

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Health & Safety in offices – Assessing the Risk

Every employer has a legal duty to ensure that their workplace meets minimum safety standards under Health & Safety legislation. This briefing looks at the practicalities of making your office a safe place to work, explains how to undertake a simple risk assessment and offers a checklist to help you identify potential hazards.

Note:

1. Every organisation is different – you need to think through the risks, hazards and preventative measures particular to your work and organisation.
2. This briefing gives a very brief overview, and regulations vary depending on where your organisation is based. Detailed guidance on all the following issues is available from the relevant Health & Safety body for your nation (see *Further Resources section for contact details*).

A. Basic requirements

As an employer, you must ensure the safety of anyone your work may impact on, including employees (wherever they are working), visitors to your office, those affected by your work (neighbours or the public), people who use products you may supply, users of your services and those who use your equipment or work at a workplace you provide (e.g. contractors and agency staff). You are also responsible for staff who work from home.

The following best-practice measures are necessary to help ensure the safety of anyone who may come into danger:

- **Risk assessment** – a risk assessment is a careful and regular examination of what could cause harm in your workplace. It enables you to weigh up whether or not you have taken enough precautions to prevent harm or to reduce the risk of an accident happening. (see *section B for more details*).
- **Registration** – if you employ people in an office, you have a duty to register using an official form. This allows the enforcing authority (generally your local authority environmental health department, or district council in

Northern Ireland) to know who you are and what you do. The form – obtainable from your enforcing authority – asks for basic details such as your address, main activities and number of staff.

- **Information for employees** – where necessary, you must put up suitable notices as specified by the relevant Health & Safety body for your nation (see *Further Resources section for contact details*). Also, state where people can go for help and advice. Record all this on your risk assessment form.
- **Accident reporting** – obtain an accident book and keep it updated. Everyone should know where it is kept. A reportable work-related accident must be reported to the enforcing authority – for more details, refer to the relevant Health & Safety body for your nation.
- **Insurance** – you must have Employers' Liability Insurance and display the certificates.

B. Risk assessment

If you employ five or more people in the UK (in the Republic of Ireland there is no minimum number), your risk assessment must be put down in writing. But don't make it a complex, bureaucratic process – the assessment should be sufficient to fit the purpose, and then acted upon immediately.

In most small organisations the risks are often already known and prevention is easy (e.g. you probably already know that the carpet with the curling edge might cause someone to slip, or that people who carry heavy books might hurt their backs).

If you are a small organisation and you are confident you understand what's involved, you can do the assessment yourself. If not, or you work in a larger place, you could get help from a Health & Safety advisor. In all cases, you should make sure that you involve your staff or their representatives in the process. They will have useful information about how the work is done that will make your assessment of the risk more thorough and effective.

Even if you do not have to record the risk assessment under the legislation (e.g. if you employ fewer than five people in the UK), it is good practice to do so for future reference and monitoring.



Five steps to risk assessment

1. Look for and identify the hazards

- For example, slippery floor, desks blocking a fire escape route, items used regularly on a top shelf, toxic substances, a wobbly computer chair, moving vehicles, staff regularly doing over-time.
- Walk around the office and make notes.
- Ask staff what they have noticed and for their ideas about what the risks might be and who might be affected.
- Look at manufacturers' instructions and accident and ill-health records.

2. Decide who might be harmed and how

- Look at the accident book to see if anything has been reported that might give you clues to dangers.
- Some workers have particular needs. Are there any vulnerable people (e.g. young people, older people, people with disabilities, lone workers)? Are there any people who are not in the office all the time (e.g. cleaners, contractors, temporary staff or members of the public)?
- If you share your office, think about how your work may affect others present.
- Specifically state how the hazards could cause harm.

3. Assess the risks and decide if they are acceptable

- Decide on the level of risk. Prioritise the most harmful on your action list.
- Decide on precautions. What are you doing already? What else do you need to do that is reasonable and practicable to either get rid of the risk or make it as small as possible?
- Set out clear responsibilities for various employees, and check that they have carried them out.
- Check people are working in accordance with any rules, or safe methods you have established. Train staff if necessary. Record training.

4. Record your findings and implement them

- Keep all written records for future monitoring. These will also be useful if there is an accident. When writing them down keep it simple (e.g. tripping over rubbish: bins provided, staff instructed, weekly housekeeping checks).
- Try to combat the risk at source (e.g. fix the roof leak rather than mopping up the floor and putting up a warning sign).

5. Review your assessment

- Do this at regular intervals, and update if necessary. You must show that you are monitoring Health & Safety.

