



HANSEN ADVOCATES

ONE VISION. ONE FIRM

# “OUR TAKE”

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**“PREVENTING WORKPLACE SUICIDE”**

***A Comprehensive Approach to Employee Well-being***

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## Introduction

In recent years, the discussion surrounding mental health has gained significant traction, especially in the workplace. September, recognized as Suicide Prevention Month, serves as a stark reminder of the need to address mental health issues within our work environments. The workplace, while often a source of personal satisfaction and financial security, can also pose significant risks when mental wellness is not prioritized. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Ministry of Health of Kenya's 2023 guidelines on workplace mental wellness, the impact of work on an individual's mental health is multifaceted and complex.

This article explores the intersection of work and mental health, emphasizing the importance of proactive measures to prevent suicide and promote mental well-being in the workplace.

## Understanding the Workplace as a Risk Factor

Work can be both protective and detrimental to an individual's mental health. On the one hand, meaningful work provides a sense of purpose, financial stability, and social connections—all of which are protective factors against mental health issues. On the other hand, poorly managed work environments can significantly increase the risk of mental health problems, including suicidal ideation.



## Key workplace factors that contribute to an increased risk of suicide include:

- **Job Insecurity and Low Pay:** Economic stressors such as low job security and inadequate compensation can lead to anxiety, depression, and in severe cases, suicidal thoughts. Employees who constantly worry about their financial stability are at a heightened risk of developing mental health issues.
- **Workplace Bullying:** Bullying and harassment in the workplace are significant contributors to mental distress. A toxic work culture, where employees feel unsupported or discriminated against, can exacerbate existing mental health conditions and increase the risk of suicide.
- **Access to Lethal Means:** In certain industries, employees may have access to medications, firearms, or other lethal means. Without proper safeguards, this access can lead to fatal outcomes, particularly for those already struggling with mental health issues.
- **Work Organization Factors:** Long work hours, shift work, and high job demands can lead to burnout, fatigue, and chronic stress. These conditions, when left unaddressed, can culminate in severe mental health issues.
- **High-Risk Occupations:** Certain occupations, such as those in law enforcement, healthcare, and construction, have been found to have higher suicide rates. These jobs often involve high levels of stress, exposure to traumatic events, and access to lethal means.



## The Kenyan Context: Mental Health at the Workplace

The Ministry of Health of Kenya's 2023 National Guidelines on Workplace Mental Wellness underscores the importance of promoting mental well-being at work. In Kenya, approximately 24.9 million people are part of the workforce, with an estimated 3.7 million living with mental health conditions. The most common conditions include anxiety, depression, substance use disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar mood disorder. These conditions not only affect individual employees but also have a profound impact on productivity and economic outcomes.

Mental health issues are a significant economic burden, costing the Kenyan economy approximately KES 62.2 billion (US\$571.8 million) in 2020 alone. This loss is largely attributed to absenteeism, presenteeism, and premature mortality, all of which are preventable with the right interventions.

## Strategies for Preventing Suicide in the Workplace

To effectively address the risk of suicide in the workplace, employers must take a proactive and comprehensive approach to mental health. Here are key strategies that can help:

- **Promote a Supportive Work Environment:** Creating a positive work culture where employees feel valued, respected, and supported is crucial. This includes implementing policies that prevent workplace bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Regular training on mental health awareness and suicide prevention can also help destigmatize these issues.



- **Provide Access to Mental Health Resources:** Employers should ensure that employees have access to mental health resources, such as counseling services, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and mental health days. Providing confidential support can encourage employees to seek help when needed.
- **Foster Work-Life Balance:** Encouraging a healthy work-life balance is essential in preventing burnout and stress-related mental health issues. Employers can offer flexible working arrangements, reasonable workloads, and adequate time off to help employees recharge and maintain their mental well-being.
- **Implement Workplace Mental Wellness Programs:** Following the recommendations of the Kenya Mental Health Action Plan, workplaces should establish mental wellness programs that focus on prevention, early intervention, and support for employees with mental health conditions. These programs should include regular mental health check-ins, stress management workshops, and peer support networks.
- **Restrict Access to Lethal Means:** In industries where employees have access to potentially lethal means, employers should implement strict safety protocols to minimize risk. This includes secure storage of medications, firearms, and other hazardous materials.
- **Encourage Open Communication:** Employers should foster an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns without fear of retribution. Open communication can help identify at-risk individuals and provide them with the necessary support before a crisis occurs.



## Conclusion

The workplace plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's mental health. While it can be a source of fulfillment and stability, it can also contribute to significant mental health challenges if not properly managed. As Suicide Prevention Month reminds us, it is imperative that employers take active steps to create a work environment that prioritizes mental wellness. By promoting a supportive culture, providing access to resources, and implementing comprehensive wellness programs, we can significantly reduce the risk of suicide in the workplace and ensure that every employee can work productively, fruitfully, and with peace of mind.





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