No BS Fact Sheet No. 6
Fire Risk Assessment

A fire risk assessment is an organised way of looking at the workplace to identify potential fire hazards and minimise the risks they pose. A hazard is something that has the potential to cause harm; and the risk is the chance, high or low, of harm occurring. Risk assessments will help you monitor highly hazardous areas more closely, making the workplace safer. This usually involves looking at each area of the workplace and using simple checklists to identify the hazards. You will then decide whether a hazard is significant and take action to ensure the risk is minimal.

What The Law Says

For many years UK companies have relied on a fire officer to endorse the adequacy of fire safety in their Workplace with the award of a Fire Certificate. However under the current Fire Safety Order (2005), a complete change of approach has been demanded to managing fire safety in the workplace. Fire Certificates have been replaced with fire risk assessments - ensuring fire safety is now up to you!

The 5 Steps to Fire Risk Assessments

You and your colleagues know more about your business and your workplace than anyone else. Use your knowledge to identify hazardous areas and find ways of minimising the risks.

It is important that fire risk assessments are done for the whole premises, even areas that are seldom used. If there are other workplaces within the same premises, other employers should be consulted at the same time.

If your workplace is small, you may be able to assess it as a whole. Larger workplaces should be divided up in to smaller areas, e.g. maintenance department, office, stores and stairway etc.

Start by selecting each area of the workplace in turn. Complete the form by following these simple steps:

Step 1: Identify any potential fire hazards Look for sources of heat and fuels and try to keep them safe distances apart. Also:

- Try to remove unnecessary sources of heat and where possible avoid using naked flame heaters;
- Try to keep the amount of flammable substances in the workplace down to a minimum. Consider using less hazardous alternatives;
- Store highly flammable substances in fire resistant cabinets;
- Make provision for additional signage;
- Make sure electrical appliances have been tested, and where possible, use circuit breakers;
- Avoid overloading plug sockets;
- Keep ducts and flues clean;
- Consider using 'hot work permits';
- Establish and enforce no smoking areas;
- Where applicable make sure cigarette butts are properly extinguished and disposed of before leaving the workplace;
- Reduce sources of oxygen by keeping doors closed.

Step 2: Decide who might be in danger if fire should occur

If there is a fire, the main priority is that everyone reaches a place of safety quickly. This is more important than dealing with the fire itself because fire can spread quickly and if the workplace does not have an effective fire detection system, people can soon become trapped and overcome by the heat and smoke.

As part of the assessment, for each area you need to identify:

- Who may be at risk if there is a fire;
- How they will be warned; and
- How they will escape.

Don't forget to consider customers, visitors, contractors, people handicapped in any way. Make sure they have sufficient time to escape from their work area and consider if additional help will be required. They should all be aware of the fire evacuation procedure and the person responsible for them should know where they can be found.

You need to have an effective way of raising the alarm if fire should occur. The form this takes depends very much on the size and layout of the workplace.

In small workplaces where all exits are visible and people present would quickly detect any fire, a simple shout of "fire!" may be all that is needed. In larger premises, fire alarm call points may need to be installed, or even an automatic detection system.

Once a fire has been detected and the alarm has been raised, everyone in the workplace should be able to evacuate without putting themselves at undue risk. When checking the means of escape look for the following:

- Is there sufficient time for a full evacuate to take place once the alarm has been raised?
- In the event of fire, would all the available exits be affected or are there likely to be alternatives?
- Are fire doors kept closed?
- Are the escape routes signed properly and adequately illuminated? Check for a sign on the outside of the door
- Are your staff trained in using the fire escape route?

You should pay special attention to ensure that both the exit route and the other side of the exit door are free from obstructions. There are certain items which should not be located in corridors or stairways intended for use as a means of escape. Largely this is common sense, but here are some examples:

- Portable heaters;
- Upholstered furniture;
- Coat racks;
- Vending and gaming machines;
- Photocopiers.

Step 3: Evaluation
Once you have identified a hazard, you should evaluate the risk it poses and decide whether your existing controls are adequate. Maybe more could be done to minimise the hazard or even get rid of it altogether.

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Also consider the escape routes people have available to them and whether these are adequate. Pay special attention to:

- Areas where there could be a delay in detecting a fire and raising the alarm;
- Areas where a warning may go unnoticed, or even ignored; and
- People, who may be unable to react quickly, like the elderly or disabled.

Step 4: Keep a record

It is good practice to keep full records of your risk assessments available for inspection by the authorities. They will also prove useful to you when reviewing the risks in the workplace. Just using a simple form like the one shown should suffice.

Step 5: Review

Review the assessment periodically, especially if there have been changes to work practices. Plan an annual review, but keep a close eye on any changes that may occur during your weekly inspections.

Need more help?

Please feel free to contact us anytime for more advice. We are always happy to help.

CALL ME!