Risk Assessment Guidance

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What is Risk Assessment?

Risk assessment is a process for managing the health and safety of your employees and to anyone else who may be affected by their work activity.
All employers have a duty of care not only to their employees, but to the general public who live near to the organisation's premises, affected by the organisation's operations or are a consumer of their goods or services. The moral obligation is not just reflected in common law where, for example, claims for compensation are lodged based on negligence, but it is enshrined in statute law and is therefore criminally enforceable.

Health and Safety legislation requires more than just providing 'reasonable' care. Depending on the specific legislation there may be duties of absolute, practicable or reasonably practicable care.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Reg 3) requires employers (and the self-employed) to conduct suitable and sufficient risk assessments that provide preventative and protective steps to control workplace hazards. For organisations with five or more direct employees (this includes directors) the Risk Assessment must be in a written form.

Failure to comply with regulation 3 of MHSWR can result in fines, improvement notices or prohibition notices that will cost the organisation financially both directly and indirectly through disruption of production or time lost on dealing with investigation. Almost 90% of financial losses through statutory non-compliance are uninsured.

The Process

There are five well-documented steps to conducting Risk Assessments.

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Step 1: Identify Hazards:

First of all – know what a hazard is. Hazards are very commonly confused with risks or injury. A hazard is something that has the potential to cause harm or loss. For example, Fire, Electricity, Chemicals, Noise etc. can physically harm individuals or damage property.

Walk around your workplace and identify all potential hazards in your workplace. These may include physical hazards (such as manual handling), chemical hazards (such as exposure to solvents), biological hazards (such as viruses or bacteria), working at height (using ladders, mobile towers or scissor lifts), ergonomic hazards (such as poor workstation setup), and psychosocial hazards (such as workplace stress).

Don't overcomplicate the process but simply observe the operations, processes, activities and determine what could reasonably be expected to cause harm. (The movement of a forklift truck in a busy warehouse, the transfer of palleted goods to shelving, the vibration and noise of drilling masonry etc.) Take notes or ideally, take photographs or video footage that can be used in developing the document.

It is important to consult with the employees and/or representatives to see if they have any concerns regarding their current work practices. There may be issues, other than physical, such as stress regarding shift work, the expected work rate, or simply the monotony of the activity. There may be recurring issues such as cuts to the hand, back injuries, or high absenteeism on particular activities, so check existing accident and incident reports, near misses, and any relevant health and safety data.

Step 2: Assess the risk:

Assessing the risk involves identifying who can be harmed and how. This is best accomplished by grouping individuals into work categories or areas rather than on an individual basis. For example, bricklayers, warehouse shelf stackers, cleaners etc. Some activities, of course, may be specialised to an individual with a particular expertise, (for example an engineer who conducts Non-destructive Radiographic tests of stainless-steel welds). You must consider people who are not in the workplace all the time, such as shift workers, home workers, maintenance staff, contractors, visitors or staff who visit clients or members of the public. There is also a statutory duty to consider certain categories of workers who may be at particular risk, E.g., new and young workers, people with disabilities, and new or expectant mothers.

Now that we know what a hazard is, we need to define risk. Risk is the likelihood of potential harm from a hazard being realised. The potential harm (or incident) is caused by, or during' work activities or by the products and services created by the work activities. For example, there may be a risk of fire due to an overloading of an electrical socket, or a risk of a fall whilst working from a stepladder, but how do we assess the level of risk? This depends on a number of factors to be considered but they are classified within two elements. The likelihood (or probability) of a hazard causing harm and the severity (or consequences) of the harm to the people or property involved.

The level of risk can be assessed as (low, medium or high) or by assigning numbers to the likelihood and consequences of a hazard causing harm. (Quite commonly on scales of 1 to 5). On this method the two numbers are simply multiplied to produce an output between 1 to 25 and compared to a risk matrix to determine the levels of risk that are considered tolerable (low), require further controls (medium), or unacceptable (high).

Most organisations will use this relativistic method but more complex processes will require more mathematical and statistical techniques to provide numerical probability, E.g., for mechanical failure, chemical explosion, virus outbreak etc.

Step 3: Control the risks and decide on the precautions.

