

COMMISSIONED BY START BEYOND

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FROM

# RISK TO RESILIENCE

PROTECTING FRONTLINE WORKERS FROM RISING CUSTOMER AGGRESSION

Customer aggression is no longer a fringe issue. It's an on-going threat to businesses and their frontline workers. This white paper reveals the findings from the YouGov Frontline HR Leaders Survey, and outlines the key features of the immersive learning solution Minaca VR; Managing Incivility, Negativity and Customer Aggression.

Created by Start Beyond, Minaca VR gives customer-facing employees in retail, hospitality and the health and aged care industries, the skills and confidence to identify and manage aggressive customers; and thereby builds an empowered and resilient workforce.



# A FOREWORD FROM THE CEO

By Angus Stevens, Start Beyond  
CEO and Co-Founder



Customer aggression towards frontline staff is on the incline. From supermarket cashiers and healthcare workers to hospitality teams, it's becoming increasingly common to experience incivility, threats, or violence on the job.

The consequences are serious: stress, anxiety, burnout, and in too many cases, valued team members walking away from roles they once loved. The ripple effect is felt by individuals and businesses alike, via rising absenteeism, turnover, insurance claims, and regulatory exposure.

That's why Start Beyond developed Minaca VR, a world-first immersive training program that empowers frontline teams to safely manage customer aggression and conflict before it escalates.



Developed in partnership with WHS experts Amy Towers (Director and Principal Consultant) and Steven Booker (Workplace Psychologist and Employment Lawyer) from the Risk Collective, Minaca VR uses realistic simulation of real life encounters to allow workers to learn through experience, without the emotional or physical risk.

Minaca VR equips frontline staff with the situational awareness and confidence needed to recognise, de-escalate, and recover from challenging interactions. It's immersive learning that's designed to protect your people, your culture, and your bottom line.

This white paper outlines key insights derived from a YouGov survey commissioned by Start Beyond, industry context, and successful business cases, which demonstrate the critical role that immersive training can play in transforming outcomes for your people and your business.

We believe every employee has the right to feel safe at work. And with the right tools, HR leaders can lead the way.





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>01</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION: THE REALITY ON THE GROUND</b>	<b>01</b>
	What YouGov data reveals about rising customer aggression and the toll it's taking on staff and business	
<b>02</b>	<b>WHY TRADITIONAL TRAINING FALLS SHORT</b>	<b>12</b>
	The limitations of legacy methods and why immersive learning is the breakthrough frontline teams need	
<b>03</b>	<b>INTRODUCING MINACA VR: IMMERSIVE TRAINING FOR REAL-WORLD RISK</b>	<b>14</b>
	A deep dive into the program's psychology, design, aggression profiles, and plug and play delivery	
<b>04</b>	<b>THE HUMAN IMPACT</b>	<b>21</b>
	How Minaca VR drives meaningful change at three levels: individual, cultural, and organisational	



<b>05</b>	<b>A ROADMAP FOR LEADERS: FROM CONCERN TO CAPABILITY</b>	<b>22</b>
	Actionable steps for HR and L&D teams to gain internal buy-in and implement immersive training	
<b>06</b>	<b>CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE IS IMMERSIVE</b>	<b>24</b>
	Why EQ, safety, and psychological readiness will define tomorrow's frontline workforce	
<b>07</b>	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>26</b>
	All the academic journals & industry reports referenced in this paper	
<b>08</b>	<b>ABOUT START BEYOND</b>	<b>27</b>
	Our mission, expertise, and commitment to shaping the future of immersive learning	
<b>09</b>	<b>CONTACT US</b>	<b>29</b>
	How to connect with the team or request a demo of Minaca VR	



# 01

# INTRODUCTION:

## THE REALITY ON THE GROUND

### YouGov study analysis

If you've worked on the frontline, or led those who do, you've heard the stories. The customer who shouts. The one who looms too close. The confrontation that leaves a team member rattled or off work for days.

Across retail, hospitality, healthcare and education, frontline workers in Australia are reporting increased exposure to aggressive and antisocial behaviour. It's both frustrating

and dangerous. From verbal abuse to physical intimidation, the rising tide of customer aggression is putting psychological safety and even lives at risk.

