current employment she would struggle financially to either replace the loan with another loan provider, or at the very least pay a much higher interest rate if she continued the loan through her current employer.

When asked "had she spoken to her Supervisor about her dilemma?" Jennifer responded, "she had" but "...the General Manager was not very responsive to her concerns or need". The General Manager was described, by her as "old school" quoting that "...young people moving into management, had to earn their stripes". She felt 'trapped' and was also concerned about the effect long hours was having in the personal relationship with her partner.

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<sup>2</sup>Lending providers generally loan within limited levels of LVR (loan valuation ratio) meaning the amount of money that will be provided as a loan based on a multiple of factors, including equity of the loan, and earnings which determine a borrower's capacity to repay loan repayments, as well as other considerations.

Jennifer's partner was demonstrating annoyance and frustration with her high work levels and time away from home; he was becoming increasingly "snappy and short" – beginning to show signs which resent the situation of long absences away at work. Jennifer felt uncomfortable and frightened that her relationship might be entering "rocky-ground". At home, Jennifer was preoccupied with these unpleasant thoughts and experiences. The Bank, and its independently operated insurance arm, adopted a culture of 'high performance work practices' with promotion and the payment of bonuses heavily weighted to performance. The insurance company arm had met or exceeded all its growth KPIs for new customers and premiums since Jennifer took up the role, for which the General Manager seemed to have taken most of the credit for. Whilst there was a 'blow-out' in expected claims due to the unprecedented number of recent widespread bushfires, these were mostly covered under its own underwriter risk management protection policy. In short, the insurance company appeared to be going very well, although the General Manager didn't provide any positive feedback of accomplishments. This also led to unhappiness for Jennifer and her team, which was beginning to affect their motivation, enthusiasm, and even physical/medical wellbeing. Jennifer was becoming very unpopular with her direct reports as she allocated increased workloads to each staff member. The absentee rates from her direct reports were running at over 15% and she had "heard by the grapevine" that one of the employees (although unsure which one) was planning to report oppressive work conditions to WorkCover.<sup>3</sup> Jennifer's wellbeing started to be negatively impacted by workplace challenges.

### Questions of the Case Study

1. Identify each of the parties affected by events reported in the case.
2. What are the issues of concern for each of the affected parties?
3. What are the general responsibilities of parties for workplace health, wellbeing, and safety in the workplace? How might these be addressed in the case?
4. What are the risk management exposures revealed in the case? And, how might these be addressed?
5. What advice would you provide to Jennifer?

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<sup>3</sup>WorkCover is a government agency operating in the NSW jurisdiction, responsible for investigating industrial employment issues related to workplace, health, and safety. It has a policy of investigating all complaints made against employers, including complaints made anonymously.

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