



Risk assessment — the key to healthy workplaces

Why carry out a risk assessment?

Every few minutes somebody in the EU dies from work-related causes. Furthermore, every year hundreds of thousands of employees are injured at work; others take sickness leave to deal with stress, work overload, musculoskeletal disorders or other illnesses related to the workplace. And, as well as the human cost for workers and their families of accidents and illnesses, they also stretch the resources of healthcare systems and affect business productivity.

Risk assessment is the basis for successful safety and health management, and the key to reducing work-related accidents and occupational diseases. If it is implemented well, it can improve workplace safety and health — and business performance in general.

What is risk assessment?

Risk assessment is the process of evaluating risks to workers' safety and health from workplace hazards. It is a systematic examination of all aspects of work that considers:

- what could cause injury or harm,
- whether the hazards could be eliminated and, if not,
- what preventive or protective measures are, or should be, in place to control the risks (1).

Employers have a general duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to work and to carry out a risk assessment. The EU framework directive (2) highlights the key role played by risk assessment and sets out basic provisions that must be followed by every employer. Member States, however, have the right to enact more stringent provisions to protect their workers (please check the specific legislation of your country) (3).



How to assess the risks?

For most businesses, a straightforward five-step (4) approach to risk assessment should work well. However, there are other methods that work equally well, particularly for more complex risks and circumstances.

The five-step approach to risk assessment

Step 1. Identifying hazards and those at risk

Remember: a hazard can be anything — whether work materials, equipment, work methods or practices — that has the potential to cause harm.

Here are some tips to help identify the hazards that matter:

- walk around the workplace and looking at what could cause harm;
- consult workers and/or their representatives about problems they have encountered;
- consider long-term hazards to health, such as high levels of noise or exposure to harmful substances, as well as more complex or less obvious risks such as psychosocial or work organisational risk factors;
- look at company accident and ill-health records;
- seek information from other sources such as:
 - manufacturers' and suppliers' instruction manuals or data sheets;
 - occupational safety and health websites;
 - national bodies, trade associations or trade unions;
 - legal regulations and technical standards.

For each hazard it is important to be clear about who could be harmed; it will help in identifying the best way of managing the risk. This doesn't mean listing everyone by name, but identifying groups of people such as 'people working in the storeroom' or 'passers-by'. Cleaners, contractors and members of the public may also be at risk.

Particular attention should be paid to gender issues (5) and to groups of workers who may be at increased risk or have particular requirements (see box). In each case, it is important to identify how they might be harmed, i.e. what type of injury or ill health may occur.

(1) *Guidance on risk assessment at work*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1996.

(2) Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work.

(3) Ireland: www.hsa.ie; Malta: www.ohsa.org.mt; United Kingdom: www.hse.gov.uk/risk/index.htm

(4) Whether the risk assessment process in your country is divided into more or fewer steps, or even if some of the five steps are different, the guiding principles should be the same.

(5) Factsheet 43, including gender issues in risk assessment: <http://osha.europa.eu/publications/factsheets>

Workers who may be at greater risk

- Workers with disabilities
- Migrant workers
- Young and old workers
- Pregnant women and nursing mothers
- Untrained or inexperienced staff
- Maintenance workers
- Immuno-compromised workers
- Workers with existing ill-health conditions such as bronchitis
- Workers on medications that may increase their vulnerability to harm

Step 2. Evaluating and prioritising risks

Remember: a risk is the chance, high or low, that somebody may be harmed by the hazard.

The next step is evaluating the risk arising from each hazard. This can be done by considering:

- how likely it is that a hazard will cause harm;
- how serious that harm is likely to be;
- how often (and how many) workers are exposed.

A straightforward process based on judgement and requiring no specialist skills or complicated techniques could be sufficient for many workplace hazards or activities. These include activities with hazards of low concern, or workplaces where risks are well known or readily identified and where a means of control is readily available. This is probably the case for most businesses (mainly small and medium-sized enterprises — SMEs). Risks should then be prioritised and tackled in that order.

Step 3. Deciding on preventive action

The next step is to decide how to eliminate or control risks. At this stage, it will have to be considered:

- if it is possible to get rid of the risk;
- if not, how risks can be controlled so they do not compromise the safety and health of those exposed.

When preventing and controlling risks, the following general principles of prevention have to be taken into account:

- avoiding risks;
- substituting the dangerous by the non-dangerous or the less dangerous;
- combating risks at source;
- applying collective protective measures rather than individual protective measures (e.g. control exposure to fumes by local exhaust ventilation rather than personal respirators);
- adapting to technical progress and changes in information;
- seeking to improve the level of protection.

Step 4. Taking action

The next step is to put in place the preventive and protective measures. It is important to involve the workers and their representatives in the process.

Effective implementation involves the development of a plan specifying:

- the measures to be implemented;
- who does what and when;
- when it is to be completed.

It is essential that any work to eliminate or prevent risks is prioritised.

Step 5. Monitoring and reviewing

Carrying out regular checks must also not be neglected to ensure that preventive and protective measures are working or being implemented and to identify new problems.

The risk assessment has to be reviewed regularly depending on the nature of the risks, the degree of change likely in work activity or as a result of the findings of an accident or 'near miss' ^(e) investigation. Risk assessment is not a once-and-for-all activity.

Recording the assessment

The risk assessment must be recorded. Such a record can be used as a basis for:

- information to be passed to the persons concerned;
- monitoring to assess whether necessary measures have been introduced;
- evidence to be produced for supervisory authorities;
- any revision if circumstances change.

A record of at least the following details is recommended:

- name and function of the person(s) carrying out the examination;
- the hazards and risks identified;
- groups of workers facing particular risks;
- the necessary protection measures;
- details of the introduction of the measures such as the name of the person responsible and date;
- details of subsequent monitoring and reviewing arrangements, including dates and the people involved;
- details of the workers' and their representatives' involvement in the risk assessment process.

Further information

This factsheet has been produced to support the European 2008/09 campaign on risk assessment. Other factsheets in the series and more information on risk assessment are available at <http://osha.europa.eu/topics/riskassessment>. This resource is being continually developed and updated.

^(e) A near miss is an unplanned event that did not result in injury, illness or damage — but had the potential to do so.

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