

DIRECTORS' BRIEFING



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Health and safety risk assessment

● Faced with the mass of legislation, meeting your health and safety requirements can seem a daunting task. Fortunately, the most critical part of managing health and safety — risk assessment — is relatively straightforward. This briefing covers:

- ◆ How to carry out a risk assessment.
- ◆ What the most common hazards are.
- ◆ How to control the risks.
- ◆ Handling the paperwork.

For an overview of your responsibilities under health and safety legislation, see **Health and safety**, LA 3.

1 The process

In most work environments, you (or your designated health and safety officer) can carry out the risk assessment yourself, calling in specialist help for specific hazards (eg to monitor levels of airborne dusts or noise).

A Identify the hazards (see 2, 3 and 4).

- ◆ Physically inspect your premises and the tasks carried out there.
- ◆ Ask employees and safety representatives what hazards they are aware of.
Working as a small team — with an insider from each department to provide experience and an outsider for a fresh eye — can be useful.
- ◆ Check suppliers' instructions and information on equipment and materials.
- ◆ Check your records of accidents and sickness. These may point to hazards.
- ◆ If your work varies, or you operate on different sites, include other hazards which

you can expect to come across.

B Decide **who** could be affected.

You are responsible for the health and safety of everyone who could be affected, not just your employees.

- ◆ Visitors, contractors and new employees may be at extra risk.
Bear in mind that they may not be aware of your safety procedures.
- ◆ Consider anyone who is likely to be particularly vulnerable (eg the disabled, pregnant women, young people and people who work on their own).

C Evaluate **how likely** employees and others are to be hurt and how effective your existing precautions are (see 5).

- ◆ If there are any specific legal requirements

FURTHER HELP

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name and by the code given to each briefing. For example, the law briefings have the codes LA 1, LA 2, etc.

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affecting your industry, have you complied with them?

- ◆ Do you meet industry standards?
- ◆ What risk remains? How many people could it affect, and how badly?

D Decide what you can do to **eliminate or minimise** the risk (see 6).

- ◆ Ideally, you should eliminate the hazard altogether.
- ◆ Most risks can be reduced to acceptable levels with simple procedures and systems.
- ◆ Consider additional measures, which are reasonably practicable, to reduce the risk to an acceptable level. For example, warning signs or personal protective equipment (see 6E).

E **Record** the outcome of your health and safety risk assessment and any corrective action taken (see 7).

- ◆ The written record can be a useful reminder of areas that you may need to keep under review.

F **Review** your assessment periodically (eg annually).

- ◆ You will also need to amend your assessment when circumstances change (eg when you acquire new equipment).

2 Accidents waiting to happen

There are numerous places in every office, shop or factory where some sort of hazard can be identified.

Particular situations may well lead to particular kinds of accident. These may be quite hard to recognise when you are looking around familiar

Reasonably practicable steps

The law recognises it is not always practicable for an employer to remove every risk.

For example:

- ◆ *If an employee has to visit a room full of noisy machinery once a month for ten minutes, providing ear muffs should be adequate.*
- ◆ *If an employee occasionally has to cross a busy loading bay, providing a designated marked route with warning signs should be adequate.*

When the hazards are encountered more frequently, or the number of employees involved rises, the risk becomes unacceptable and you will be required to take further steps (see box, page 3).

premises, so a checklist approach is useful.

A Identify places where uneven floors, loose cables and spillages may cause people to **trip or slip** when moving around.

- ◆ Note areas where poor lighting might increase the risk from these hazards.

B Look out for sharp corners and open drawers that people might **walk into**.

C Check doors and crossings where people might **collide**.

- ◆ People carrying large items or pushing loaded trolleys may not be able to see where they are going.

D Pay special attention to staircases and unguarded drops where people might **fall**.

E Make a note of areas where unstable stacking or poor storage might lead to people being **hit by falling objects**.

- ◆ Even files falling down from a high shelf could cause serious injuries.

If an accident occurs, it must be reported and investigated.

3 Common hazards

A hazard is something that has the potential to harm or injure someone. Machinery, power tools and inflammable or corrosive materials can create specific accident hazards in the workplace.

But even an office with just a few items of office machinery, consumables, heaters, fans and kettles could contain many hazards.

A Unsafe **electrical** installations (eg overloaded sockets or old or damaged wiring) can start fires or cause electric shocks.

- ◆ Electrical equipment can be particularly hazardous if it is poorly maintained or portable.

B **Machinery** can cut or catch people, or can throw out material, dust or fumes.

- ◆ Machines may also create unacceptable levels of noise, especially if poorly maintained.
- ◆ All moving vehicles are potentially dangerous.
- ◆ Some machinery is inherently hazardous (eg pressure boilers, lifts, lathes).

C Any **hazardous substances** that you use or produce could be a potential cause of injury or ill health.

► Health and safety law is complex.

This briefing reflects our understanding of the basic legal position as known at the last update. Obtain legal advice on your own specific circumstances and check whether any relevant rules have changed.

► For an overview of developments in business law in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002, see the law briefings, LA 7, LA 9, LA 13, and LA 16.

- ◆ Inflammable goods that are not properly stored present a fire hazard.
- ◆ Solid or liquid waste that is not properly treated or disposed of can be a health or fire hazard.
- ◆ Toxic or corrosive materials may cause poisoning or burns.

D There may be **special hazards** resulting from the nature of your business. For example:

- ◆ Burns and scalds in catering businesses.
- ◆ Falling objects on construction sites.
- ◆ Dangerous chemicals, tools or machinery associated with your particular industry (eg solvents, presses).