While physical safety measures have improved over time, protocols to support mental health and emotional resilience are falling behind.







To quantify this growing problem, Start Beyond commissioned independent research firm YouGov to conduct a national survey of HR and Learning & Development leaders (2024).

### Key objectives included:

- Validating anecdotal reports of increasing customer aggression
- Understanding the effects of poor customer behaviour on employee wellbeing, organisational performance, and safety compliance
- Identifying gaps in current training approaches and support mechanisms



The survey, conducted in Q4 2024, engaged 337 senior decision-makers across healthcare, retail, hospitality and education. Respondents represented medium to large businesses with an annual turnover above \$10 million. Here's what they told us:

# THE ISSUE IS RIFE

# 84%

said aggressive customer behaviour is an issue for frontline workers.

Aggressive behavior includes:

- **Incivility**  
Using a dismissive, sneering or sarcastic tone of voice
- **Intimidation**  
Invading personal space, raised voice, making demands
- **Verbal threats or abuse**  
Questioning the employee's authority or job, insults
- **Physical threats or abuse**  
Miming or actual unwanted touching, including coughing, spitting and sneezing



# 89%

said they are also concerned about the impact of aggressive customer behaviour on the safety, mental and physical health and wellbeing of frontline workers.

The physical and psychological effects of aggressive behaviour on employees include:

- Stress and anxiety
- Temporary or permanent injury
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Low job satisfaction
- Burnout and reluctance to resume role







### **Industry response is catching up**

Customer aggression is no longer being ignored. The National Retail Association (2023) has issued formal guidance to help businesses address this growing risk. In April 2025, WorkSafe Victoria and VML launched the 'Don't Cross the Line' campaign - a national awareness initiative highlighting that behaviours like yelling, swearing and name-calling are not only inappropriate, but psychologically harmful and potentially unlawful.





# 73%

of HR leaders fear a rise in workers' compensation claims related to psychological injury.

## **HR Leaders are worried**

While some businesses offer counselling, or time-off after an incident, many have no clear process in place to support affected staff, leaving both employees and employers vulnerable.

Most HR leaders monitor wellbeing through a mix of performance tracking, surveys, and one-on-one check-ins. However only 23% do this weekly, meaning issues can go unchecked for too long.

And when it comes to solutions, most are stuck.





# 80%

of HR leaders want better or more frequent training to help staff handle customer aggression, but can't get internal buy-in.

## The roadblocks

### Tight budgets:

Training is seen as a 'nice-to-have' rather than essential

### Low visibility:

Senior leaders aren't exposed to frontline abuse and underestimate its impact

### Weak regulatory pressure:

WHS bodies acknowledge the issue, but current audits and guidelines lack the enforcement power to compel action

## EXPERT TIP

"HR leaders can secure buy-in by linking frontline training to business-critical outcomes like customer satisfaction, staff retention, and operational efficiency. Start with a small pilot to prove ROI, bring frontline voices into the boardroom to build urgency, and frame it as a risk mitigation strategy, not solely a wellbeing initiative."



— Amy Towers, Risk Collective  
Director and WHS Expert



## Staff turnover is the tipping point

Reducing staff turnover is the primary reason HR leaders would invest in better training. It ranks higher than the risk of compensation claims or regulatory audits.

The true cost of turnover goes far beyond recruitment. It includes:

- Loss of skills, knowledge, and team cohesion
- Time and money spent onboarding replacements
- Productivity delays and morale disruption

Yet only 53% of HR leaders conduct wellbeing assessments at least once a month. For many casual or part-time workers, this means no regular check-ins, and when they do happen, they're often too late to prevent burnout or disengagement.

## EXPERT TIP

“To boost staff retention, investing in meaningful and impactful training such as VR training can support wellbeing, build experience, and show employees they're valued. Likewise, regular check-ins, even brief ones, help spot issues early, especially in casual or high-turnover roles. When staff feel supported, they're far more likely to stay.”

— Amy Towers, Risk Collective  
Director and WHS Expert





## The message is clear: This is a psychosocial risk

The findings confirm what many frontline leaders already know. Customer aggression is no longer a rare occurrence; it's a systemic, daily risk that extends beyond physical harm into the realm of psychological injury.