Risk assessment form

The following template is offered by the Health & Safety Executive (England, Wales and Scotland) to provide a useful way of recording and monitoring your risk assessment and plans for preventing accidents. Other Health & Safety bodies may have an

alternative template, but using this as a basis will help you to adopt an organised approach to assessing and minimising the risks.

Use the checklist in section C as a guide to identify specific issues that may be relevant to your organisation and place of work.

Note: this list is *not* definitive – add to it as you need.

Organisation name:				Date:			
Assessment undertaken by (name):							
Step 1	Step 2	Step 3		Step 4			Step 5
What are the potential hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you doing already?	What further action is necessary?	How will you put this into action (prioritise and deal with high risk hazards first)?			Review date
				Action by whom	Action by when	Done	
Housekeeping							
Fire safety							
Office layout							

...and so on (see below)

C. Checklist

Housekeeping

- Do you have an induction in Health & Safety for staff, young workers, volunteers, people on work placement and trainees in your workplace?
- Have they been briefed on fire safety?
- Do you have an appointed member of staff with first aid training?
- Are there staff working at locations under the control of other employers? Have they been given relevant the Health & Safety information?
- Are there any specific tasks that require special Health & Safety training?

- Have there been any accidents since the last assessment? What? What has been done to ensure these do not recur? Who were these reported to?
- Have there been any work-related causes of sickness absence since the last assessment?
- Is anyone showing signs of stress (e.g. from high work demands, lack of job control, too little support from colleagues, poorly managed change, poor relationships, etc.)?
- Is the Health & Safety Law poster displayed (if applicable to your jurisdiction)?
- Is there is an accident book that fulfils current statutory obligations?* Do staff know where it is? Is there a first aid kit? Is it fully stocked?



- Hygiene – are toilets supplied with hot and cold water, soap and towels? Are there enough toilets?
- Is there drinking water? Do you need a fridge? Is this cleaned regularly?

*The detailed reporting of accidents, diseases and dangerous incidents at work is required by law. For details, check with the relevant Health & Safety body for your nation (see *Further Resources* section for contact details).

Fire safety

New fire safety rules came into force on 1 October 2006.

For more information and a list of check points, see VAN Briefing 105 – **Fire Safety**, available to download from www.voluntaryarts.org/publications

Office design and layout

- Is there sufficient space for the equipment and the worker? 11 cubic metres per person is the minimum in the UK.
- Is there sufficient space for walkways through an area? Is there sufficient space for light, intermediate and busy foot traffic?
- Are there separate areas for tasks that require dedicated space?
- Are there step ladders for hard to reach tasks?
- Are there signs to highlight risks (e.g. near steps, slippery floors, unusually hot water tap, etc.)?
- Are the floors of all rooms, corridors and stairways safe (e.g. free from obstruction, maintained, covered with non-slip material and adequately lit)?
- Do staircases have a good handrail or handhold?
- Are the surfaces of car parks and pathways around the building free of potholes or other tripping hazards?

Lighting

- Is there sufficient lighting for the performance of tasks?
- Are employees able to control incoming natural light or glare sources?
- Is artificial lighting causing reflections from work surfaces or shadows over the task?
- Do employees find they have tired, sore or irritated eyes at the end of a day?

Noise and air quality

- Is noise a problem in your workplace or in the area that might affect your work?
- Are there problems with temperature, draughts, odours or lack of fresh air? The temperature should be at least 16 degrees Celsius where people work sitting down.
- Do staff suffer from dry, irritated eyes at the end of the day?
- Are building air-conditioning systems maintained in accordance with manufacturers' specifications and local health authority guidelines?

Computers and workstations

You have a legal duty to ensure that you and your employees use computers and other IT equipment safely. Every computer

should be checked. This is to reduce the risk of repetitive strain injury (RSI), headaches and other aches and pains.

- Is the force required to press the keys about right? Is there a keyboard rest?
- Is the screen functioning correctly (i.e. it should not be flickering, dim or too bright)? Is there adjustability for the screen brightness? Is there adjustability of the screen height?
- Are old or deteriorated screens being used? Have radiation emissions from these old screens been tested within the last 12 months?
- Have multiple computer electrical cords or computer cables been adequately contained and untwisted?
- Do staff have regular breaks away from display screens?
- Is there sufficient space for documents to be spread out within easy reach? Is there easy access to equipment such as a telephone and keyboard? Are document holders provided if necessary?
- Are workstations set up to reduce awkward postures? Is there a need for foot rests?
- Are the computer chairs stable, supportive and adjustable in height and back rest angle?

