

Navigating the hidden risks

Claire Heaney

UNSUSPECTING business owners face a time bomb with stress and sexual harassment complaints more common than many think.

Employment law expert Bryan Gurry said research had shown that up to 8 per cent of claims lodged in Victoria were for stress related conditions.

"That is nearly double that of physical claims," he said.

Mr Gurry said sexual harassment, in its many forms, accounted for up to 7 per cent of claims, according to research.

Mr Gurry, who has worked in workers compensation and insurance law for 20 years, has prepared a guide for time-strapped employers who do not have the time or resources to get on top of the many issues.

The guide, *Managing the Hidden Risks*, aims to be a one-stop-shop for business operators, assisting them to navigate the myriad of employment law issues they face.

He said the aim was to outline the legal rights and responsibilities of all parties in a plain, easy to understand way.

Mr Gurry said the "hidden risks" were known as psycho-social risks. They include:

- STRESS.
- SEXUAL harassment.
- WORKPLACE bullying.
- DISCRIMINATION.
- EMAIL and internet misuse.

Mr Gurry said small business operators were often too engrossed in the hands-on operation of their business to work up a policy, induct staff and monitor staff and policies.

"Protecting employees from psycho-social risk in the workplace is especially problematic," he said.

"The demanding nature of managing a small business in the modern work environment makes it difficult for an employer to monitor the psychological welfare of its employees and as such is too often ignored."

But, Mr Gurry warned that an employer could no longer turn a blind eye to these issues.

He said employers who ignored the health and safety of staff faced potentially severe economic penalties.

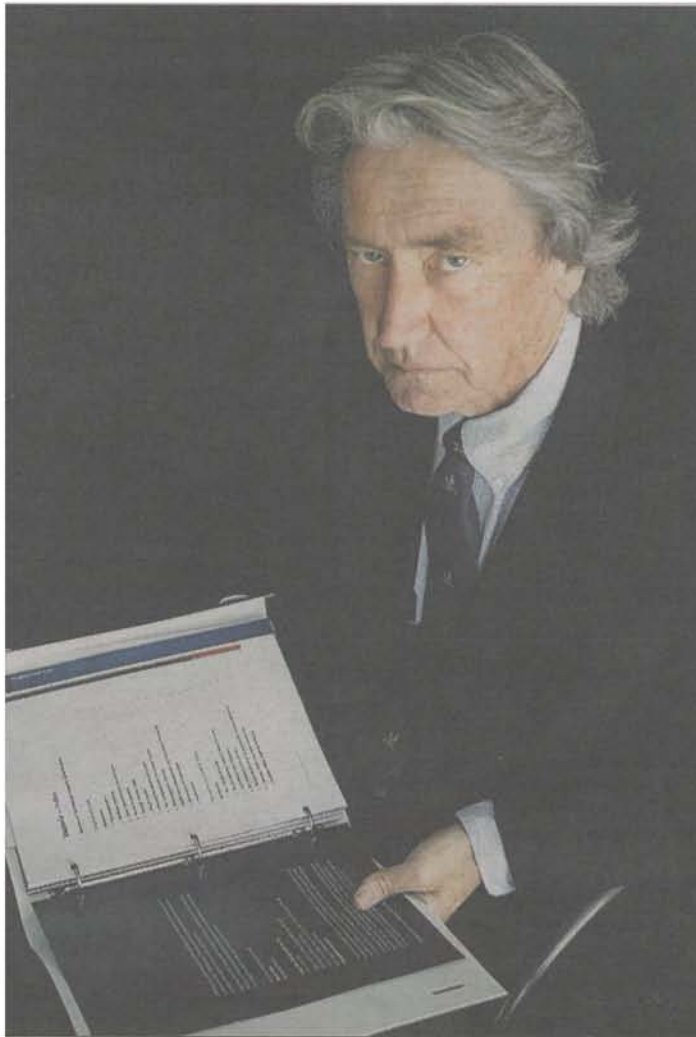
"Workplace stress can lead to formal legal proceedings which is a significant expense for a business owner," he said.

He also noted that sickness and absenteeism could be reduced if the hidden risks were properly managed.

Mr Gurry said his guide came in a user friendly format and business operators could work their way through it, tailoring the policies to meet their needs.

Bosses could use the guide to consult and plan with employees on all work related health and safety issues.

The guide comes in two versions, one for employers with up to 20 on staff and another for medium employers with 20 to 150 on their payroll.



Key notes: Bryan Gurry with his guide. Picture: PETER WARD

Getting down to work

EMPLOYERS must comply with legal obligations relating to occupational health and safety, employment law and workers compensation. Doing so ensures that exposure to claims and litigation is reduced and the business reputation maintained.

BUSINESSES must manage their employees, right from pre-employment to termination.

EFFORTS must be made to ensure employee health and wellbeing and workplace morale is maintained.

A STRESS-free work environment should be cultivated and 'stressors' should be identified and reduced.

Mr Gurry, who runs GRM Business Solutions, said the guide would assist employers reduce their exposure to risks, claims and litigation.

Mr Gurry has teamed with law

firm Middletons to prepare the employment law section.

The workers compensation section of the guide has been written by Alan Clayton, a principal of Bracton Consulting Services.

Bracton specialises in accident compensation and has worked with key organisations.

Mr Gurry said many small business operators did not have the \$2000 to \$5000 it could cost to consult a professional to assist them with the development of policies.

"These businesses do not have a middle management structure to deal with these issues," he said.

Bigger companies with managers, supervisors, occupational health and safety representatives, workers compensation and human resource personnel might also be able to use the guide.

Prices start from around \$200 for the small business version of the guide and there are low cost optional yearly updates. A guide for small and medium businesses sells for around \$360 with bi-annual subscription updates.

At this stage Victorian and New South Wales versions are available.

Net link: www.grmbusiness.com.au