Recent changes to legislation, both state and federal, now recognise **verbal abuse, intimidation, and aggressive behaviour** as psychosocial hazards. Employers have a legal duty to address these risks or face growing exposure to **PTSD, burnout, and psychological injury claims**.

Traditional training isn't keeping up. Relying solely on conventional classrooms and eLearning fails to prepare staff for the emotional complexity of modern customer-facing roles.

To truly protect their people, organisations need accessible, experience-based training that equips staff with practical tools, emotional resilience, and real-world decision-making confidence.

## Mental health conditions in Australia, 2020 - 2021\*:



# 12,155

**Serious claims**  
Mental health conditions accounted for **9% of serious claims**

### Frequency rate



# 9.3

serious claims per million hours worked

### Median compensation paid



# \$55,270

per claim

### Median time lost



# 30.7

weeks per serious claim

#### \*Sources:

Safe Work Australia (2022) Australian Workers' Compensation Statistics 2020 - 2021.



## Why this risk can't be ignored

Safe Work Australia's 2024 report on Workplace and Work-Related Violence and Aggression confirms the scale of the issue:


- Claims for workplace violence and aggression have increased by 56% since 2017–18
- Mental health conditions now make up 11% of serious claims, with a 97.3% increase over the past decade
- Claims made by women have increased by 73%, compared to 33% for men over the same period

Industry-specific data adds further weight:

- In retail, hospitality, and transport, 87% of workers reported verbal abuse from customers, 12.5% experienced physical violence, and 9% were spat on (SDA, 2023)
- In healthcare and social assistance, nearly 40% of workers reported exposure to violence or traumatic events (Safe Work Australia, 2024)
- In education, physical violence towards school leaders has increased by 76.5% since 2011 (Dicke et al., 2024)







“The obligation to manage these risks isn’t new, but recent updates to WHS laws and the introduction of specific psychosocial hazard regulations have brought sharper legal and operational focus. Businesses are now expected to treat risks like verbal abuse, intimidation, and aggressive customer behaviour as they would any other workplace hazard, by identifying, assessing, and implementing control measures. That includes providing training that helps workers not just recognise these risks, but respond confidently in the moment.”

“We’re supporting clients who’ve received improvement notices for failing to manage this risk, and others dealing with complex psychological injury claims, many of which are driving up premiums and internal strain.”

“This is no longer just a compliance checkbox, it’s a critical workforce risk. The cost of inaction is increasing. Investing in immersive, evidence-based training, in combination with other preventative controls, isn’t just responsible, it’s commercially smart.”

“Customer aggression is more than a frontline challenge, it’s a serious health and safety risk with legal, psychological, and financial impacts. Workers need to know how to recognise when behaviour crosses the line, respond in a way that de-escalates, and feel confident that their organisation will back them. Training is essential, but it must be supported by strong systems, leadership, and preventative controls to create real safety at work.”

**— Amy Towers, Risk Collective  
Director and WHS Expert**



# 02

# WHY TRADITIONAL TRAINING FALLS SHORT

PowerPoint slides and passive eLearning may satisfy compliance. However, they don't prepare staff for high-stakes, emotionally-charged customer interactions. Role-playing often feels artificial, and printed manuals rarely make it off the shelf.

In contrast, VR training engages both mind and body, ensuring the user is an active learner and retains critical information. It creates a safe space where learners can make decisions, experience consequences, and try again, all without real-world risk.





# WHERE MINACA VR MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

The power of virtual reality isn't theoretical.  
It's already transforming workplace training across industries.

97%

of second-year speech pathology students at the **University of Newcastle** reported increased confidence after VR training through VOMA Speech Pathology, a virtual oral musculature assessment app.



2X

faster training times and increase in knowledge retention for **St John Ambulance** to deliver First Aid certificate programs.



70%

uplift in sales compared to traditional training campaigns for **Nespresso**.



**Derived from the internal reports of these Start Beyond projects, this data demonstrates what Minaca VR delivers: faster learning, deeper retention, and real-world readiness, at scale.**



# 03

## INTRODUCING MINACA VR:

### IMMERSIVE TRAINING FOR REAL-WORLD RISK

Minaca VR - Managing Incivility, Negativity, and Customer Aggression, is a modular, off-the-shelf virtual reality training program, developed in partnership with WHS experts from the Risk Collective.