4 Longer-term health risks

Apart from the possibility of accidents, there are risks to your employees' health that may only build up over a period of time. These must also form part of your health and safety assessment.

A Many factors in the working environment are now recognised as putting employees under **physical or mental stress**.

- ◆ Poor lighting can lead to eye strain and headaches.
- ◆ Inadequate ventilation makes people tired and more likely to have accidents. It can also lead to the rapid spread of infectious diseases in the workplace.
- ◆ Uncomfortably high or low temperatures make it hard to concentrate and make employees more vulnerable to illness.
- ◆ Excessive noise can lead to headaches or even hearing loss.
- ◆ Poor air quality (eg from ink or paint fumes) can be an irritant or even a health hazard.

B Poor design of chairs, furniture and equipment can cause **musculoskeletal**

problems, such as lumbar pain, upper limb problems and 'tennis elbow'.

C Bad practice and inadequate training in areas such as the manual handling of **objects** can lead to unnecessary injuries and back problems.

- ◆ Consider the layout of the work flow and whether storage is adequate.

D There can be particular health problems for people working with **computers**. Ensure that:

- ◆ PC screens are clear and flicker-free, and can be adjusted, and are free from glare.
- ◆ Desks and chairs are adjustable to the right height, and employees are shown how to make these adjustments (see **6C**).
- ◆ Footrests and other means of support are offered to those who need them.
- ◆ Working practices include regular breaks away from the screen and the keyboard.

E Implement a **smoking policy**.

- ◆ Non-smokers exposed to smoke in the workplace may claim damages for health issues related to passive smoking.

5 Existing precautions

For every hazard you have identified, decide whether your existing precautions are adequate.

A Your precautions must be sufficient to reduce the risk to an **acceptable level**.

- ◆ The local council or the Health and Safety Executive can advise you (see **8**).

B Your precautions should meet **industry standards**.

- ◆ Your trade association may be able to provide advice or information.
- ◆ You may want to include management of health and safety as part of a benchmarking exercise against other companies. (See **Benchmarking**, ST 4.)

C Ideally, your precautions will reduce risk as far as **reasonably practicable**.

- ◆ You are fully justified in balancing cost against risk in deciding what precautions are reasonable (see box, page 2).

6 Improving safety

Give priority to controlling risks which could affect large numbers of people or result in serious harm to individuals.

"The biggest danger with risk assessments stems from familiarity. People in familiar surroundings often fail to spot hazards that would horrify an outsider."

Sally Richards,
employment consultant

Tackle the causes

Whenever there are significant risks, you must try to tackle the causes of the hazard rather than merely providing protection or warnings.

For example:

- ◆ *Installing venting equipment and extractor fans to stop the build-up of fumes in enclosed areas.*
- ◆ *Providing an overhead walkway so that employees do not have to cross a busy loading bay.*

- A** The best option is to **remove** a hazard altogether.
- ◆ For example, installing improved flooring or lighting.
 - ◆ Or using safer machinery.
 - ◆ Or using non-flammable materials.
- B** You can **control risks** with suitable systems and procedures.
- These might include:
- ◆ Procedures for dealing with simple hazards (eg spillages).
 - ◆ Physically separating employees from hazards.
For example, by setting up barriers or cordoning off certain areas of the building.
 - ◆ Insisting that staff take regular rest breaks to prevent tiredness.
 - ◆ Developing a sound, workable evacuation plan, in case of emergencies.
- C** You can improve the effectiveness of procedures by providing appropriate **information and training**.
- ◆ Employees must be given training before being exposed to the hazards.
Make it part of your induction programme.
 - ◆ The training should make it clear how seriously you take health and safety.
Make it clear that failure to follow the procedures will be viewed as a disciplinary offence.
 - ◆ Ideally, induction and training should be recorded, with the trainee's signature as confirmation of having received the training.
 - ◆ Use signs to warn people of hazards.
- D** You can reduce risk by **minimising exposure** to the hazard.
- ◆ Only suitably trained employees should be allowed to operate or repair dangerous machinery.
 - ◆ A 'permit-to-work' system can be used to control access to particularly dangerous situations.
- E** Provide **personal protective equipment**, such as protective clothing, goggles and ear defenders as a last resort when other steps are impracticable or are insufficient on their own.
- F** Regular **safety monitoring** will help to ensure that the precautions you have put in place are working.

This monitoring should include:

- ◆ Regular visual inspection of the workplace.
- ◆ Records of all incidents, including illness, accidents and 'near misses' (see **2**).
- ◆ Planned maintenance and routine inspection of equipment.

Regular inspection is legally required for some potentially dangerous equipment, including boilers, lifts and air-conditioning installations.

7 Paperwork

You should keep detailed records of any risk assessments carried out.

A Your **records** must show that:

- ◆ You made a comprehensive assessment, using specialist help where appropriate.
- ◆ You have dealt with all the obvious significant hazards.
- ◆ You have put reasonable precautions in place to ensure that the remaining risk is acceptably low.

B Your records can include **cross-references** to other documents.

For example, your company's manuals and health and safety procedures.

While you are not required to keep written records of risk assessments if you have fewer than five employees, it is still a good idea to do so.

8 Help and advice

A **HSE Books** provides a range of free and paid-for publications (01787 881165).

- ◆ Many of these publications and free advice can be found on the HSE website, www.hse.gov.uk.

B You can ask for **advice** from the Health and Safety Executive or from your local council.

- ◆ The HSE and the local authority will generally work constructively with you to try to improve health and safety.
- ◆ You can call the HSE's confidential information line for advice, without having to disclose who you are (08701 545500).

EXPERT CONTRIBUTORS

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