

Perpetration of workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment

This fact sheet explores what workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment (WTFSH) is, who is perpetrating it, and what prevention and responses could look like.

The findings are drawn from a national perpetration survey, interviews with industry stakeholders and focus groups with young people (aged 18–39 years), as part of the ANROWS research project, “Technology-facilitated sexual harassment in the workplace: Perpetration, responses and prevention”, led by Asher Flynn with Anastasia Powell and Lisa Wheildon.

What is WTFSH?



Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment (WTFSH) involves **unwelcome and/or threatening sexual conduct using mobile, online and other digital technologies in a workplace context**. It can include a wide range of behaviours **within and beyond** the physical location of the workplace, and **during or after** business (working) hours.

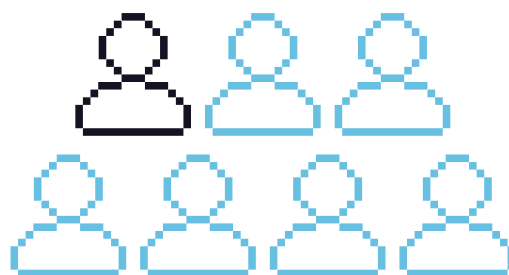
Behaviours may include **unwelcome sexual advances; comments and jokes; sexual requests; relational pursuit (including monitoring or stalking behaviours); threats of physical violence such as rape; sexually explicit and abusive communications; non-consensually taking, sharing or threatening to share, nude or sexual images** (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2020, p. 77).

WTFSH can be perpetrated by **co-workers, contractors, suppliers, customers, clients, and by general community members**, for example, engaging in WTFSH behaviours towards a public or high-profile figure due to their work (e.g. journalists, academics and politicians).

(Flynn et al., 2024, p. 9)

1 in 7

Australian adults surveyed report engaging in workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment



Gender is a significant factor in perpetration

Men are more likely to report engaging in WTFSH compared to women.

24% of men surveyed said they had engaged in WTFSH

7% of women surveyed said they had engaged in WTFSH

45% of people who reported engaging in WTFSH work in a male-dominated workplace

Reports of engaging in WTFSH were somewhat lower in workplaces with roughly equal numbers of men and women (39%) and drastically lower in workplaces with mostly women employees (16%).



Perpetrators often minimise their behaviour

Most people who engaged in WTFSH minimised the seriousness of their behaviours, saying that they:

52% "thought the person was okay with it"

45% "thought the person would be flattered"

42% "thought it was funny"

41% "wanted to pursue a sexual or other personal relationship with them"

Others reported they had ill intentions

More than 1 in 4 people reported they were motivated by negative feelings, saying that they:

31% wanted to "annoy" the victim and survivor

30% wanted to "hurt the feelings" of the victim and survivor

31% wanted to "express their anger" towards the victim and survivor

30% wanted to "humiliate" the victim and survivor

30% wanted to "frighten" the victim and survivor

Sexist and discriminatory attitudes and beliefs are two of the strongest predictors of engaging in WTFSH

People who strongly hold sexist and gender-discriminatory attitudes – such as that women often flirt with men just to be hurtful or that men generally make more capable bosses than women – were over

15x more likely

to say they've engaged in WTFSH than those who don't have those attitudes.

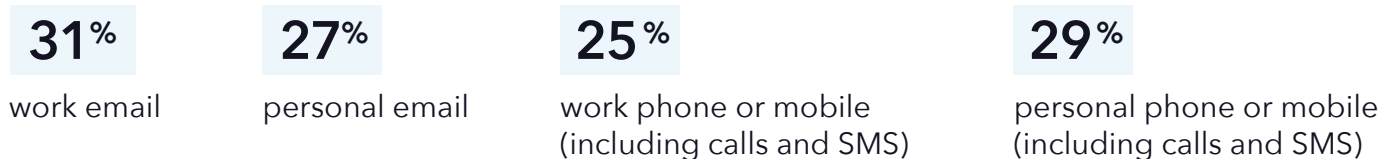
Participants who strongly believe sexual harassment myths – like that women enjoy being hit on at work or that stopping sexual harassment at work is as simple as telling your colleague you're not interested – were almost

5x more likely

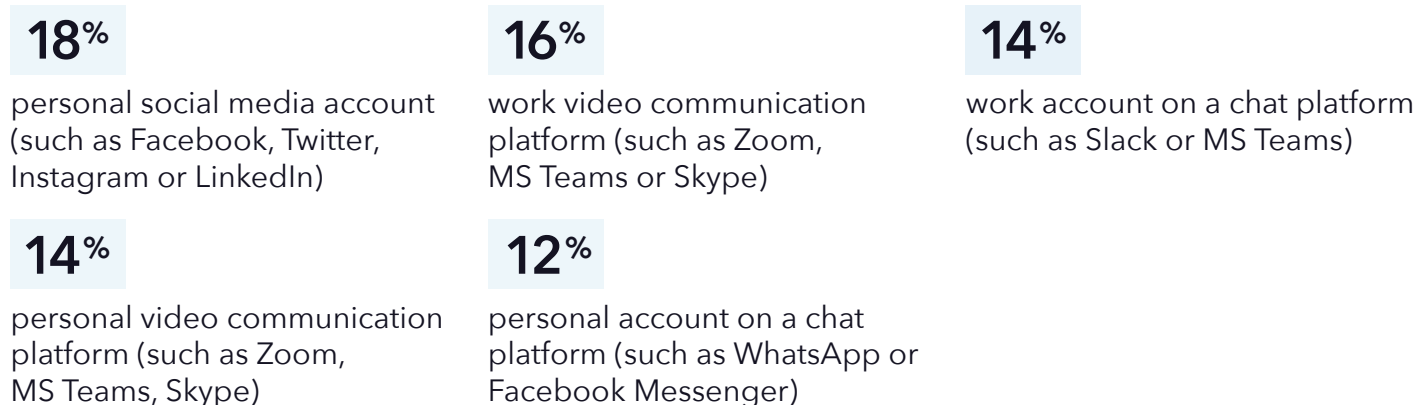
to report engaging in WTFSH than those who don't believe in these myths.

