An introduction to risk assessments

A free guide from Citation’s Health & Safety experts.
An introduction to: Risk assessments

A risk assessment is the process of identifying which hazards in and around your business have the potential to cause your employees harm.

Once potentially harmful hazards have been established, it’s then your job as an employer to put appropriate measures in place, to eliminate or reduce the odds of an employee falling victim to harm.

Hazard vs risk: what’s the difference?

If you’ve not heard of the shark in a swimming pool analogy before, then you’re in for a treat, because we’ll be using it to explain the difference. A shark in a pool alone is only a hazard, the shark only becomes a risk if an individual enters the pool.

Not having suitable and sufficient risk assessments in place can, at worst, be fatal. Circulating adequate risk assessments to all employees can benefit your business in many ways:

- Eliminate or reduce work-related ill health
- Prevent output being reduced or stopped
- Avoid your environment or equipment from being damaged
- Prevent unwanted costs from fines, fees or claims
- Side-step potentially costly reputational damage.

The complexity of risk assessments will vary from business-to-business. A few elements that’ll affect the depth of your assessment include:

- The nature of your business
- The level of risk your business poses
- The type of workplace your business operates in
- The people who work at or visit your business’ premises.

Why do a risk assessment?

Risk assessments make your business’ workplace a safer and more efficient place for everyone. They give clear, safe instructions for employees to go about their daily duties, thus reducing the opportunities for incidents.

Not only will risk assessments protect you and your employees from accidents, but they’ll protect you from the law too. That’s because risk assessments fall under one of the legal duties included in the Health & Safety at Work Act, under the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations.

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In 2017/18* in Great Britain:

- **1.4 million** workers suffered from a work-related illness
- **2,595** workers died from mesothelioma due to past asbestos exposure
- **144** people were killed at work
- **71,062** worker injuries were reported under RIDDOR
- **555,000** injuries occurred in the workplace**
- **30.7 million** working days were lost due to work-related illnesses or injuries
- **£15 billion** - the estimated cost of ill-health and injury from working conditions.

**According to the Labour Force Survey.
Risk assessments in five steps

There are five simple steps you should follow for a successful risk assessment.

1. Identify the hazards
When identifying hazards, don’t just rely on your own knowledge. Speak to the trade associations and employees who directly do the work and ask them what they believe the hazards to be.
And it doesn’t stop there. Remember to review all your accident handbooks for hazard trends, operating manuals and instructions, as well as consulting with a Health & Safety professional to facilitate with the process.

2. Who could be in harm’s way?
Cast your mind further afield to just those that directly carry out the work. For example, unloading a vehicle in a retail park affects the vehicle’s driver, the fork lift driver and the general public.

3. Risk evaluation
Once you’ve compiled a list of hazards, it’s time to prioritise them. Which hazards are most likely to happen? And if they were to happen, how much harm could they inflict?
For example, if you’ve an employee working from a poorly erected scaffold with no handrail, on the fourteenth story of a block of flats, the risk could potentially be fatal. Therefore, it’d be expected and reasonable of you to inject a lot of resource into preventing this.
Legally, as an employer, you’re required to do everything reasonably and practicably possible to protect your employees from harm.
You should also go through your list of hazards and review their processes, to see if some of the hazards can be removed altogether. If they can’t be completely removed, can an alternative process be put in place to reduce the amount of risk?

4. Record and communicate your findings
By now, you should have a list of hazards and how you can eliminate or reduce them. For ease of viewing, consider recording these in a table.
A few suggestions for columns within your table include:
– The hazard itself
– Who could be harmed and how?
– What controls are currently in place?
– What’s the risk rating? i.e. how likely is it that the event will occur, and how severe could the consequences be if it did occur.
– Are any additional controls needed?
– What’s the residual risk rating?
– Who’s responsible for the action points, and when’s the deadline?
No matter the size of your business, risk assessments are incredibly important. Although recording your assessment isn’t a legal requirement, it’s recommended by the HSE.
One of the key elements of a risk assessment is how you communicate it. After all, what use are the findings and solutions if those that’re affected aren’t aware of and clearly implementing them?
To ensure your risk assessment is digested, keep it short and simple. We’d also recommend distributing it in team meetings or one-to-ones, as well as storing a digital or print copy somewhere for employees to access when they wish.
When sharing your risk assessment, instead of just regurgitating your paperwork, consider taking your employees to the physical location of the work and demonstrating the process. Give plenty of opportunity for questions and feedback, and ask everyone in attendance to sign a document to prove they’ve participated.

5. Review your risk assessment
A risk assessment should be a living document. Industries, workplaces and roles constantly evolve, and with that your processes will too.
Whether it’s monthly, quarterly or yearly, set yourself a reminder to go back and review existing processes, and identify new ones. It’s also worth remembering to review your risk assessment when legislative changes come in to force as they could affect your processes too.
Without fail, you should review your risk assessment document after an accident or near miss has happened within your workplace – and the industry as a whole. You should also review it when the process or people undertaking the process change.
Here at Citation, we truly believe following the above steps (thoroughly!) will result in a safer, more engaged workforce. If you’re struggling with any aspect of your risk assessment, we’ve a team of experienced Health & Safety consultants on hand to help you along the way.

Attention: most common workplace risks

With workplaces occupying five or more employees, according to the HSE*, the most common workplace risks are:
1. Slips, trips or falls on the same level
2. Handling/lifting/carrying
3. Struck by an object
4. Falls from a height
5. Acts of violence

*HSE: Health & Safety Statistics 2017/18

PLEASE NOTE: The above is intended to provide information of general interest but does not give legal advice.