



## Background

One in every hundred UK companies will be making a claim for fire loss or damage in the next twelve months according to the Association of British Insurers (ABI). Many of those companies will undoubtedly be ill-prepared for the possible devastation to follow. With commercial fire insurance payouts for 2005 running at an all time high (up 60% on the previous year), most single site businesses that suffer a major fire will go out of business within 18 months.

It is not just hot works or electrical faults that are the cause of fire. Arson is a growth industry with 2,400 attacks on business premises, churches and schools every week.

Plus businesses need to consider compliance with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act by making access to their buildings, products and services easier for disabled people. This includes making provision for their safety whilst in the charge of that business.

There are ways of reducing the risk. Since 1997 it has been a legal responsibility of the owner/occupier for all non domestic buildings (with a limited number of exceptions) to be risk-assessed under the Workplace Regulations. This requirement is set to be reinforced and rigidly enforced.

## Fire Safety Order

1st October 2006, saw the most far reaching overhaul of 118 pieces of current fire safety related legislation with the introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order, issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

This confirms the aims of the Workplace Regulations (which it replaces) by changing the way we approach fire safety in the UK. It will be a legal requirement for all business and building owner / occupiers to carry out a risk assessment. This is a process to identify and remove fire hazards or manage the risk if it occurs.

Risk assessment is considered by the Fire Service to be an important part of their Integrated Risk Management Planning. It effectively requires a partnership between business and the enforcing authority which will include targeted inspections, safety audits and rigorous enforcement of any failure to comply. Another aspect of their work will be to gather evidence and investigate the causes of fires; a good reason for a business to keep accurate records proving that its risk assessment is correct and up to date.

## The Process of a Risk Assessment

This is not just a management paper exercise. It needs to be an integral part of every business strategy, communicated to all members of staff (who will also have an active part to play) and may change the way companies do business. It will require consideration to be made to neighbours and visiting tradesmen. It will take as much time and resource as the risk realistically demands. At this point most senior managers view the requirement as being costly and unnecessary, especially if they have a Fire Certificate. But when was the last time many businesses reviewed their buildings since the issue of that certificate? Has the risk changed since then and, if so, is anything being done differently to meet that change?

Here we explain the process that a business needs to go through and identify areas where a business can benefit - not just from updated, increased fire safety measures, but also from the potential to make real improvements and cost savings.

Where to start? The obvious place is a review of current circumstances and measures. But there is one thing to do before even that takes place and that is to appoint a responsible person. This is the person whose duty it is to ensure that all fire safety issues are properly addressed. It requires someone with the necessary training and experience to display a degree of competence. It is not enough to understand the basic principles of combustion or have a vague idea that paints and thinners should be locked away in a metal cabinet. The responsible person must be able to recognise the importance of understanding legislation that applies to new and existing buildings in addition to the Fire Safety Order, such as Building Regulations 2000. A plea of ignorance is no excuse under the law.

Once the competent responsible person is appointed and has reviewed the current situation the following checklist requires to be visited.

- The identification and removal (if possible) of hazard
- Manage the risk of the remaining hazard
- Review people. Identify those most at risk
- Understand the building layout, construction and contents
- Assess the processes that take place within the building
- Consider means of escape and ways to detect and raise the alarm should fire start
- What operating facilities exist to fight the fire

Finally a business needs to keep written records (a requirement if you employ 5 or more persons) and review the situation regularly (at least annually).

From this review a plan can be developed to make a workplace as safe from fire as possible by reducing the potential for it to start. Eliminating all risk is impossible but the precautions should always outweigh the risk.

Should a business owner feel that he does not have the in house skill levels to complete the assessment then this expertise can be bought in. But it is important to remember that this is only buying advice, not migrating the responsibility.

## Less obvious benefits

At the moment all we have looked at is time and added expense to complete the risk assessment. When the initial audit has been done, it will be a more simple matter to review the findings in subsequent years. Doing it right can have added benefits in addition to increased fire safety.

Firstly let's look at what can be gained from the audit.

- An increased knowledge of the building layout and construction.

Space is always at a premium and a greater understanding of the building, coupled to the processes that go on inside it, might allow for improvements in layout and associated cost savings. It will also help when planning future expansions and alterations.

- A detailed review of contents and activity

Storage linked to layout might help streamline the operations within the business. A close look at activity and procedures usually helps identify areas of waste. Result? More cost savings.

