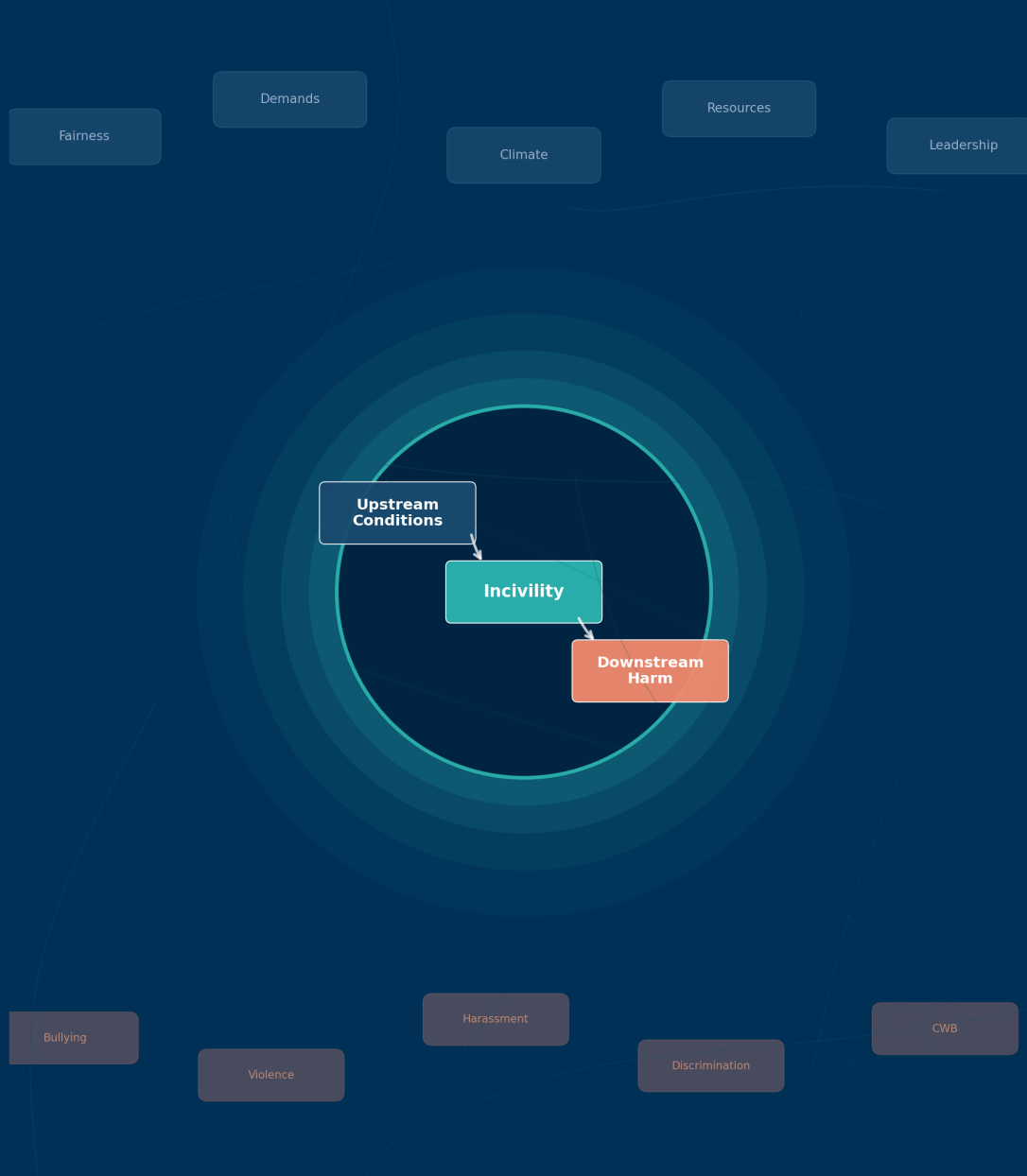


Between Cause and Crisis

How Incivility Connects Upstream Risk
to Downstream Harm

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Between Cause and Crisis: How Incivility Connects Upstream Risk to Downstream Harm

This paper maps the relationships between upstream organisational conditions, workplace incivility, and downstream harmful behaviours. Drawing on Mibo's FIP model, PRPA data, and a 37-organisation financial study, it demonstrates that monitoring incivility is a key to **proactive** psychosocial risk and protection management.

