

PSA LINK

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PSA SHOP STEWARD NEWSLETTER

Occupational Health: Risk Assessment

A Risk Assessment (RA) is an activity that includes recognising hazards in the workplace and assessing the risk and consequences of exposure of these hazards. It also involves identifying preventative measures that need to be in place to remove, reduce or control workers' exposure to hazards.

The law is not strong on workers' rights around risk assessments. The *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHS Act)* itself is weak and does not specifically require that risk assessment be done in all workplaces. The General Safety Regulations do, however, require that employers evaluate the risk of any work situation, condition or machinery to which workers are exposed.

There are also detailed regulations that require that risk assessments be done for specific hazards and there is also general requirement in the *OHS Act* that hazards be identified and that essential precautions are put in place to deal with these. Shop stewards and health and safety representatives must argue that this should include a risk assessment, which should be a general tool used in all workplaces as part of building healthy and safe workplaces. The regulations dealing with risk assessments can be used to set precedence and establish the principles and minimum standards for general workplace risk assessments. Once management has agreed to do a risk assessment, workers and their representatives must demand that health and safety representatives be part of the process.

FIVE STEPS TO RISK ASSESSMENT?

Step 1: Identify hazards, i.e. anything that may cause harm

Employers have a responsibility to assess the health and safety risks faced by their workers. The employer must systematically check for possible physical, mental, chemical and biological hazards.

This is one common classification of hazards:

Physical: e.g. lifting, slips and trips, noise, dust, machinery and computer equipment.

Mental: e.g. excess workload, long hours, working with high-need clients and bullying (these are also called 'psychosocial' hazards, affecting mental health and occurring in work relationships).

Chemical: e.g. asbestos, cleaning fluids and aerosols.

Biological: e.g. tuberculosis, hepatitis and other infectious diseases faced by healthcare workers, home-care staff and other healthcare professionals.

Step 2: Decide who may be harmed, and how

Recognising who is at risk, starts with the organisation's own full- and part-time employees. Employers must also assess risks faced by agency and contract staff, visitors, clients and members of the public on their premises. Employers must review work routines in all locations and situations where staff members are employed. For example, home-care supervisors must take due account of their clients' personal safety in the home and ensure safe working and lifting arrangements for the home-care staff.

Hazards are also found in repetitive tasks, in lifting loads, and in slips and trips from spillages and obstacles. Staff also face the risk of violence from customers and intruders, especially at night. Workstation equipment (i.e. desk, screen, keyboard and chair) must be adjusted to suit each employee.

Step 3: Assess risks and take action

Employers must consider how likely it is that each hazard could cause harm. This will determine whether or not the employer should reduce the level of risk. Even after all precautions have been taken, some risk usually remains. Employers must decide for each remaining hazard whether the risk remains high, medium or low.

Step 4: Make a record of findings

Employers with five or more staff are required to record in writing the main findings of the risk assessment. This record should include details of any hazards noted in the risk assessment, and action taken to reduce or eliminate risk. This record provides proof that the assessment was carried out and is used as the basis for a later review of working practices. The risk assessment is a working document. You should be able to read it - it should not be locked away in a cupboard.

Step 5: Review the risk assessment

A risk assessment must be kept under review to ensure that agreed safe work practices continue to be applied (e.g. that management's safety instructions are respected by supervisors and line managers), and take account of any new working practices, new machinery or more demanding work targets.

