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Productivity Commission Mental Health Inquiry

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The mental health of the self-employed is important

For many years COSBOA has attempted to get the recognition that a self-employed person is just that, a person, with all the same health issues as the other group of people in the workplace, the employees. We are all people.

Some six years ago there was a day when the needs of the self-employed reached a low point when it came to health. In those days the Department of Health, the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), the ACTU and even peak employer groups did not recognise self-employed as people. It was on that day we received a visit from a representative from the Department of Health who asked us to sign a joint statement about healthy workplaces. The statement mentioned employees and workers and the responsibilities of employers. We asked why there was no mention of the health of the self-employed? There were some 2.5 million Australians in workplaces who were invisible as human beings to the Department of Health and peak industry bodies. Why?

That same day our CEO received a call from the AHRC. One of their staff complained that they were running a program about helping employees in the workplace who had mental health problems but couldn't get small businesses involved. He explained why that was difficult and how they could get better results. He also asked, "if an employer has a mental health problem is this an issue for the Human Rights Commission?" The AHRC official went silent and then said "I'll have to check." What other answers could there be besides yes? The official had gone silent as she had never considered an employer a human being.

Not much later we ran a panel on the health of the self-employed at one of our annual summits in Melbourne. A representative from WorkSafe Victoria rang and asked if they could participate, which our CEO thought would be great and he was indeed very pleased with their interest. But just to make sure he pointed out that the panel was about the health of the person who was the employer and of the self-employed in general. The WorkSafe official went silent and then said 'well, no that isn't something we are interested in.' Our CEO challenged him asking if he cared if a self-employed person had a mental health problem and he replied 'we are only interested in workers'. Our CEO asked 'how can a workplace be healthy if there are say 5 people in the workplace but you only consider the health of 4 of them?' The WorkSafe official hung up.

These events show just how much the self-employed had become invisible as human beings, how ideologues had won the battle and our regulators and policy makers had lost the sense of reality.

Why has the mental health of the self-employed been ignored? Because there are people including policy makers who say to the self-employed ‘you know what you signed up for’ or ‘you know what you are getting into’. They believe that business to business activity and competition between businesses is inherently equal. It obviously isn’t. Others think that you can somehow or other have a healthy workplace if you force the owner of a business to ignore his or her own health and concentrate on the health of others. They all seem to believe that creating complex employment processes is OK as the employer will just have to ‘step up to the mark’. They understand ideology but not the reality of the modern small business workplace.

The question for the ideologues is how can a workplace be safe and healthy if the health of even one person is excluded from consideration? The fact is that most workers will want and even demand that the small business employer, the person who provides them with an income and a sense of worth, is healthy. They will want what a normal human being wants, other human beings to be blessed with good health. Most employers care for his or her workers, that’s what most people do, they care.

The reality is that you cannot possibly have a healthy workplace if you force one person to work harder and longer for others. The fact is that jobs will be less secure and workplaces less safe if the employer is not considered as a person.

Yet, we still have many people in positions of influence who either don’t understand that we are people or just refuse to understand as it interferes with their textbook beliefs. That the self-employed would have human rights is not a bad thing.

The Productivity Commission should recommend that policy assessment processes include assessment of the impact on individuals who run a business.

There should also be a review into just what is reasonable to ask a self-employed person to complete and what their responsibilities are when it comes to government reporting and workplace management. The review should consider just what is possible and what is necessary for small business people to complete. Then the review can make recommendations on which processes can be changed to assist in creating and maintaining a mentally healthy workplace.

In the end if there are, for example five people in a workplace and we only consider the mental health of four of these people, the employees, then we put the jobs of those four at risk. We potentially fail those four people.

The mental health of everyone in a workplace must be considered, including the owner who employs no one else, who is a sole operator, as well as the mental health of individuals who employ other individuals.

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