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The Missing Middle

Psychosocial risk doesn't operate in neat categories. Upstream conditions like unfairness, excessive demands, and poor leadership flow through an organisation's relational environment before surfacing as the harmful behaviours that trigger formal complaints and compensation claims.

Understanding how these factors connect is a key to proactive psychosocial risk and protection management.

Sitting at the junction between upstream conditions and downstream harm is a construct most programs don't fully understand or pay enough attention to: **workplace incivility**. It is the everyday disrespect that emerges when work design fails and accumulates into something far more damaging when left unaddressed.

Incivility doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens for a reason. When fairness erodes, when demands overwhelm resources, when leadership is absent, civility is the first casualty. And when incivility takes hold, it becomes the pathway through which upstream pressures convert into bullying, harassment, violence, and discrimination.



This whitepaper draws on Mibo's FIP (Factor Influence & Prediction) model analysis, PRPA data, and a 37-organisation financial study to map these relationships, and to make the case that **monitoring incivility is one of the most powerful tools available for proactive psychosocial risk and protection management**. Not because incivility is more important than the upstream factors that cause it, but because it reveals what's happening upstream before the downstream consequences emerge.

Why does this matter financially?

Across 37 organisations, incivility's position in the psychosocial chain explains **61.3% of the variance in non-productive salary**. The difference between high-incivility and low-incivility organisations represents **\$10.2 million annually** for a 500-person workforce.

What Is Workplace Incivility?

Workplace incivility is low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm, carried out in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. In practice: dismissive comments, ignoring input in meetings, failing to give credit, condescending tone, excluding colleagues, and curt emails. The ambiguity of intent is what makes it insidious, instigators can always claim they 'didn't mean it.'

Unlike bullying (persistent, targeted, power-imbalanced) or harassment (discriminatory intent), incivility is subtle, deniable, and low-intensity. It goes undetected and unaddressed until it escalates.

What Mibo's Data Reveals

Mibo's PRPA measures incivility across both harm (risk) and protective (benefit) dimensions, each scored on a 0–100 scale. Across 37 organisations, incivility harm scores range from 15 to 60 (mean 36.4), while civility benefit scores average just 23.0. For most organisations, harm outweighs benefit , incivility is a negative force in the psychosocial environment.

The Canary in the Coal Mine

Miners once relied on canaries to detect toxic gas before it reached dangerous levels. The bird's distress was the signal that something invisible was building. Workplace incivility functions in precisely the same way.

Mibo's analysis across multiple organisations reveals a finding with profound implications:

When organisational conditions worsen, incivility rises first.

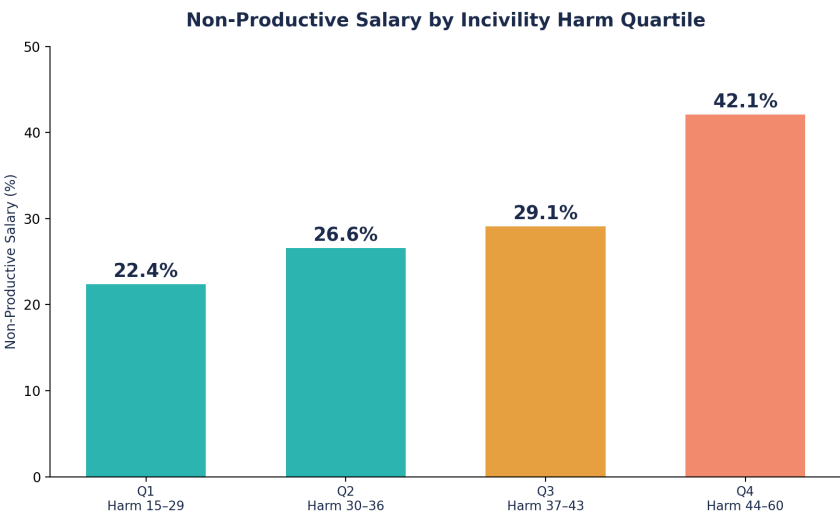
Before leader support declines. Before co-worker relationships fracture. Before any other relationship metric moves. Incivility is the most sensitive indicator of Work Design deterioration.

$r = 0.844$ | Huber $R^2 = 0.710$ | Permutation $p = 0.002$

When work design fails , when demands exceed resources, when role clarity erodes , the first observable signal is a rise in everyday disrespect. Not bullying. Not formal grievances. **Rudeness.** The canary starts to falter.

