

RISK ASSESSMENT: FIRST STEPS

What is risk assessment?

Assessing risk is part of managing health and safety. Risk assessment techniques are used to address health and safety issues across a wide range of businesses and work activities. Risk assessments provide a useful means of deciding about whether or not workplace hazards are being properly controlled and form an effective basis for a health and safety improvement programme. This guidance introduces risk assessment: those who have more hazardous workplaces or are less confident about their health and safety standards will need to look at our “Risk assessment basics” leaflet. Those in the most hazardous workplaces will also want to look at our “Assessing hazard and risk” leaflet.

What does the law say?

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations come into force on 1st October 2004. They apply to employers and the self-employed and impose a statutory duty to assess and manage health and safety risks at work. These Regulations are not about filling in forms for every different aspect of your work. They do require you to look at what you are doing and make decisions about whether or not you are complying with health and safety law.

For employers, these regulations require you to make an assessment of the risks your employees are exposed to whilst at work and of the risks other people are exposed to as result of your work. Self-employed people are required to do the same, but must consider themselves in place of employees. You must inform your employees about the findings of your assessment. If you employ five or more you must make a record of the more significant hazards and of your most important conclusions.

What’s the point?

Assessing risk helps you to manage health and safety effectively. It allows you to focus on what could cause a problem in your work and check that you have done enough to comply with the legal standards. The Regulations call these “the preventative and protective measures”. The assessment you make under Regulation 3 is to help you identify these measures and check that they are in place. Regulation 4 requires you to have arrangements to make sure that the preventative and protective measures are put in place and stay in place. The Regulations aim to create workplaces where health and safety is seen as a key topic and where it is managed in the same way as other key parts of your business.

Is there an easy way of doing this?

Traditional guidance on risk assessment suggests a step by step approach to risk assessment involving hazard identification, deciding who may be exposed to risks from the hazards and how they might be harmed and looking at existing precautions before deciding if more needs to be done to reduce the risks. Whilst this approach can be helpful, it does take time. On the Isle of Man you are not expected to concentrate too much time and resource in hunting down hazards that are already properly controlled.

HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK INSPECTORATE INFORMATION DOCUMENT: RISK ASSESSMENT

Remember that your assessment is to check whether or not you are working to the legal standards and, if you are not, to show what you need to do to improve. So you need to see what you are already doing to keep things safe and make sure that this is enough to meet the legal standards. Rather than refer to the law, it's often easier to compare your work to normal good practice in your industry. If you aren't sure about this you can use industry codes, training notes, instruction manuals or health and safety guidance books as your reference points.

Look at your operations and check that precautions in place control the risks that you know about. If you use machinery, is it maintained regularly? Are safety features, such as guards, in place and working properly? If you have extraction equipment to deal with harmful dusts, fumes, or gases is it maintained and inspected annually? Is electrical equipment in good condition and checked regularly? If you lift or move heavy or awkward objects, do you use mechanical aids? Are fire prevention and control measures in place?

You may well rely on workers doing their work competently, following instructions and using safety equipment. Are you sure that rules are being followed and that everyone is aware of them and properly trained? Is safety equipment always available? Does everyone use it when they should? You may already have detailed rules to deal with your most significant risks. If you run a nursing or residential home and have thorough plans for lifting patients, providing lifting aids and training staff, simply refer to these: don't try to make a full assessment for each lift.

If you make these checks honestly and carefully you will be able to decide whether or not further control measures are needed to reduce risks. Don't forget about visitors and members of the public, and remember that the Regulations ask you to make specific checks for fire safety and for young workers. Use your workforce as a source of information about health and safety in your workplace. They should be actively involved in the assessment process. When you have completed your risk assessment, share the results with those affected by your work.

How can I reduce risk?

There are a number of ways to reduce risk. It's best to get rid of any risks you can't control, but often you won't be able to do this. Do try to lower the risk by choosing measures that benefit everyone rather than just one person. The options below are in priority order:

- 1) Remove the risk altogether
- 2) Reduce the risk - try a safer way of working or a less hazardous product
- 3) Apply engineering solutions such as barriers or machine guards
- 4) Lay down set systems of work and train people to follow them
- 5) Use personal protective equipment.

Do take account of the skills of your workers, but remember that not everyone in your workplace will have the same training and experience.

What about keeping records?

If you employ less than 5 people you don't have to keep a record, although you can still be asked to show that you made a proper check and explain how you decided that all was in order. Anyone employing 5 people or more have to record the significant findings of their assessment and identify any group of people that is particularly at risk. You might have already done this in your health and safety policy.

Do I have to do anything else?

You need to amend your assessment when there are significant changes in the way you work or you have reason to believe that it is no longer valid, such as after an accident. It is a good idea to review your assessment annually.

As the point of assessing risks is to make sure that your workplace is safe, don't forget to make sure that the preventative and protective measures are put in place and stay in place. Make regular checks to make sure that this is the case.

How long have I got to do this?

Inspectors look to see that you have complied with the standards set by health and safety law. Although the Regulations are in force from 1 October 2004, they will not be taking formal action to enforce any wholly new requirements until January 2006. They will expect you to show that you are taking steps to comply with the existing requirements and may ask you to work to both new and existing rules if you are not.

Getting further help

There are a large number of publications available on risk assessment. The Health and Safety at Work Inspectorate have issued other guidance on assessment to support the information contained in this document. Many employers' organisations provide guidance based on the hazards to be found in their industries. Certain bodies also provide examples of completed assessments that you may find could be readily adapted to your own workplace.

The Department of Trade and Industry's Training Services Division at the Hills Meadow Training Centre (telephone no: 687150) run courses on risk assessment. Those working in the public sector are advised to contact Public Service Training, Employee Development (tel: 685724) to book a suitable course. Some trade associations provide or co-ordinate training for members and there are a number of businesses that provide risk assessment training courses. Try contacting the companies listed in the phone book under "health and safety".

The information in this document is current as of July 2004 and has been prepared by the Health and Safety at Work Inspectorate. This document does not replace any other HSWI guidance or affect any existing enforcement procedures. Copies of this document are available in electronic format from the Inspectorate.

Further guidance on Isle of Man health and safety legislation is available from the Health and Safety at Work Inspectorate, Murray House, Mount Havelock, Douglas, IM1 2SF, telephone 685952, email WorkSafe@dlge.gov.im or website www.gov.im/dlge.