Built for customer-facing teams in retail, hospitality, healthcare and aged care, Minaca VR equips frontline workers with the skills and confidence to protect themselves from physically and emotionally dangerous situations in the workplace.





Unlike traditional training, Minaca VR teaches staff to learn through experience. It places the user in dramatic real-world scenarios reproducing various customer-facing industry settings, and presents them with **three frequently-encountered customer aggression profiles**, identified by Workplace Psychologist and Employment Lawyer, Steven Booker.

## **BULLDOG**

Ego-driven and frustrated; quick to escalate with verbal or physical aggression



## **VIPER**

Retaliatory and hostile; driven by perceived injustice or disrespect



## **CHAMELEON**

Calculated and manipulative; uses charm to coerce, but turns aggressive when denied





I think I know how to effectively manage a rude and disrespectful customer


Strongly Disagree      Not Sure      Strongly Agree

1      2      3      4      5

Continue

Minaca VR administers a **before-and-after learner survey** that captures changes in confidence, capability, and readiness. This data gives businesses a measurable benchmark to assess training effectiveness and report on psychological safety performance.





**Where is a safe location to move to?**

**Exit the aisle**

**Stand ground  
where you are**

**Towards the  
back of house**

## What makes Minaca VR different

The program blends immersive storytelling with behavioural science to deliver training that sticks. Each session combines:

- 360° real-world video scenarios that place the learner in high-pressure customer interactions
- Branching decision pathways where choices shape the outcome by escalating, de-escalating, or staying neutral
- Behavioural prompts aligned with WHS psychosocial risk guidelines
- Emotional checkpoints and real-time feedback to build self-awareness and psychological safety

## Plug and play solution

Using lightweight, ready-to-go PICO G3 VR headsets, employees can navigate realistic 360° simulations, building confidence, emotional resilience, and practical de-escalation techniques.

With no facilitators or complex IT setup required, Minaca VR makes scalable, high-impact training accessible, right where it's needed most.



As learners progress, Minaca VR collects and tracks decision data, providing valuable insights into skill development, confidence growth, and organisational training gaps.

**Angus Stevens, CEO and Co-Founder of Start Beyond says:**

“With VR, we can place staff in immersive, real-world scenarios where they can learn how to identify and manage psychosocial risks in the workplace effectively, without the real-world risk. This is particularly important for large service-oriented workforces or businesses experiencing seasonal demand, where rapid, effective training is a necessity.”

“Investing in staff wellbeing isn’t just about compliance, it’s about long-term resilience, as well as organisational success. Minaca VR protects employees, equips them with critical skills, and ensures businesses are prepared to manage the growing challenge of customer aggression.”



The Bulldog





"One of the best things about training in VR is that you can see how things might play out differently. What if I'd said something else? What if I gave in to keep the customer happy? With a system like Minaca VR, learners can actually step into those 'what ifs' and experience how their choices affect the outcome."