The Critical Threshold

When we divide the 37 organisations into quartiles by incivility harm score, a clear tipping point emerges. The bottom three quartiles (harm scores below 43) show a gradual increase in non-productive salary. But organisations in the top quartile , those with harm scores above 43 , experience a dramatic acceleration:



The jump from Q3 to Q4 is 13 percentage points of additional non-productive salary. Organisations in the top quartile are losing 42.1% of salary to non-productive time , nearly double the 22.4% in the bottom quartile.

Practical takeaway: Monitor incivility levels across your workforce. Rising scores signal upstream deterioration before formal complaints emerge. Falling scores confirm your upstream interventions are working.

What Creates Incivility: Upstream Drivers

Incivility is not primarily a 'bad apple' problem. It is a systemic outcome of how work is designed. Mibo's PRPA data shows that other psychosocial work factors are **9.5 times more likely** than bullying and harassment to be reported as contributing high harm to mental health. The upstream conditions create incivility.

Fairness: The Single Most Powerful Driver

Mibo's FIP model analysis quantifies what 25 years of research has consistently shown , perceived injustice is the primary trigger for incivility:

Procedural Fairness: 10.5% average influence

The single most influential harm-side driver of incivility across multiple client datasets (range: 6.0% – 21.1%). Ranked #1 of all upstream factors. When employees perceive that processes, decisions, and resource allocation lack fairness, incivility rises.

Why Fairness Is So Powerful: The Neuroscience

Research from UCLA reveals why fairness exerts such a disproportionate influence on workplace behaviour. Tabibnia, Satpute, and Lieberman (2008) found that the human brain responds to fairness the same way it responds to winning money or eating chocolate , it activates the brain's reward circuitry.

When participants in the study received fair offers in a money-sharing task, the ventral striatum and ventromedial prefrontal cortex became active , the same reward regions that fire when receiving food, winning money, or seeing a beautiful face. But when offers were unfair, the insula (associated with disgust) activated instead. Accepting an unfair offer required the prefrontal cortex to override the disgust response , it literally takes self-control to swallow unfairness.

The implications for the workplace are profound. The ventral striatum is a brain region we share with rats, where it activates when receiving food. Scientists believe this indicates that **being treated fairly may have evolved as a basic human need** , as fundamental as food or safety. Throughout human history, the ability to cooperate for the greater good of the group would have contributed to species survival. When organisations violate this deep-seated need through unfair processes, decisions, or resource allocation, the neurological response is not rational disappointment , it is visceral disgust. And that disgust is the seed from which incivility grows.

Demands and Resources

Mibo data delivers a critical refinement: **it is not demand severity that matters, but the balance between demands and resources**. The general level of Work Design risk has essentially no relationship with relationship outcomes ($r = 0.06$). High demands are sustainable when accompanied by adequate resources. The strongest individual pathway: Emotional Demands $\rightarrow$ Incivility ($p = 0.698$, $r = 0.870$).

FIP analysis across multiple clients confirms that fairness and demands are structurally consistent predictors across every organisation. Contextual factors like uncivil climate and passive leadership also contribute, when leaders model or tolerate disrespect, it signals that incivility is acceptable.

Practical takeaway: The strongest pathway runs from emotional depletion and perceived unfairness through to everyday disrespect. Address fairness and demand management together for the most significant reduction in incivility.

Where Incivility Leads



The incivility spiral describes how low-level disrespect escalates through reciprocation. When someone perceives unfair treatment, negative emotions drive tit-for-tat dynamics. If unresolved, mild incivility transforms into overt aggression. Research positions incivility, bullying, and physical violence on a continuum, and longitudinal evidence confirms the escalation.

Incivility and harassment are not separate problems. They co-occur in organisations, with gender harassment functioning as the bridge between everyday rudeness and targeted discriminatory behaviour. Evidence from large-scale studies confirms that gender and race predict vulnerability to uncivil treatment, meaning 'general rudeness' can function as veiled discrimination.

What Mibo's FIP Model Confirms

FIP analysis identifies the upstream factors that most powerfully drive bullying and harassment exposure:

Bullying: 46.44% of incidence explained

Top drivers: Unfairness, Emotional Demands, Cognitive Demands, Productivity Hindrances, and Incivility.

Harassment: 35.05% of incidence explained

Same factors plus Counterproductive Behaviour, which appears only on the harm wing as a pure toxic amplifier (6.9% average influence). Its presence increases harm, but its absence does not create civility.

Practical takeaway: Incivility sits at the centre of the escalation pathway , both a downstream consequence of upstream risk and an upstream driver of more severe harm. Address the upstream conditions that create incivility early, and you interrupt the chain before bullying, harassment, and violence emerge.

