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FACTS

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

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Risk assessment — roles and responsibilities



Workers' safety and health is protected in Europe by an approach based on assessing and managing risk. In order to carry out effective workplace risk assessment, all those involved require a clear understanding of the **legal context, concepts, the process of assessing the risks** and the **role** to be played by the **main actors** involved in the process ⁽¹⁾.

Legal context

The key role played by risk assessment is set out in the EU framework directive ⁽²⁾. Employers have a general duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to work. Risk assessments enable employers to take the measures necessary to protect the safety and health of their workers. These measures include:

- preventing occupational risks;
- providing information and training to workers;
- putting in place the organisation and means to implement the necessary measures.

The framework directive has been transposed into national legislation. Member States, however, have the right to enact more stringent provisions to protect their workers (please check the specific legislation of your country) ⁽³⁾.

What is risk assessment?

Risk assessment is the process of evaluating the 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.

Remember:

- a hazard can be anything — whether work materials, equipment, work methods or practices — that has the potential to cause harm;
- a risk is the chance, high or low, that somebody may be harmed by the hazard.

How to assess the risks

The guiding principles that should be considered throughout the risk assessment process ⁽⁴⁾ can be broken down into a series of steps.

Step 1 — Identifying hazards and those at risk

Looking for those things at work that have the potential to cause harm, and identifying workers who may be exposed to the hazards.

Step 2 — Evaluating and prioritising risks

Estimating the existing risks (their severity, their probability, etc.) and prioritising them in order of importance. It is essential that the work to be done to eliminate or prevent risks is prioritised.

Step 3 — Deciding on preventive action

Identifying the appropriate measures to eliminate or control the risks.

Step 4 — Taking action

Putting in place the preventive and protective measures through a prioritisation plan (most probably all the problems cannot be resolved immediately) and specifying who does what and when, when a task is to be completed and the means allocated to implement the measures.

Step 5 — Monitoring and reviewing

The assessment should be reviewed at regular intervals to ensure it remains up to date. It has to be revised whenever significant changes occur in the organisation or as a result of the findings of an accident or 'near miss' ⁽⁵⁾ investigation.

⁽¹⁾ The content of this factsheet is based on *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⁾ A near miss is an unplanned event that did not result in injury, illness or damage — but had the potential to do so.

Who does what?

The **employer** has a duty to:

- ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to work;
- organise the risk assessment;
- select the person(s) to carry out the assessment and ensure they are competent;
- assess the risks and implement protective measures;
- consult the employees or their representatives about the organisation of the risk assessment, and the persons carrying out the assessment and implementing the preventive measures;
- be in possession of an assessment of the risks;
- draw up assessment records having consulted with the workers and/or their representatives, or even involved them in the work, and make the records available to them;
- ensure all persons affected are informed of any hazard, of any harm to which they may be at risk and of all the protective measures taken to prevent such harm.

The person carrying out the risk assessment

The employer has the final decision on the people who carry out risk assessments. They can be:

- the employer;
- employees designated by the employers;
- external assessors and services **if** there is a lack of competent personnel in the workplace.

The people designated by the employer to undertake risk assessments should be competent. In most circumstances they do not need to be safety and health experts, but they can demonstrate their competence by showing they have:

- (1) an understanding of the general approach to risk assessment;
- (2) the capacity to apply this to the workplace and task required; this may require:
 - (a) identifying safety and health problems;
 - (b) assessing and prioritising the need for action;
 - (c) suggesting options available to eliminate or reduce risks and their relative merit;
 - (d) evaluating their effectiveness;
 - (e) promoting and communicating safety and health improvements and good practices;
- (3) the ability to identify situations where they would be unable to adequately assess the risk without help and be able to advise on the need for further assistance.

Workers and their representatives

Workers and/or their representatives have the right/duty to:

- be consulted on arrangements for the organisation of the risk assessment and for the appointment of those undertaking the task;
- participate in the risk assessment;
- alert their supervisors or employers about perceived risks;
- report changes in the workplace;

- be informed of the risks to their safety and health and of the measures required to eliminate or reduce these risks;
- ask the employer to take appropriate measures and to submit proposals to minimise hazards or to remove the danger at source;
- cooperate to enable the employer to ensure a safe working environment;
- be consulted by the employer when drawing up the records of assessments.

Contractors/suppliers

Where employees from different enterprises work in the same workplace, assessors from each employer may need to share information about risks and the measures needed to tackle those risks.

Risk assessment resources

There are many resources available to help enterprises carry out risk assessments. The choice of method will depend on workplace conditions, for example the number of workers, the type of work activities and equipment, the particular features of the workplace and any specific risks.

More information about risk assessment resources is available at: <http://osha.europa.eu/topics/riskassessment>

Participatory risk assessment

Risk assessments should not be carried out by the employer or the employer's representative working in isolation. They should involve employees or their representatives. Workers should be consulted as part of the assessment process itself and given information on any conclusions reached, as well as on the preventive measures to be taken.

Coordination among employers

When carrying out risk assessments, always consider the potential presence at the workplace of employees from other businesses (e.g. cleaners, private security guards, maintenance workers) or other outsiders (e.g. clients, visitors, 'passers-by'). They should be considered as persons at risk but attention should also be paid to whether their presence may introduce new risks into the workplace.

Use of external services to make risk assessments

Whoever undertakes the risk assessment — even if it is an external service — it is the employer who is ultimately responsible for that assessment.

Further information

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

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