



Five Steps To Risk Assessment





HEALTH AND SAFETY SPECIFICATIONS, HEALTH AND SAFETY MANAGEMENT PLANS, OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS, RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES, AUDITING AND REVIEW, TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

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HELPING YOU TO ASSESS HEALTH AND SAFETY RISK IN THE WORK PLACE

Introduction

A risk assessment is an important step in protecting your workers and your business, as well as complying with the law. It helps you focus on the risks that really matter in your workplace – the ones with the potential to cause real harm. In many instances, straightforward measures can readily control risks, for example ensuring spillages are cleaned up promptly so people do not slip, or cupboard drawers are kept closed to ensure people do not trip. For most, that means simple, cheap and effective measures to ensure your most valuable asset – your workforce – is protected.

The law does not expect you to eliminate all risk, but you are required to protect people as far as is 'reasonably practicable'. This guide tells you how to achieve that with a minimum of fuss. Risk assessment is the cornerstone of our health and safety legislation, and should not only be our point of departure but a regular stop on the daily operations route.

This is not the only risk assessment method, there are other methods that work well, particularly for more complex risks and circumstances. However, we believe this method is the most straightforward for most organisations and will assist in establishing risk assessment as a cornerstone of your health and safety program.

What is Risk Assessment?

A risk assessment is simply 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. Workers and others have a right to be protected from harm caused by a failure to take reasonable control measures.

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. You are legally required to assess the risks in your workplace so that you put in place a plan to control the risks.

How to Assess the Risks in your work place

Follow the five steps in this eBook:

Step 1 Identify the hazards

Step 2 Decide who might be harmed, what might be damaged and how

Step 3 Evaluate the risks and decide on control measures

Step 4 Record your findings and implement them

Step 5 Review your assessment and update if necessary



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Don't overcomplicate the process. In many organisations, the risks are well known and the necessary control measures are easy to apply. You probably already know whether, for example, you have employees who move heavy loads and so could harm their backs, or where people are most likely to slip or trip. If so, check that you have taken reasonable precautions to avoid injury.

If you run a small organisation 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 work in a larger organisation, you could ask a health and safety advisor to help you. If you are not confident, get help from someone who is competent. In all cases, you should make sure that you involve your staff or their representatives in the process. They will have useful information about how the work is done that will make your assessment of the risk more thorough and effective. But remember, you are responsible for seeing that the assessment is carried out properly.

When thinking about your risk assessment, remember:

- A hazard is anything that may cause harm, such as chemicals, electricity, working from ladders, an open drawer etc (An item, process or activity)
- The risk is the chance, high or low, that somebody could be harmed by these and other hazards, together with an indication of how serious the harm could be. (Probability and outcome)
- Most risk matrixes are based on evaluating the likelihood of a certain outcome.

Step 1 – Identify the Hazards

First you need to work out how people could be harmed. When you work in a place every day it is easy to overlook some hazards, so here are some tips to help you identify the ones that matter:

- Walk around your workplace and look at what could reasonably be expected to cause harm. Physical inspections and job observations often generate the most important hazard information. Always remember: if it doesn't look safe then it most likely isn't safe.
- Ask your employees or their representatives what they think. They may have noticed things that are not immediately obvious to you.
- Zero outcome incidents are often ignored, to the detriment of your hazard identification process. Encourage reporting and open communication in this regard.
- Review publications by other similar organizations.
- Visit other resources which might identify hazards typically associated with your line of work. (There are numerous publications and newsletters which can assist in this regard)
- Check manufacturers' instructions or data sheets for chemicals and equipment as they can be very helpful in spelling out the hazards and putting them in their true perspective.
- Have a look back at your accident and ill-health records – these often help to identify the less obvious hazards.
- Health hazards are often ignored and should be included in your identification process.

Remember to think about long-term hazards to health (e.g. high levels of noise or exposure to harmful substances) as well as safety hazards.



Step 2 - Decide who might be harmed, what might be damaged and how

For each hazard you need to be clear about who might be harmed; it will help you identify the best way of managing the risk. That doesn't mean listing everyone by name, but rather identifying groups of people (eg 'people working in the storeroom' or 'passers-by').