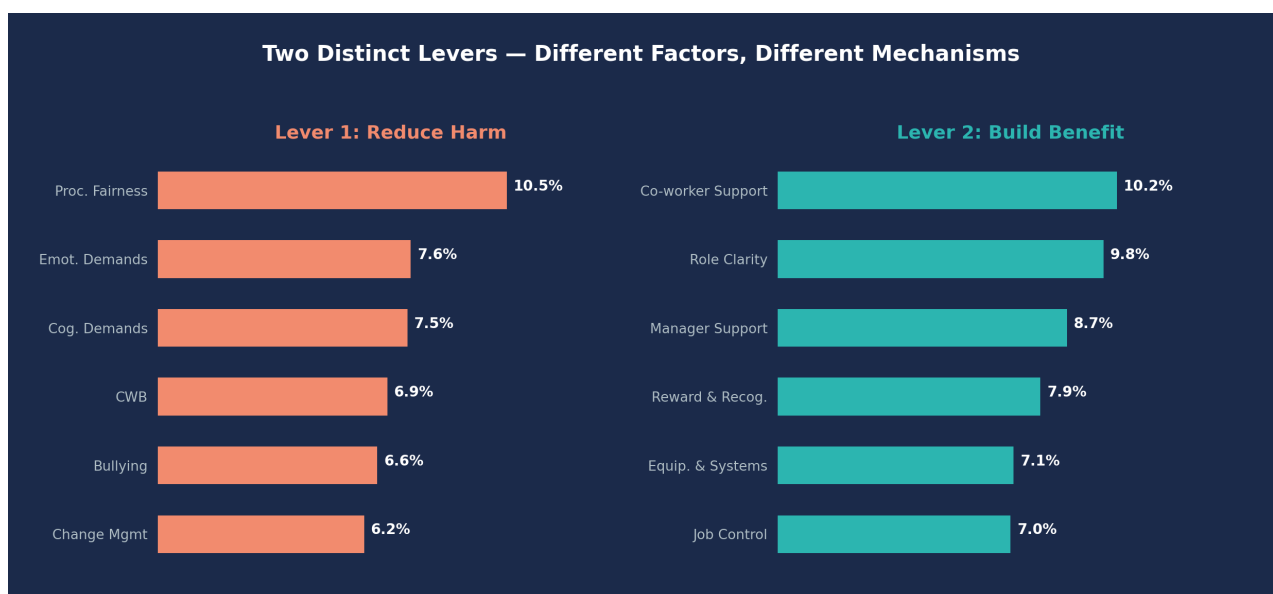
Two Levers: Reducing Harm vs Building Civility

Is reducing incivility the same process as building civility? The intuitive answer is yes. The data says no.

Mibo's FIP model analysis reveals a striking asymmetry:

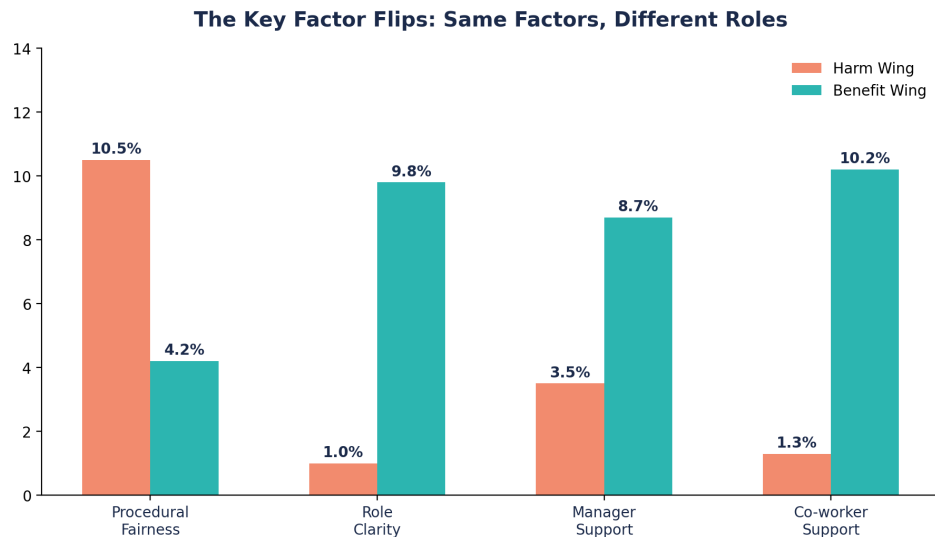
The factors that drive incivility harm are almost entirely different from those that build civility benefit.

