

Occupational Safety and Health

► Occupational safety and health (OSH) like all facets of business, needs to be properly managed. A company's OSH system helps ensure effective control of OSH risks and continual improvement in OSH performance. The aim is to prevent work-related illness or injury and achieve compliance with regulations and standards.

Why bother with OSH?

As well as not wanting to harm people, you also have a **legal duty** to ensure the health, safety and welfare of your employees at work and the health and safety of others who may be affected by your activities (e.g. tradespeople and the public.). Small businesses may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of an accident, as absence of a key employee or damage to an essential piece of equipment can cause you problems in meeting commitments – possibly threatening your **business survival**. It is also the case that small firms are twice as likely to have a fatal or major injury as large firms. Preventing the creation/introduction of hazards at the design stage is more cost-effective than trying to put things right later.

What employers should do

- **Register** your business with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or Local Authority - remember they can advise you on OSH.
- Get **employers' liability insurance**.
- Ensure employees are **competent** and that you **consult** and **communicate** with them and gain their **co-operation**.
- Lead by example, showing **commitment** to OSH
- Identify your OSH hazards, then assess and **control significant risks**, including fire. You must have adequate **emergency procedures** and access to **competent OSH advice**.

- Provide **welfare amenities** such as toilets, hot and cold running water, drinking water and first-aid, etc.
- Have and communicate an OSH **policy** (written down if you have five or more employees).
- **Record, investigate** and **report** accidents to the enforcing authority if required. Establish accident root causes to help prevent recurrences.

There is HSE **guidance** on OSH topics and you may seek advice from **competent specialists**.

Who is at risk?

You have a duty to identify all those at risk and to take appropriate action to protect them. There is an extra duty of care towards those who are particularly vulnerable, such as: young and inexperienced workers; disabled people; pregnant women and nursing mothers. Your duty of care covers all your employees, including remote and lone-workers, part-time and temporary workers, work-experience students; contractors; visitors; and others who may be affected by your activities. Risk assessment should cover both the normal workplace activities and also uncommon situations, such as emergencies, breakdowns and maintenance.

How to manage OSH risks

Most effective systems are based on the principle of 'plan, do, check, act'. In OSH terms this will require you to develop a **policy** on what you intend to



achieve, then a **plan** of how and when you will do it, including any necessary arrangements. Next is the **'doing'** phase, when you implement the plans and then **check** that you have done what you planned to do and that it is effective in **controlling risks**. Any deficiencies found need to be **acted** upon and rectified, so that you **continually improve** your system and performance.

Your system needs to be appropriate to the size and complexity of your organisation and the hazards associated with your activities. By taking a **risk-based approach**, you can focus your efforts on the significant risk areas. It is important that employees know their OSH **roles and responsibilities** and are adequately trained and resourced to fulfil them.

What are the hazard areas?

Most accidents are due to management failures leading to unsafe acts (e.g. horseplay) and unsafe conditions (e.g. poor housekeeping or unguarded machinery). There are always factors in the work environment that can threaten the health or safety of people. It is important to identify, assess and control these factors and it may be helpful to group some of the most common ones as follows:

- **Physical hazards.** Refers to the effects of different forms of energy on employees and their health. The most significant physical hazards are noise, vibration, radiation, cold/hot conditions, and insufficient lighting or ventilation. In work environments where these hazards are not adequately controlled, people can suffer conditions such as noise-induced hearing loss, hand-arm vibration syndrome, cancer, heat stroke, frostbite and hypothermia.
- **Accident hazards.** The most typical accident types are injuries from falling objects; falls from

- heights; slipping, tripping and falling; being hit by moving objects; entanglement; crushing; trapping; burning; and electric shock. These hazards can lead to cuts, abrasions, bruises, burns, fractures, amputations, head injuries and death. Good housekeeping and safe systems and places of work can help prevent accidents. *See also 'Travel and Traffic Risks' (work card).*
- **Physical strain.** Can be caused by inadequate ergonomics i.e. a poor relationship between a worker and their physical work environment. Typically this would include unsuitable work methods, workstations and tools/equipment – leading to the risk of musculoskeletal problems (e.g. back pain and upper-limb disorders) hernias and fatigue. In order to reduce the risk of strain injuries, good ergonomic principles should be applied to manual handling, difficult working positions, the physical dimensions and layout of workstations, the design of tools, and the use of machines and equipment. Manual handling training should also be given.
- **Hazardous substances.** Refers to substances in solid, liquid or gaseous states, present in the workplace, which can be hazardous to health. The health risks associated with these substances depend on their properties, the volumes used, the way they are used and the potential routes of entry into the body (inhalation, injection, absorption or ingestion). There may be chemical, flammable, explosive, biological or radiation effects from some substances. It is important to have up-to-date safety data sheets for all hazardous substances on your premises. Manufacturers or suppliers have a legal duty to provide such data sheets with their products – the sheets will identify all the hazards associated with the substances, including exposure limits, control methods and emergency actions.

- **Work-related stress (WRS).** When WRS is under control, work feels meaningful, the atmosphere at the workplace is good, operations run smoothly and there is good co-operation. However, when WRS is not controlled, people can be physically and psychologically damaged (e.g. heart disease; backpain; nervous breakdown and depression). WRS can be defined as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. It's often caused by change, lack of control, job insecurity, hostile work environment (e.g. bullying, discrimination, violence or harassment) and high workload.

See also '*Stress Management*' (info card).

- **People's actions.** Unsafe actions and risk-taking by people can be both conscious and unconscious. Such behaviour can cause major accidents, leading to serious injuries, ill health or death. A typical example is where an employee, in a misguided effort to 'speed up the job', runs down a corridor and collides with someone, causing a serious injury. To reduce risk-taking, you must have a safe system of work; competent employees who understand the risks and controls involved; and a culture in which unsafe behaviours are not tolerated. As even competent employees can sometimes make mistakes, it is important to identify those areas in which significant harm could occur and put in place additional safeguards. These might include inter-locked guarding, sensors, alarms, permits-to-work and lock-off systems. Intentional damage to buildings, plant/equipment or people (violence) may be more difficult to predict and prevent. It is prudent to have reasonable standards of security, a system for reporting/investigating incidents and regular checking and testing of equipment.

See also '*Acts of Damage*' (work card) and '*Violence at Work*' (info and work cards).

Further information

Further information is in the SME Risk Management toolkit: Personnel Risk Management (booklet) and Occupational Safety and Health Risks (work card).

The following guidance leaflets can be obtained free from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 2WA. Tel: 01787 881165 or

www.hsebooks.co.uk

An introduction to health and safety: health and safety in small firms – INDG259

Consulting employees on health and safety: a guide to the law – INDG232

First-aid at work: your questions answered – INDG214

Five steps to risk assessment – INDG163(REV1)

Good health is good business: employers' guide – MISC196

Managing health and safety: five steps to success – INDG275

Need help on health and safety? – INDG322

RIDDOR – HSE31(REV1) [accident reporting]

Stating your business – INDG324 [writing a H&S policy]

Welfare at work: guidance for employers on welfare provisions – INDG293

Workplace health, safety and welfare: a short guide for managers – INDG244

The following priced publication is also available from HSE Books: *Essentials of health and safety at work* – HSE (2000), ISBN 0 7176 0716 X

Other information can be found at:

HSE Information Line, tel: 08701 545500

HSE website: www.hse.gov.uk

HSE Northern Ireland: www.hseni.gov.uk

IOSH websites: www.iosh.co.uk

and www.safestartup.org