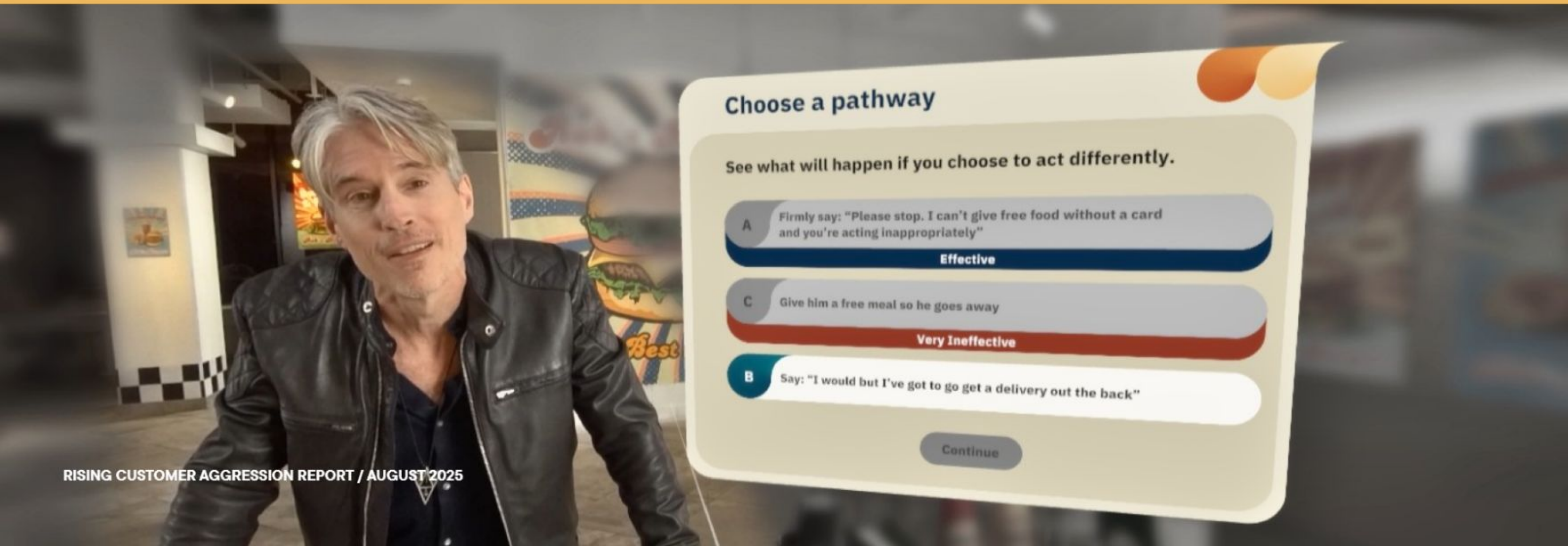
"This 'what if' learning, technically referred to as counterfactual simulation, can be very effective in supporting learners in weighing the pros and cons of different decisions."



— **Professor Eduardo Velloso, the University of Sydney**  
**Professor of Computer Science (Human-Computer Interaction)**

In a 2024 study published in the Symposium on Virtual Reality Software and Technology, researchers observed that participants who engaged in counterfactual VR scenarios were able to deliberate on their actions, make deeper connections, and retain information easily (Minotti et al., 2024).

By having users explore the emotional and practical consequences of their actions, immersive debriefing fostered effective learning through reflection in a realistic, yet controlled environment.







**Professor Eduardo Velloso continues:**

“That emotional dimension matters. A 2022 study published in *Computers & Education* found that emotional engagement is a critical factor in successful immersive learning (Dubovi, 2022). VR environments that provoke emotional responses, not just intellectual processing, improve attention, memory, and learner motivation. In short: when people feel something during training, they’re more likely to remember it and apply it.”

“These findings are reinforced by broader evidence. A 2022 meta-analysis in *Clinical Simulation in Nursing* reviewed 28 studies and concluded that VR-based simulation training consistently improves knowledge retention, practical skill acquisition, and learner satisfaction when compared to traditional training methods (Sim et al., 2022). While focused on healthcare, the implications are clear for all high-pressure, people-facing industries: immersive learning helps workers build real-world readiness.”

“With Minaca VR, these evidence-based methods are brought together to give staff the opportunity to practice and reflect on how they respond to aggression. It creates a psychologically safe space to explore, adapt, and grow.”



# 04

# THE HUMAN IMPACT

Minaca VR creates safer, more supportive workplaces.

## FOR FRONTLINE WORKERS:

- Reduced fear and anxiety at the start of a shift
- Greater confidence in high-pressure situations
- A clear signal that their wellbeing matters

## FOR MANAGERS:

- Shared language for navigating conflict
- Stronger peer support and collective resilience
- Improved communication between staff and managers

## FOR BUSINESSES:

- Lower staff turnover
- Fewer incident reports and psychological injury claims
- Stronger compliance and a more trusted employer brand

“At The Reject Shop, we're proud to be trialling VR training as a proactive step to support team safety and address the growing challenge of customer aggression. While this is a new approach for us, the early results have been encouraging. Since completing the training, the percentage of team members who felt very confident managing aggressive customers increased from 18% to 68%, with 98% of participants now feeling confident or very confident overall.

These outcomes highlight the power of immersive learning to build confidence, reduce risk, and reinforce our commitment to keeping our team safe.”