- An assessment of people and those most at risk

This area can overlap into ensuring compliance with DDA requirements which will reduce the potential for complications later.

## What else can be gained from the exercise?

- Possible insurance premium savings if the detection or structural fire resistance is upgraded
- Training. The findings of the assessment (digital photos of problem areas - for example a wedged open fire door) can form the basis of a staff fire awareness training package
- It is in everyone's interests to reduce fire insurance claims as this will equate to lower premiums for the future
- Upgraded systems can realise reduced ongoing maintenance costs
- There are potentially severe financial penalties if prosecuted for not complying with the Fire Safety Order
- If a business experiences a fire and hasn't carried out a risk assessment adequately, it might result in insurance payment problems
- By learning more about the building, a facilities manager can better manage a repair programme having identified wear and tear at an earlier stage. Considerable cost savings can be achieved from this alone.
- Staff will react favourably to a caring, responsible employer. By introducing a comprehensive fire safety culture everyone will be proactive in making their place of work safer
- A highly visible and informative fire safety programme gives a good impression to customers, visitors and suppliers
- There are links between fire safety and other health and safety issues. For example the installation of an illuminated exit sign in a stairwell might prevent a trip should power to the lights fail.
- Updated drawings can assist future layout planning
- Upgrading the existing fire alarm system can achieve non fire benefits from advances made in technology. An example being a detector which not only combines smoke, heat and CO detection in one device but also picks up toxic gas emissions from faulty heating appliances, boilers and flues. Staff attack signals and bomb alerts can also be built in to modern fire alarms.

- Targeting resources effectively can also assist with post fire recovery

Another consideration relates to two areas, both linked to the fire service.

As part of the review of fire brigades, some redistribution of resource may increase the reaction time to attend fires in remote, especially rural, locations. As such the insurers have stated that premiums may have to rise for those risks due to the increased reaction time. If a risk assessment can prove that this factor has been taken into account and built into the fire plan, it may be a good bargaining tool to prevent an increase in insurance costs.

The other issue concerns climate change. With weather patterns showing a reduction in available water and in some areas water pressure, this primary means of extinguishing fires will need to be evaluated locally.



# Fire Risk Assessment: Continued

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## What happens if after all this a business still suffers a fire?

How well an organisation recovers from even a medium fire will have a direct bearing on the risk assessment, planning and training that takes place beforehand. It is for this reason that the fire strategy should be a core part of any business strategy.

The key to survival depends on getting up and running in some capacity as soon as possible. To achieve this will require a building, lines of communication, staff, critical records and stock. Some key areas to consider are;

- Identify critical information.
    - Customer details. Current order book
    - Supplier and staff information
    - Specialist tools and stock
    - Sales literature
    - Manufacturing drawings, legal documents and company cheque book
    - Computers and telephones
  - Is there a need to hold a limited amount of recovery stock off site
  - Allocate minimum staffing levels to clear up and continue to operate. Have call out lists for out of hours reaction
  - Determine timescales for the main actions following a small, medium and large fire
  - Consider lines of communication, telephones, fax, PCs and mail redirection if required
  - What about alternate emergency power supplies
  - Obtain standby quotes from agencies which help with disaster recovery operations. There may be a lot of blackened material and water to shift. The fire service will offer very good fire salvage advice
  - Know who to contact to conduct a structural survey which may be needed before a damaged building can be entered and eventually reoccupied
  - Combustion products can be very acidic and corrosive so protect vital fragile assets at all times in fireproof compartments
- Security in the early stages may require broken windows to be boarded up or manned guarding
  - A prepared PR message should be released as soon as possible with the aim of sending a positive 'under control' message to the marketplace
  - Training is vital for any plan. and adequate provision must be made.
    - Training brings the responsible person up to a level of adequate competence to carry out the risk assessment.
    - Next evacuation drills and duties of fire wardens and fire marshals as part of the resulting fire safety plan. There may be a requirement to conduct some disability evacuation drills training separately.
    - Also, training in post-fire recovery activity which will be critical to the survival of a single site company. Training provides the confidence and benefit of people knowing what they have to do in a situation and helps to keep them safer. It shows a responsible attitude on the part of their employer. Training also shows up any flaws or omissions in the plan.
    - Finally. Carrying out a risk assessment won't change the way fire behaves. A lack of training and planning won't change the way people behave in a fire situation. But if risk is assessed and plans are practiced then we can change the potential for fire to start in the first place and alter the reaction of those caught up in it.