Reducing harm and building benefit are two distinct levers. Organisations that pull only one will get incomplete results.



Source: Mibo FIP model, harm wing (multiple client datasets) and benefit wing analysis

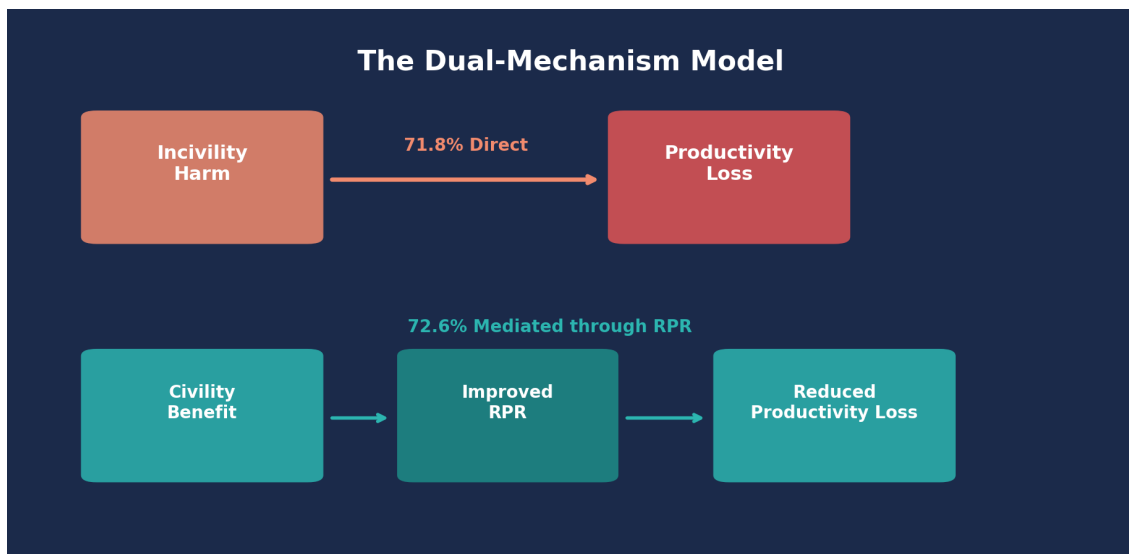
The Key Insight: Factor Flips



Procedural Fairness is a hygiene factor, its absence causes damage but its presence alone does not create civility. **Role Clarity** is the opposite: the most consistent benefit-side driver that barely registers on harm. **Support** builds civility rather than preventing harm.

The Dual-Mechanism Model

The 37-organisation study reveals **how** these levers operate through different mechanisms:



Practical takeaway: **Lever 1** (harm reduction) should target fairness, demand management, and toxic behaviour elimination. **Lever 2** (benefit building) should target role clarity, interpersonal support, recognition, and resources. Both levers must be pulled simultaneously.

The Financial Case

The Core Finding

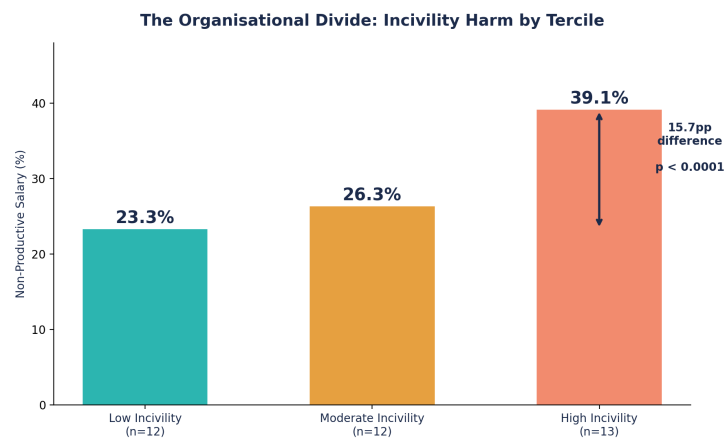
61.3%

of the variance in non-productive salary across 37 organisations is explained by a single variable: **incivility harm**. ($r = 0.783$, $p = 0.815$, $p < 0.0001$, $R^2 = 0.613$)

Civility benefit explains 40.0% of variance ($r = -0.633$, $p < 0.0001$). Harm is 1.5× stronger than benefit , confirming the asymmetry identified in FIP analysis. Both matter, but harm reduction should be prioritised when resources are limited.

