

Basic principles of workplace risk assessment and control: guidelines for the smaller contractor

Employers have a legal duty to carry out risk assessments*. As an employer, you are required to assess what activities and situations can harm people, how badly they could be harmed, and how likely is it that harm will occur. This allows the significant (important) risks to be identified. The most significant risks are the priorities for action by the employer. The action required is to take reasonable steps to remove or reduce the chance of harm, and in particular, serious harm. You should write down your assessment where there are significant risks.

Basic steps in a risk assessment can be identified as:

1. Identifying hazards
2. Assessing the risk of harm
3. Assessing existing control measures, to see if they are adequate
4. Assessing if extra controls are needed
5. Reviewing later on, to see if the controls are working

1. Identifying hazards

Identify all the significant (important) **hazards** in the job (eg falls from height, electricity, asbestos, manual handling). What makes a hazard *particularly* important is if it could kill or lead to serious injury (eg falling from three meters, or electricity, are both significant hazards. Lifting a small box is probably not, but lifting a heavy, awkward crate may be a serious hazard).

2. Assessing the risk of harm

Assess how likely it is that your workers (and others, such as other contractors or the public) might be harmed by such a hazard (eg would they be working at height all day, every day or just once a month?). You will need to take into account the work situation and the person involved (eg a young person may, because of their inexperience, be more at risk than an experienced worker, or a person who cannot read may not know what a safety sign is telling them).

You will also need to consider *how many* workers (and others) may be harmed (eg the more people working up ladders or with electricity or dangerous chemicals, the more the risk of harm).

The above assessment gives the **risk** to workers before any health and safety measures (controls) are taken into account (for example, it is likely that you would conclude that the risk of three men working with electricity is 'high', but that the risk of three men working on computers for two hours a day is 'low'). The three men working up a ladder is the more significant (important) risk and you should deal with important risks first. (Remember: *risk* is linked to the extent of the *hazard* and the *exposure* of people to it).

3. Assessing existing control measures

Look at each significant risk and decide what **controls** are in place to remove or reduce that risk (eg having written safety procedures or method statements, only working on 'dead' circuits to remove the chance of electrocution, or using personal protective equipment, such as eyewear when drilling, to reduce the risk of eye injury).

Note: you should only use personal protective equipment (PPE) if there is no better way of reducing the risk of harm (eg it is better to work three meters up on a firm platform, than three meters up on a shaky stepladder with a safety harness). Note too that if PPE is not worn, or if it does not fit properly, it does not give protection.

You have then assessed the **actual risk** to workers (and others) after control measures have been taken into account. Remember to **record your risk assessment**

4. Assessing if extra controls are needed

When you have taken the existing or planned controls into account, how much risk of harm remains? If the risk is *still* significant (eg if the risk is *still* 'high'), you must *do more to reduce the risk* (eg doing the work another way, or giving more training, or personal protective equipment etc).

5. Reviewing later on, to see if controls are working

Jobs often change as they go along, sometimes in ways you do not expect. When they change, there is a chance your risk assessment should change too. Once you have conducted a risk assessment and introduced the necessary controls, make sure that your control measures are suitable for what is actually happening 'on the tools'. If there are extra hazards or risks (perhaps there is more need to work at height than originally thought) or if you think your controls are not working properly (perhaps some employees are not using PPE properly), then change your risk assessment and control measures accordingly.

*For a summary of what the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) requires from a basic risk assessment, go to: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg163.pdf for its free leaflet (INDG 163). This leaflet is also available, along with other free and priced guidance from: HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA (Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995).