In each case, identify how they might be harmed, i.e. what type of injury or ill health might occur. For example, 'shelf stackers may suffer back injury from repeated lifting of boxes'. This process will allow you to plan controls and direct implementation and training requirements.

Remember:

- Some workers have particular requirements, e.g. new and young workers, new or expectant mothers and people with disabilities may be at particular risk.
- Extra thought will be needed for some hazards; cleaners, visitors, contractors, maintenance workers etc, who may not be in the workplace all the time; members of the public, if they could be hurt by your activities;
- If you share your workplace, you will need to think about how your work affects others present, as well as how their work affects your staff – talk to them; and ask your staff if they can think of anyone you may have missed.

Step 3 - Evaluate the risks and decide on control measures

Having spotted the hazards, you then have to decide what to do about them. The law requires you to do everything 'reasonably practicable' to protect people from harm. You can work this out for yourself, but the easiest way is to compare what you are doing with good practice. There are many sources of good practice on the web and in industry. (Never be afraid to look or ask)

First, look at what you're already doing; think about what controls you have in place and how the work is organised. Then compare this with the good practice and see if there's more you should be doing to bring yourself up to standard. In asking yourself this, consider:

- Can I get rid of the hazard altogether?
- If not, how can I control the risks so that harm is unlikely?

When controlling risks, apply the principles below, if possible in the following order:

- try a less risky option (e.g. switch to using a less hazardous chemical);
- prevent access to the hazard (e.g. by guarding);
- organise work to reduce exposure to the hazard (e.g. put barriers between pedestrians and traffic);
- issue personal protective equipment (e.g. clothing, footwear, goggles etc); and
- provide welfare facilities (e.g. first aid and washing facilities for removal of contamination).

Improving health and safety need not cost a lot. For instance, placing a mirror on a dangerous blind corner to help prevent vehicle accidents is a low-cost precaution considering the risks. Failure to take simple precautions can cost you a lot more if an accident does happen. Involve staff, so that you can be sure that what you propose to do will work in practice and won't introduce any new hazards.



Step 4 - Record your findings and implement them

Putting the results of your risk assessment into practice will make a difference when looking after people and your business.

When writing down your results, keep it simple, for example 'Tripping over rubbish: bins provided, staff instructed, weekly housekeeping checks', or 'Fume from welding: local exhaust ventilation used and regularly checked'.

We do not expect a risk assessment to be perfect, but it must be suitable and sufficient. You need to be able to show that:

- A proper check was made;
- You asked who might be affected;
- You dealt with all the significant hazards, taking into account the number of people who could be involved;
- The precautions are reasonable, and the remaining risk is low; and
- You involved your staff or their representatives in the process.

If, like many businesses, you find that there are quite a lot of improvements that you could make, big and small, don't try to do everything at once. Make a plan of action to deal with the most important things first. Health and safety inspectors acknowledge the efforts of businesses that are clearly trying to make improvements.

A good action plan often includes a mixture of different things such as:

- A few cheap or easy improvements that can be done quickly, perhaps as a temporary solution until more reliable controls are in place;
- Long-term solutions to those risks most likely to cause accidents or ill health;
- Long-term solutions to those risks with the worst potential consequences;
- Arrangements for training employees on the main risks that remain and how they are to be controlled;
- Regular checks to make sure that the control measures stay in place; and clear responsibilities – who will lead on what action, and by when.

Remember, prioritise and tackle the most important things first. As you complete each action, tick it off your plan.

Step 5 – Review your Risk Assessment and Update if necessary

Few workplaces stay the same. Sooner or later, you will bring in new equipment, substances and procedures that could lead to new hazards. It makes sense, therefore, to review what you are doing on an ongoing basis. Every year or so formally review where you are, to make sure you are still improving, or at least not sliding back. With short term projects reduce the review period. In construction the biggest contributor to the realization of risk is unmanaged change.



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Look at your risk assessment again. Have there been any changes?
Are there improvements you still need to make?
Have your workers spotted a problem?
Have you learnt anything from accidents or near misses?
Make sure your risk assessment stays up to date.
Do employees have a hazard reporting channel which will allow for the reporting of new hazards?