The Organisational Comparison

Dividing the 37 organisations into thirds by incivility harm score reveals a striking pattern , the gap between the best and worst is not incremental, it is transformational:



What This Means in Dollars

Scenario (500 employees, \$130K avg salary)	Productivity Impact	Annual \$ Value
Each 1-point harm reduction	0.74 pp less non-productive	\$483,000
5-point harm reduction	3.7 pp less non-productive	\$2,414,000
10-point harm reduction	7.4 pp less non-productive	\$4,828,000
High → Low incivility (tercile split)	15.7 pp less non-productive	\$10,233,000
1-point RPR improvement	9.4 pp less non-productive	\$6,110,000

The financial logic is direct: poor work design depletes employees, depleted employees become uncivil, incivility erodes the psychosocial environment, and a deteriorating environment translates directly to less salary converted to productive output. Each step in this chain is now quantified.

Recommendations

Monitoring incivility does not replace addressing upstream causes , it **reveals** them. Organisations that understand these relationships gain the ability to detect upstream risk earlier, intervene before escalation, and

measure whether their interventions are working.

1. Understand the upstream-to-downstream chain

Map the relationships between work design conditions, incivility, and downstream harmful behaviours. This understanding is the foundation for targeted, effective intervention.

2. Address the upstream conditions that create incivility

Procedural Fairness is the #1 harm-side driver (10.5%). Emotional and cognitive demands deplete capacity for civil interaction. Addressing root causes is how organisations sustainably reduce incivility.

3. Monitor incivility as the early warning system

Include validated incivility measurement in regular psychosocial risk assessments. Rising scores signal upstream deterioration before formal complaints emerge. Falling scores confirm interventions are working.

4. Pull both levers simultaneously

Reducing harm requires targeting fairness, demand management, and toxic behaviour elimination. Building benefit requires targeting role clarity, support, recognition, and resources. Different mechanisms, both are needed.

5. Prioritise role clarity and interpersonal support

Role Clarity is the most consistent benefit-side driver. Manager and co-worker support build the relational environment in which civility flourishes. These are civility builders, not just harm preventers.

6. Use RPR as the primary financial monitoring KPI

With $R^2 > 0.84$ for predicting productive salary proportion, RPR provides a single metric integrating risk and protective factors with a direct line to financial outcomes.

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Introducing Mibo

Mibo is a **next-generation** Psychosocial Risk Management technology platform helping organisations embrace a rigorous approach to creating supportive psychosocial work environments.

Our solution combines the **Psychosocial Risk and Protection Assessment (PRPA)**, industry-leading analysis and reporting, an **advanced Control Measure Module system**, and the leveraging of emerging technologies to enhance capability, efficiency, and precision in managing psychosocial risks.

Discover more about Mibo's innovative approach to Psychosocial Risk and Protection Management.

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Introducing Australian Psychological Services

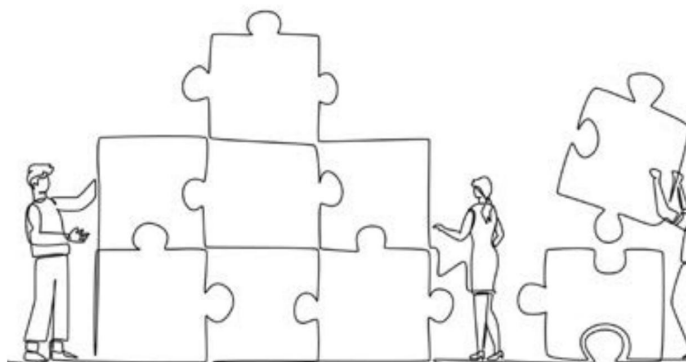
Since 2010, APS has been a **leading provider** of workplace mental health solutions and **specialist psychological services**, both Australia-wide and internationally.

As a specialist psychological consultancy, we provide a **broad range** of workplace mental health and wellbeing solutions, including mental health and wellbeing strategy development, psychosocial risk management services, as well as training and development.

At APS, we believe that good work is good for people and that when we get it right, **work can be a protective factor for mental health**. As such, our approach focuses on the **prevention** of psychological harm but also seeks to promote the **positive elements** of work to improve performance, productivity and create thriving workplaces.

Renowned for our innovation and impact, APS operate through a national and international team of senior psychologists with an emphasis on evidence-informed initiatives that are theoretically robust and highly practical, culminating in our motto “when rigour matters”.

You can learn more about APS services [here](#)



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