Perpetrators use a variety of work and personal platforms to engage in WTFSH

People who had engaged in WTFSH were asked about the devices and platforms used the last time they had engaged in WTFSH. **The most common devices and platforms used were:**



Other devices and platforms include:



The following quotes are from interviews with industry stakeholders about how technology is used and focus groups with young people (aged 18–39 years) about their experiences of WTFSH.

We have been involved directly in cases where you have employees that may set up WhatsApp groups or messenger groups where the purpose is to cement employee relationships and bonds ... and there have been some instances where people have engaged in those sorts of groups in ways that were not appropriate ...

Research participant, industry interviews

The trend that's happening now is that it seems to come from not just the one platform. It's often multiplatformed, so people, if they really want to target someone, perpetrators are targeting Instagram, but then also LinkedIn and Facebook, all at the same time. Sometimes these can be personal messages, so DMs, and personal messages ... but they can happen across platforms.

Research participant, industry interviews

I've had an experience where a colleague has access to my movements, so my calendar, they can see my meetings and the location of my meetings, and by doing so, they're aware of my movements and they try to - yeah, stalkerish behaviour. ... So, it's through those technology platforms that they can do other things outside of work.

Research participant, focus groups

I have my mobile number on the email signature, and someone can take that and then use that to message me something inappropriate.

Research participant, focus groups

Perpetrators report few consequences for engaging in WTFSH

Of the 1 in 7 people who reported engaging in WTFSH, less than half (39%) said that a formal report or complaint had ever been made against them for such behaviours. The most common responses to reports of WTFSH were:



[People worry about] the professional repercussions from speaking out about when they experience these kinds of forms of harassment ... [They don't want to be seen as] ... "making a fuss", or they're "hard to work with", or they're just being "overly sensitive", that kind of thing.

Research participant, focus group

What can workplaces and policymakers do?

WTFSH needs to be better understood and taken seriously by employees, employers and leadership

The findings highlight the need for technology-facilitated sexual harassment to be taken just as seriously as in-person sexual harassment.

I think it's very risky for technology-facilitated sexual harassment to be conceptualised as something different or novel or unique. It is still sexual harassment. It's just delivered through a different medium and it's no less important, or the experience of it is no less meaningful or awful, simply because it happens through your phone or through Facebook from one of your colleagues.

Research participant, focus group

The findings also emphasise the unique nature of technology-facilitated sexual harassment and the ways in which technologies used for work are also part of an employee's home life.

Probably the key kind of difference in terms of how people experience technology-facilitated sexual harassment is that it can come home with them in more ways than if you're just experiencing it at work. Which can be really violating.

Research participant, focus group

I mean, this is 24 hours a day, right? This isn't limited to just when you're in the workplace and particularly with people working more from home and not being in an environment where you're around people.

Research participant, focus group

Employees have clear ideas about what they wanted to see from employers and governments

Focus group discussions identified the following ideas about what was needed to build workplace cultures that were equipped to prevent and respond to WTFSH:



A clear definition of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour concerning work contexts and digital technologies is needed. Workplace policies on sexual harassment – both internal and government regulations/mandated requirements – should specifically mention WTFSH.



A cultural change regarding appropriate and inappropriate conduct on digital technologies in the work context is needed. Cultural change needs to start at the top with leadership, which can be further strengthened with training and policies that engage with relatable case studies and scenarios.



A focus on “safety by design” (that is, anticipating, detecting and eliminating harms before they occur by factoring safety into the design of any technology) in the development of workplace technologies (e.g. shared calendars) is needed. These considerations need to be included within workplace policies to reiterate a culture of what is and is not appropriate or acceptable workplace conduct.



Ready to take action?

Australian employers have a legal obligation under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) to take “reasonable and proportionate measures” to eliminate sexual harassment and workplace environments that are hostile on the basis of sex (AHRC, 2023).

This positive duty “aims to create change by preventing workplace sex discrimination, sexual harassment and other unlawful behaviour from happening” (AHRC, 2023).

Addressing and seeking to prevent technology-facilitated sexual harassment related to the workplace is a critical part of meeting this positive duty.

Get started with a range of free tools and resources to support your work in preventing workplace sexual harassment. Go to **“Lead the Change”** at **Our Watch** for more.

Sources

Australian Human Rights Commission. (2020). *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*. AHRC. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/respectwork-sexual-harassment-national-inquiryreport-2020>

Australian Human Rights Commission. (2023). *What is the Positive Duty?* AHRC. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/what_is_the_positive_duty_0.pdf

Flynn, A., Powell, A., & Wheildon, L. (2024). *Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment: Perpetration, responses and prevention* (Research report, 03/2024). ANROWS.

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