When you are running a business it's all too easy to forget about reviewing your risk assessment – until something has gone wrong and it's too late. Why not set a review date for this risk assessment now? Write it down and note it in your diary as an annual event. Remember risk assessments are not there to assist with incident investigation but rather to avoid the materialization of the risk.

During the year, if there is a significant change, don't wait. Check your risk assessment and, where necessary, amend it. If possible, it is best to think about the risk assessment when you're planning your change – that way you leave yourself more flexibility. Include risk assessment in all change, by making it part of the development process.

Frequently asked questions

What if the work I do varies a lot, or I (or my employees) move from one site to another?

Identify the hazards you can reasonably expect and assess the risks from them. This general assessment should stand you in good stead for the majority of your work. Where you do take on work or a new site that is different, cover any new or different hazards with a specific assessment. You do not have to start from scratch each time. Use this assessment as your baseline

What if I share a workplace?

Tell the other employers and self-employed people there about any risks your work could cause them, and what precautions you are taking. Also, think about the risks to your own workforce from those who share your workplace. Maintain communication between the different work groups and ensure both risk assessments are understood.

Do my employees have responsibilities?

Yes. Employees have legal responsibilities to co-operate with their employer's efforts to improve health and safety (e.g. they must wear protective equipment when it is provided), and to look out for each other.

What if one of my employee's circumstances change?

You'll need to look again at the risk assessment. You are required to carry out a specific risk assessment for new or expectant mothers, as some tasks (heavy lifting or work with chemicals for example) may not be appropriate. If an employee develops a disability then you are required to make reasonable adjustments. People returning to work following major surgery may also have particular requirements. If you put your mind to it, you can almost always find a way forward that works for you and your employees.



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What if I have already assessed some of the risks?

If, for example, you use hazardous chemicals and you have already assessed the risks to health and the precautions you need to take under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations, you can consider them checked' and move on.

Am I required as an employer to perform risk assessments?

Section 8 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act provides clear evidence of the legal requirement to identify, assess and control risk:

1. Every employer shall provide and maintain, as far as is reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of his employees.
2. Without derogating from the generality of an employer's duties under subsection (1), the matters to which those duties refer include in particular --
 - a. the provision and maintenance of systems of work, plant and machinery that, as far as is reasonably practicable, are safe and without risks to health;
 - b. taking such steps as may be reasonably practicable to eliminate or mitigate any hazard or potential hazard to the safety or health of employees, before resorting to personal protective equipment;
 - c. making arrangements for ensuring, as far as is reasonably practicable, the safety and absence of risks to health in connection with the production, processing, use, handling, storage or transport of articles or substances;
 - d. establishing, as far as is reasonably practicable, what hazards to the health or safety of persons are attached to any work which is performed, any article or substance which is produced, processed, used, handled, stored or transported and any plant or machinery which is used in his business, and he shall, as far as is reasonably practicable, further establish what precautionary measures should be taken with respect to such work, article, substance, plant or machinery in order to protect the health and safety of persons, and he shall provide the necessary means to apply such precautionary measures;
 - e. providing such information, instructions, training and supervision as may be necessary to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety at work of his employees;
 - f. as far as is reasonably practicable, not permitting any employee to do any work or to produce, process, use, handle, store or transport any article or substance or to operate any plant or machinery, unless the precautionary measures contemplated in paragraphs (b) and (d), or any other precautionary measures which may be prescribed, have been taken;
 - g. taking all necessary measures to ensure that the requirements of this Act are complied with by every person in his employment or on premises under his control where plant or machinery is used;
 - h. enforcing such measures as may be necessary in the interest of health and safety;
 - i. ensuring that work is performed and that plant or machinery is used under the general supervision of a person trained to understand the hazards associated with it and who have the authority to ensure that precautionary measures taken by the employer are implemented; and
 - j. causing all employees to be informed regarding the scope of their authority as contemplated in section 37(1)(b).



Hazard Identification

Before we can start thinking of risk assessment we need to ensure a participative hazard identification program, encouraging all employees to participate. A solid inspection and audit system will assist in identifying hazards, which in turn will provide for a more objective risk assessment process. Encourage the reporting of all hazards.

The following flow diagram depicts a basic process of highlighting hazards and ensuring suitable assessment and control:

