

HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE: RISK ASSESSMENT.

Background

EU Council Framework Directive 89/391/EEC introduced measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work. A number of linked Directives followed and each covered specific areas, such as, 89/654 (Workplaces), 89/655 (Work Equipment), 89/656 (Personal Protective Equipment), 90/269 (Manual Handling of Loads) and 90/270 (Display Screen Equipment).

Each Member State was subsequently required to implement changes to its national laws and practices to ensure compliance.

Framework Directive 89/391/EEC includes the following key provisions: -

Employers are obliged:

- to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to the work, primarily on the basis of the specified general principles of prevention, without involving the workers in any financial cost;
- to evaluate the occupational risks, inter alia in the choice of work equipment and the fitting-out of workplaces, and to make provision for adequate protective and preventive services;
- to keep a list of, and draw up reports on, occupational accidents;
- to take the necessary measures for first aid, fire-fighting, evacuation of workers and action required in the event of serious and imminent danger;
- to inform and consult workers and allow them to take part in discussions on all questions relating to safety and health at work;
- to ensure that each worker receives adequate safety and health training throughout the period of employment.

Workers are obliged:

- to make correct use of machinery, other means of production, personal protective equipment and safety devices;
- to give warning of any work situation presenting a serious and immediate danger and of any shortcomings in the protection arrangements;
- to co-operate in fulfilling any requirements imposed for the protection of health and safety and in enabling the employer to ensure that the working environment and working conditions are safe and pose no risks.

The health of workers is monitored through the application of measures introduced in accordance with national laws and practices.

Particularly sensitive risk groups must be protected against the dangers which specifically affect them.

Outside the EU in most industrialised countries workers are also protected by Duty of Care provisions. Duty of Care may be considered a formalisation of the implicit responsibilities held by an individual towards another individual within society. In most countries, it is not a requirement that a duty of care be defined by law, but it will often evolve through the jurisprudence of common law.

Risk Assessment

One well tried technique often used to help companies comply with the various national H&S requirements is a called Risk Assessment and it plays an essential role to help companies and their workforce stay safe. In the UK, it is a statutory requirement to assess the risks in your workplace and in many other counties. The following guidance has been written for use in the UK, but these guidance rules can be adapted for use in most other countries.

What is Risk Assessment?

A risk assessment is nothing more than a careful examination of what, in your work, could cause harm to people, so that you can weigh up whether you have taken enough precautions or should do more to prevent harm. The aim is to make sure that no one gets hurt or becomes ill. Accidents and ill health can ruin lives and affect your business too if output is lost, machinery is damaged, insurance costs increase, or you have to go to court.

The important things you need to decide are whether a HAZARD IS SIGNIFICANT and whether you have it covered by satisfactory precautions, so that the RISK IS SMALL. You need to check this when you assess the risks. For instance, electricity can kill, but the risk of it doing so in an office environment is remote, provided that 'live' components are insulated and metal casings properly earthed.

Hazard and Risk - don't let words put you off!

Hazard means anything that can cause harm (e.g. chemicals, electricity, working from ladders, etc)

Risk is the chance, high or low, that somebody will be harmed by the hazard.

There are Five Steps to RISK ASSESSMENT

How to assess the risks in your workplace

STEP 1: Look for the hazards

STEP 2: Decide who might be harmed and how

STEP 3: Evaluate the risks and decide whether the existing precautions are adequate or whether more should be done

STEP 4: Record your findings

STEP 5: Review your assessment and revise it if necessary

Don't be overcomplicated. In most firms in the commercial, service and light industrial sectors, the hazards are few and simple. Checking them is common sense, but necessary. You probably already know whether, for example, you have machinery that could cause harm, or if there is an awkward entrance or stair where someone could be hurt. If so, check that you have taken what reasonable precautions you can to avoid injury.

The following rules may be different in some counties; if you are a small firm and you are confident you understand what's involved, you can do the assessment yourself (you don't have to be a health and safety expert!). If you are a larger firm, you could ask a responsible employee, safety representative or safety officer to help you. If you are not confident, get help from a competent source. But remember - where the law requires it, you are responsible for seeing it is adequately done.

STEP 1: Look for the hazards

If you are doing the assessment yourself, walk around your workplace and look afresh at what could reasonably be expected to cause harm. Ignore the trivial and concentrate on significant hazards which could result in serious harm or affect several people.

Ask your employees or their representatives what they think. They may have noticed things which are not immediately obvious. Manufacturers' instructions or data sheets can also help you spot hazards and put risks in their true perspective and so can a company's accident and ill-health records.

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