Workplace equipment

- What other equipment do you have in the office? Does each item meet Health & Safety standards (this should be checked at time of purchase too)?
- Is it regularly maintained to manufacturers' specifications? If necessary, are there procedures for ensuring maintenance?
- Is there a system for immediately fixing faulty equipment?
- Are all filing cabinets and cupboards stable? Are they fitted with locking devices to prevent opening of more than one drawer at a time to stop them from falling over?
- Are they located clear of doors and frequently used routes?
- Are sharp corners of furniture situated so as to avoid a hazard to people passing them?

Electrical equipment

Electricity can be very dangerous. The risks are greater in the wet, outside and in cramped spaces. Make sure you check with the relevant Health & Safety body for your nation and understand the implications and the legalities. For more information and a list of check points, see VAN Briefing 103 – **Electrical Equipment**, available to download from www.voluntaryarts.org/publications

Copying equipment

- Is there a separate area for photocopying? Is there adequate ventilation for photocopiers?
- Is the copying equipment in good working order?
- Are copier lids intact and functioning to reduce exposure to intense light?
- Is the copier functioning quietly and as quickly as indicated in the specifications?
- Are self-contained toner cartridges supplied in a sealed state?
- Are procedures for the use and maintenance of copying equipment adequate, in place and in use?



Job design

- Are highly repetitive tasks (such as typing) performed for more than two hours at any one time? Do tasks require constant sitting or standing for more than two hours at any one time?
- Are tasks that require a high level of concentration performed for more than two hours at any one time?
- Do employees have some choice of when, how and how frequently they perform some tasks? Are they trained to vary tasks and postures throughout the day?

Manual handling

- Do you make sure no individual handles loads weighing over 10kg (male) or 7kg (female)?
- Are there any large, awkward or heavy objects that require holding or moving either repetitively or with physical effort or force? Is appropriate mechanical handling equipment (i.e. trolley, sack truck for heavy books, computers, etc.) available?
- What do you do to make sure that handling these does not involve awkward posture, twisting or stretching away from the body?
- Does anyone have a health problem that handling will affect? What do you do if staff report backache or muscle pain from handling?

Hazardous substances

- Is there concern regarding hazardous substances such as bleach, detergents, paint, glues and new carpet or anything else in the office that may be toxic, corrosive, inflammable or explosive (many artists materials are potentially toxic)?
- Are there noticeable fumes in the air?
- Are there adequate ventilation and housekeeping practices? Has appropriate training been provided to all staff?
- Could you replace hazardous chemicals with environmentally friendly alternatives?

Further Resources

Voluntary Arts Network has a range of publications that relate to Health & Safety in some way, all of which are available to download or purchase from www.voluntaryarts.org/publications :

- VAN Briefing 72 – **Risk management for charities – a good opportunity** (September 2003).
- VAN Briefing 103 – **Electrical Equipment** (December 2006).
- VAN Briefing 105 – **Fire Safety** (March 2007).
- **Health & Safety at Outdoor Community Events**, by Abigail Cheverst, ISBN 1-899687-43-2 (2005).

Also available from www.vaireland.org :

- Northern Ireland edition, ISBN 1-899687-47-5 (2006).
- Republic of Ireland edition, ISBN 1-899687-48-3 (2006).

Other resources:

- The **Health & Safety Executive** website offers a wealth of best-practice guidance and has free downloadable leaflets on all the topics featured above. Website: www.hse.gov.uk. HSE Infoline: 0845 345 0055.
- **Health & Safety Executive** in Scotland. The power to make or change workplace Health & Safety legislation has not been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. However, the HSE work closely with the Scottish Executive particularly in areas of common interest such as health, enterprise and justice. Website: www.hse.gov.uk/scotland.
- **Health & Safety Executive Northern Ireland** Website: www.hseni.gov.uk. HSENI Freephone Helpline: 0800 0320 121.
- **Health & Safety Authority** for the Republic of Ireland Website: www.hsa.ie. Workplace Contact Unit: 1890 289 389.
- **Workplace Health Connect** is a free service for small organisations, providing practical advice on workplace Health & Safety. Website: www.workplacehealthconnect.co.uk. T: 0845 609 6006.
- **The Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives** was set up to improve the health of working age people in Scotland by ensuring healthier and safer workplaces, promote healthier lifestyles and to develop the field of employability throughout Scotland. Website: www.healthyworkinglives.com.

Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency.

Updated information may be available on the VAN website: www.voluntaryarts.org

Disclaimer: Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the information in this document is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith at the stated date but without accepting liability. We therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

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