
RISK ASSESSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE. PART 1.

What is risk assessment?

A risk assessment is simply a careful examination of your workplace, to identify what could cause harm to people, so that you can decide as to whether you have taken enough precautions or should do more to prevent harm from being caused.

Work accidents and work related ill health, can ruin lives, and seriously affect your business also, if output is lost, machinery is damaged, insurance costs increase, or you have to go to court.

You are legally required to assess the risks in your workplace.

The important thing you need to decide is whether a hazard is significant, and whether you have taken satisfactory precautions to minimize the risk.

If you are a small firm owner, and you are confident you understand what is involved, you can carry out a risk assessment yourself. You do not have to be a Health and Safety expert. If you are a larger firm, then you may want to assign a responsible employee, safety representative or safety officer to carry out the task. You can also obtain advice from outside companies, who have specialised in this type of work.

What is Hazard and Risk?

A hazard means anything that can cause harm. To give you a basic idea, think of chemicals, electricity, working at heights etc etc.

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

There are five steps in a risk assessment:

Step 1. Look for the hazards.

Step 2. Decide who might be harmed and how.

Step 3. Evaluate the risk 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 required.

Do not overcomplicate matters. In the majority of firms in the commercial, service and light industrial sectors, the hazards are few, and those that do exist are fairly obvious. Checking them is mainly a matter of common sense, but also a required and necessary action.

You probably know already, whether you have machinery that could cause harm, or if there is an awkward entrance or stairway where someone could be hurt. If so, check that you have taken all reasonable precautions you can to avoid accidents and prevent injury.

Lets take a closer look at Steps 1 and 2.

Step 1. Look for the hazards.

If you are doing the assessment yourself, walk around your workplace and look at what could reasonably be expected to cause harm. Ignore the trivial (for now) and concentrate on significant hazards which could result in serious harm.

Ask your employees what they think. They are the ones who are working with the various components on a daily basis, and will therefore know where the problems are. 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 proper perspective.

Step 2. Decide who might be harmed and how.

For each identified hazard you should then decide who might be harmed and how. And of course you will then be able to decide on a course or action that will prevent the hazard from causing risk.

Do not forget about young workers, trainees, expectant mothers etc who may be at particular risk.

Do not forget cleaners, visitors, contractors, maintenance workers etc who may not be in the workplace all the time.

Do not forget members of the public, or people you share the workplace with, if there is any chance they could be injured by your activity.