The person conducting the assessment must consider any existing control measures and their effectiveness in mitigating risks. For example, the forklift truck undergoes an annual service and has a valid certificate of thorough examination.
The assessor then needs to identify what further control measures are required to reduce the risk further and who is responsible in ensuring they are put in place and followed. There may be a time or date planned for the task and a record of its completion.

The assessment process should step through the hierarchy of controls to eliminate or minimise the identified risks.

Elimination: Consider the possibility of removing the hazard altogether. (E.g., Can a shut off valve requiring a ladder to access it be re-sited at ground level to remove the hazard of working at height?)

Substitution: Can you replace the hazard with a less hazardous alternative. An excellent example is the proliferation of water-based paint products now used compared to solvent-based products.

Engineering controls: Implement physical changes to the workplace or equipment to reduce exposure to the hazard. For example install acoustic covers and screens to reduce the noise output of equipment

Administrative controls: Establish procedures and policies to minimize exposure to the hazard. For example, a specific policy to provide rules and information to employees who spend a proportion of their working activities driving a vehicle. This may include a checklist to ensure that the vehicle is regularly maintained, insured, and is roadworthy.

Information and Training: Ensure all workers, employees and self-employed understand what they have to do in normal working conditions and non-normal working conditions (emergency). This can be accomplished by formal training, mentoring by a supervisor, demonstrations, toolbox talks, video or written publications.

Personal protective equipment (PPE): This is incorrectly listed as the first priority on many risk assessments, when in fact it is a measure of last resort when other control measures are not feasible. For example, it is impossible for a scaffold erector to not work at height but with suitable training, a safe method of working, knowledge, experience, skill and finally PPE provided in the form of a safety harness, lanyard, hard-hat, safety boots, gloves and Hi-viz clothing, they will be as safe as possible to conduct their activities. PPE must be provided free of charge by the employer and replaced when it has become defective or lost.

Organisations are not expected to eliminate all risks but need to do everything 'reasonably practicable' to protect people from harm. This means balancing the level of risk against the measures needed to control the real risk in terms of money, time or trouble.

Employers must therefore ensure that control measures are practical, effective, and suitable for their workplace and operations. If, after a full assessment is considered with reasonably practicable measures implemented, there are still risks not reduced to tolerable or below (negligible), then the job or activity may need redesigning.

Step 4: Record your findings

Risk Assessments must be conducted and recorded by a competent person. Some organisations may seek assistance from external consultancies or utilise templates which are freely available on the internet.

However, risk assessments should be created and developed specifically for a job or activity and important local information of the task, person involved, equipment, environment, training etc. is often omitted when using this 'one size fits all' approach.

As mentioned earlier, employers with five or more people must record the significant findings of the risk assessment. i.e. on hardcopy or digitally recorded on computer or similar devices. (Tablets, Mobile phones etc). The completed documents must be validated and approved by authorised and competent supervisors or management and distributed to all relevant employees and an acknowledgement of receipt obtained by their signing and dating of the document.

Step 5: Monitor and Review:

Organisations must have a monitoring process to review the implemented control measures to make sure they are working. There may be several triggers to renew the risk assessment. For example if the control measure is no longer effective. (E.g., Workers are failing to wear hearing protection in noisy areas where there is clear warning signage). The introduction of new, less experienced, staff or deployment of new equipment would trigger a review. Also consider a review if workers have spotted any problems or there have been any accidents or near misses.

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The risk assessment must then be modified to reflect any changes or additions due to new information (E.g., from an accident, or through amended legislation). Even if there are no significant changes noted, then the risk assessment should be reviewed at least annually and reissued to employees.

Whether the activities are on a construction site, a factory shop floor, a warehouse, a school, or an office, it is important that they are monitored to ensure that they are compliant with the requirements detailed in the Risk Assessment.

This can be achieved by regular auditing (in-house) or engaging independent Health and Safety consultants. The results should be recorded and assessed to identify non-conformances which may not only be addressed by improving the Risk Assessment but also to identify extra training required for employees, including management.

Risk assessment is a continually evolving process that requires cooperation from all levels of an organisation, big or small. It is one of the most important processes to effectively manage health and safety risks in your workplace and has proven significant benefits in reducing costs and increasing profitability for all sizes of companies.

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