— Tash Reeve, The Reject Shop  
General Manager, People & Culture



# A ROADMAP FOR LEADERS: FROM CONCERN TO CAPABILITY

## 01

### ASSESS THE RISK

Treat customer incivility and aggression as workplace hazards, rather than mere HR issues. Build awareness across your organisation, and ensure any incidents or WHS concerns are recorded, reviewed, and escalated as part of your risk management framework.

## 02

### BUILD THE BUSINESS CASE

Quantify the cost of inaction. Highlight the business impacts of high turnover, absenteeism, burnout, and repeated recruitment cycles. Position training as a strategic investment - one that increases knowledge, reduces WHS claims, and boosts retention.

## 03

### DEPLOY AND SCALE

Choose a solution with:

- Proven benefits for psychological safety and wellbeing
- Faster, deeper learning than traditional methods
- Tangible behavioural change and knowledge retention
- Plug and play deployment and scalability across your workforce



Start Beyond recommend a **hub-and-spoke deployment model**. This makes it easy to scale Minaca VR across locations. VR units are managed centrally and rotated through key sites, ensuring consistent access while minimising infrastructure demands.

The Start Beyond team supports the entire rollout, from setup and onboarding to reporting and customisation, so your people get the full impact, and your business gets results you can track.





06

# CONCLUSION:

**THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACE  
LEARNING IS EMOTIONAL,  
EXPERIENTIAL, AND IMMERSIVE**

As customer aggression rises and frontline resilience wears thin, traditional training models are inadequate. The workplace has evolved and so must the way we train, support, and prepare our people.

Training should do more than inform, it should **connect**. It should help employees feel safer, more capable, and genuinely supported.

Minaca VR does exactly that. It's already transforming how companies train, how staff respond under pressure, and how teams build a culture of safety and empathy.

More than a training tool, Minaca VR is an investment in your people, one that reduces harm, lifts confidence, and strengthens performance.

It's real. It's relatable. And it works.







“One of the biggest challenges in training frontline workers in Australia, is delivering it at scale across such a geographically dispersed population. VR gives us a way to bring high-quality, hands-on training to workers, no matter where they are. It means that learners can rehearse difficult conversations in a safe, realistic setting without having to leave their communities,” **says Professor Eduardo Velloso.**

“Studies show that VR training improves confidence and skill retention, especially in cases where the opportunities for face-to-face training are limited. With customer aggression on the rise, VR offers a practical and cost-effective solution to strengthen the preparedness and resilience of our workforce.”

When people feel safe, they can thrive.  
That's what Minaca VR delivers.



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08

# ABOUT START BEYOND

Founded in 2015, Start Beyond is a globally recognised, award-winning immersive learning studio that specialises in virtual and augmented reality (VR & AR) training solutions. Co-founded by **Angus Stevens (CEO)** and **Jaeger Battersby (CTO)**, the company is driven by a mission to transport imaginations and move people to see things differently.

Start Beyond has delivered over 1.8 million VR & AR learning experiences and partnered with leading organisations including Accenture, Meta, Strivr, and key government departments and educational institutions. Its clients include St John Ambulance, ANSTO, UTS, RIST, and the University of Newcastle.

Scan to learn more





Recognised for its innovation and impact, Start Beyond has been named:

- HRD 5-Star Employer of Choice 2024 & 2025
- AIXR VR Awards XR Education and Training Solution of the Year 2024 Finalist
- Australian Financial Review Top 10 Most Innovative Technology Companies 2023
- HolonIQ Top 50 EdTech Companies 2023 & 2024
- AIMIA Startup of the Year 2017

CEO **Angus Stevens** was named one of the Top 50 Australian Small Business Leaders 2023, is a regular speaker at SXSW Sydney and SXSW Austin, Texas, and serves as Co-founder and Chair of the Australian Metaverse Advisory Council (AMAC).



**AUSTRALIA'S LEADING BRANDS  
CHOOSE TO WORK WITH US**



09

# CONTACT US

The best way to experience immersive learning is to see it for yourself.  
To arrange for a product demonstration, consultation or call with one of  
our experts, **visit:** <https://www.startbeyond.co/minacavr>  
**To contact Start Beyond, go to:** <https://www.startbeyond.co/contact>

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