

Working through a basic Risk Assessment

- **Introduction**

When considering Risk Assessments, the focus should always be on Health & Safety legislation and the consequent risks around undertaking an activity. However, a truly comprehensive Risk Assessment should also consider the wider implications. For example, does it consider the risks of the activity not taking place? (Consider the risks around taking a day trip with a group of neurodivergent young adults. How will the health & wellbeing of some of these individuals be affected if the trip doesn't happen?)

A Risk Assessment that is 'people focused' should therefore start by asking the question: Why are we undertaking this activity? This will help to define those wider implications, who it might affect and in what ways.

There are a number of ways to prepare a Risk Assessment. Typical approaches begin by looking at specific processes; specific hazards; or by looking at specific activities. Whichever approach is taken, the Risk Assessment needs to be sensible, proportionate and focus on the higher risk areas.

In the explanation below, specific activities are being used as a starting point.

- **Describing the situation**

ACTION 1: Clarify your objectives (what are you actually trying to achieve?)

ACTION 2: Identify the specific activity taking place, all of the people involved and how they might be affected (where relevant, this should include members of the public and highlight individuals who may be particularly vulnerable)

Do not be tempted to skip Action (1). In order to mitigate the risks (and define the benefits), the objectives should be clearly listed, as well as the specific activities taking place.

- **Categorise all of the relevant hazards**

Once you are clear about your objectives, the activities you are planning and who could be affected, the actual hazards can be identified. These should be identified under two headings:

ACTION 3: Identify the hazards that can stop you from achieving your objectives

ACTION 4: Identify the hazards that might harm an individual / individuals

There are a number of ways to identify a hazard. The main ones include:

- Direct observation
- Formal instructions relating to particular tools & equipment
- Accident / near-miss reports
- Consultation with those undertaking the activities

‘Action (4)’ is where the legislation is focused.

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires actions that ‘so far as are reasonably practical’ to be put in place to protect individuals. In addition, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, (MHSWR), require employers and the self-employed to carry out risk assessments for all work activities that may lead to harm, as do many specific regulations, (e.g. manual handling).

Where there are legal requirements for specific types of risk assessments, (such as manual handling), reference should be made to those legal requirements.

- Evaluate the risks

ACTION 5: Identify the most significant hazards

Once all of the hazards have been identified, a judgement can be made about the level of risk associated with these hazards. The most common way to do this is simply to assess the likelihood of that risk occurring; along with the impact that it would have if it did occur.

Risk = Likelihood x Impact

This can be scored, (for example 1 for low likelihood and 10 for high likelihood), or colour coded, (for example red for high impact and green for low impact). Remember, this is a judgement call. The scores can help to prioritise actions. The hazards are still there irrespective.

Factors affecting the impact of the risk may include:

- numbers of people that may be affected
 - level of a potentially dangerous item, (e.g. temperature, noise, height etc.)
 - duration of exposure, (i.e. a one-off brief exposure versus long-term regular exposure)
- Factors affecting the likelihood of something happening include:
- number of people exposed to a hazard
 - frequency of exposure, i.e. how often the task is performed
 - length and time of exposure

- type of persons exposed, i.e. vulnerable groups such as the young, old, etc.
- the control measures already in place.

- **Controls**

ACTION 6: Evaluate the effectiveness of the control measures for each risk

After the risks have been evaluated, consider whether additional control measures are necessary to reduce the level of a particular risk.

In this context, a 'control measure' is something that can influence a specific risk or hazard. A control measure aims to minimise the likelihood or impact. Control measures are often focused around processes and procedures.

(e.g. the process of regularly checking individual driving licences mitigates the risk of having someone drive a minibus who is not appropriately qualified).

And here is the key: It is very important to monitor whether the controls are working, not just the risks themselves. This should ensure that the risks are being mitigated and managed.

When considering control measures, consideration should be given to the "hierarchy of control" detailed at Schedule 1 of The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, which gives the well-known "general principles of protection". It indicates that the best and most effective control measure is to avoid the risk, which can be achieved by not carrying out the activity at all – (although this seems to defeat the object of the exercise). The least effective means of control are those which rely on people, (e.g. the provision of instruction or the use of personal protective equipment). In order to decide whether enough is being done to control the risk, reference should be made to the appropriate legislation and/or any approved codes of practice which may give direction on the most appropriate and acceptable control measures.

- **Recording the findings**

ACTION 7: Document your findings

Risk Assessments can be recorded in a number of ways. To be valuable it should be remembered that this is not simply a 'box-ticking' or 'back-covering' exercise. Any documentation that is used should be seen as an aid to communicating information about the risks. It needs to be as simple as possible.

At its most basic, the documentation should cover the following points:

- What are the hazards and how significant are they?
- Who might be harmed and how?
- What controls are there in place to mitigate the risks?
- How well are these controls working?
- What further actions do you need to take to control the risks so they are at an appropriate level?
- Have all identified actions been completed?

- **Who should carry out the Risk Assessments?**

Whether the Assessment is carried out internally or externally, it is critically important to include the views of employees, (or volunteers), who are undertaking the activities in question, as well as the Line Manager who is responsible for their wellbeing.

It is possible to find trained Risk Assessors and/or specialist H&S Advisors who can produce Risk Assessments for you. Sometimes this will be helpful and appropriate.

- **Reviewing the Assessment**

ACTION 8: Assess when your Risk Assessment should be reviewed

Undertaking a Risk Assessment should not be seen as a 'one-off' exercise.

In order to be helpful, Risk Assessments should be reviewed regularly, especially following an accident or incident, when the circumstances have changed significantly, or when there has been a change in legislation.

- **Summary**

There has been a tendency in recent years to over-complicate Risk Assessment. In many cases it has become burdensome in terms of paperwork and bureaucracy. Keep it simple and remember, at the end of the day, Risk Assessment is a judgement call. Processes and formulas etc. can help but it is a human judgement that is required to make a decision.

If in doubt get a second opinion.