

OFFICEWISE



'There are too many regulations and too much form filling. If I read everything put out by government I wouldn't have time to run my business'.

Sound familiar? To help you, this booklet sets out what you have to do in office premises where health and safety risks

are low. The guiding principle for much of our health and safety law is that there is a balance to be struck between the risk and the cost of prevention. Where the risks are low, for example in small offices it shouldn't cost much to make sure that you keep within the law. Let's look at five examples:

Common myths about regulations

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations

'I need a written assessment of risk even though I only employ a part-time secretary.'

True or False?

False. Written assessments are only required where five or more people are employed and even then only significant findings have to be recorded.

Electricity at Work Regulations

'I've been told that I have to have my desk lamp tested every six months.'

True or False?

False. The law requires it to be maintained. It does not require an elaborate and frequent system of electrical testing.

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH for short)

‘You need a COSHH assessment for every substance you use, including floor polish.’

True or False?

False. Assessments are only needed for hazardous substances. For products used in offices this means those with labels carrying a specific health warning. The result will normally be a decision to follow the manufacturer’s instructions.

Manual Handling Regulations

‘No-one can be asked to lift more than 25 kg.’

True or False?

False. The regulations do not set limits. Their objective is to reduce the large number of lifting injuries which are very costly to employers and the country.

Display Screen Equipment Regulations

‘Screen filters to reduce radiation are now mandatory.’

True or False?

False. The levels of radiation emitted from VDUs are well below the safe levels set out in international recommendations. You do not need to provide screen filters.

This booklet will help you to understand the aspects of health and safety law which you need to know and explains which aspects do not apply to low-risk workplaces.

People who work in small offices do not figure prominently in national accident statistics. In 1997/98, only 21 major accidents took place per 100 000 people

employed in the office sector compared to 216 per 100 000 in the manufacturing sector.

Accidents do happen in offices but the health and safety



The office perspective

measures need to be matched to the levels of risk.

Advice is given at the end of the booklet on how to obtain more details on specific topics but you can ask your local health and safety inspector if you are unsure about anything.

The booklet also gives information on further HSE leaflets which you may find helpful.

Whatever the size of your business you ought to understand the basic legal framework. You have duties to:

- ◆ your employees (including trainees), wherever they are working;
- ◆ visitors to your office;
- ◆ those affected by your work (neighbours or the public);
- ◆ people who use products you supply;
- ◆ users of your services, for example if you design equipment;
- ◆ those who use your equipment or work at a workplace you provide (for example contractors and agency staff).

Put simply, you have to take care of the people who may be affected by what you do.

Notes

- 1 The injury rate quoted covers all sizes of offices not just small ones.
- 2 Source: HELA National Picture 1999 (office rate)
Health and Safety Statistics 1998/99 (manufacturing rate)

Paperwork

 - what you need to do and why

Owners and managers of small, low-risk office premises should be aware of the following requirements which may apply:

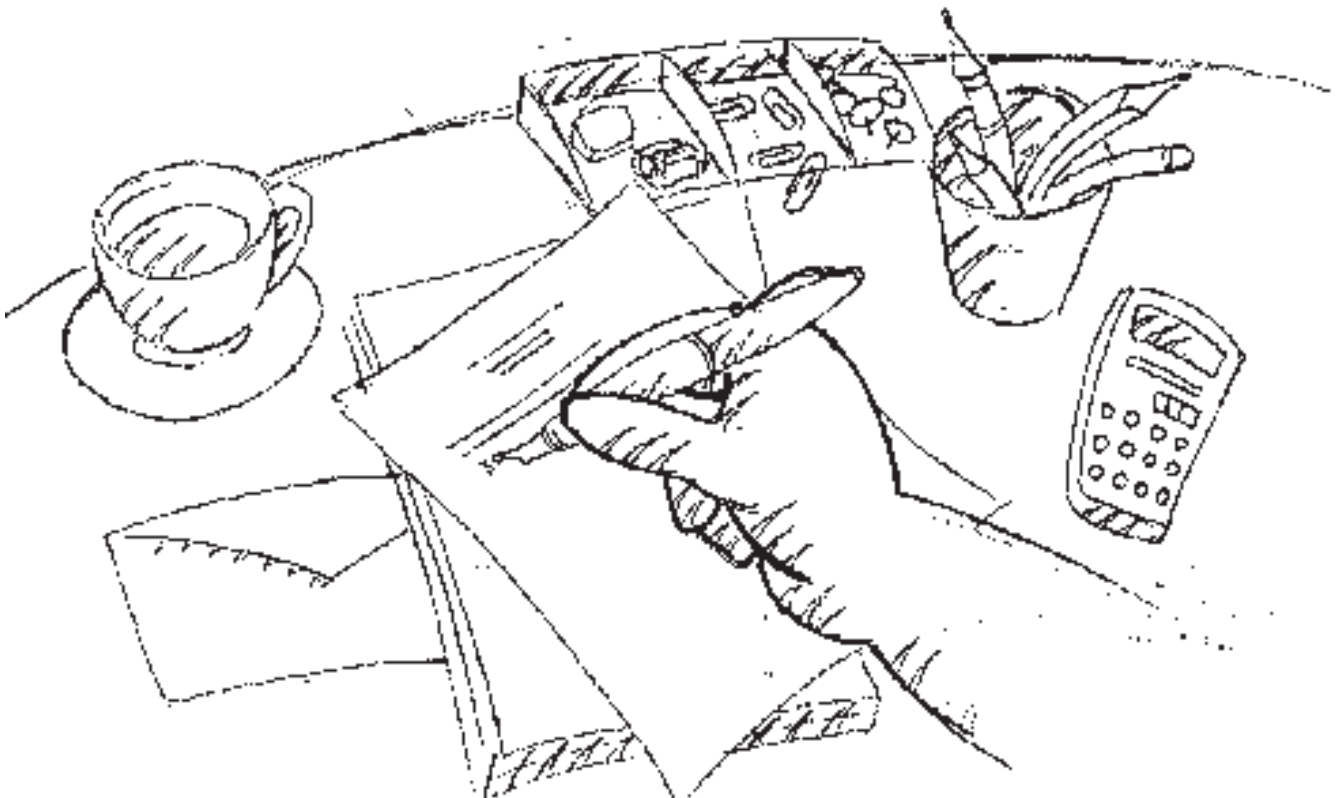
Registration

Offices where people are employed have a duty to register using an official form OSR1. It can be obtained from your enforcing authority (this will generally be your local Environmental Health Department). The form only asks for very basic details, such as your correct address

and how many people you employ and only has to be filled in once. It allows the enforcing authority to know who you are and what you do.

Information for employees

You are required to give certain information to your staff on health and safety law. The easiest way to do this is to provide a poster containing this information. The poster is called *Health and Safety Law: What you should know*, and is available from HSE Books.



An individual leaflet called *Health and safety regulations: A short guide* is also available.

Accident reporting

If a reportable accident occurs you are required to report it to the enforcing authority and complete a form F2508. These forms can be obtained from HSE Books but *to be reportable the accident has to be connected with a work activity*. A free leaflet *RIDDOR explained* gives further details of those incidents and occurrences which are reportable.

Written safety policy

You have a duty to make adequate arrangements for health and safety, but *a written policy is only required if you employ five or more people*. If you do need to write one make it short and relevant. Guidance on drafting a simple policy can be found in the HSE publication *Stating your business: Guidance on preparing a health and safety policy document for small firms*.

Employers Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Certificate

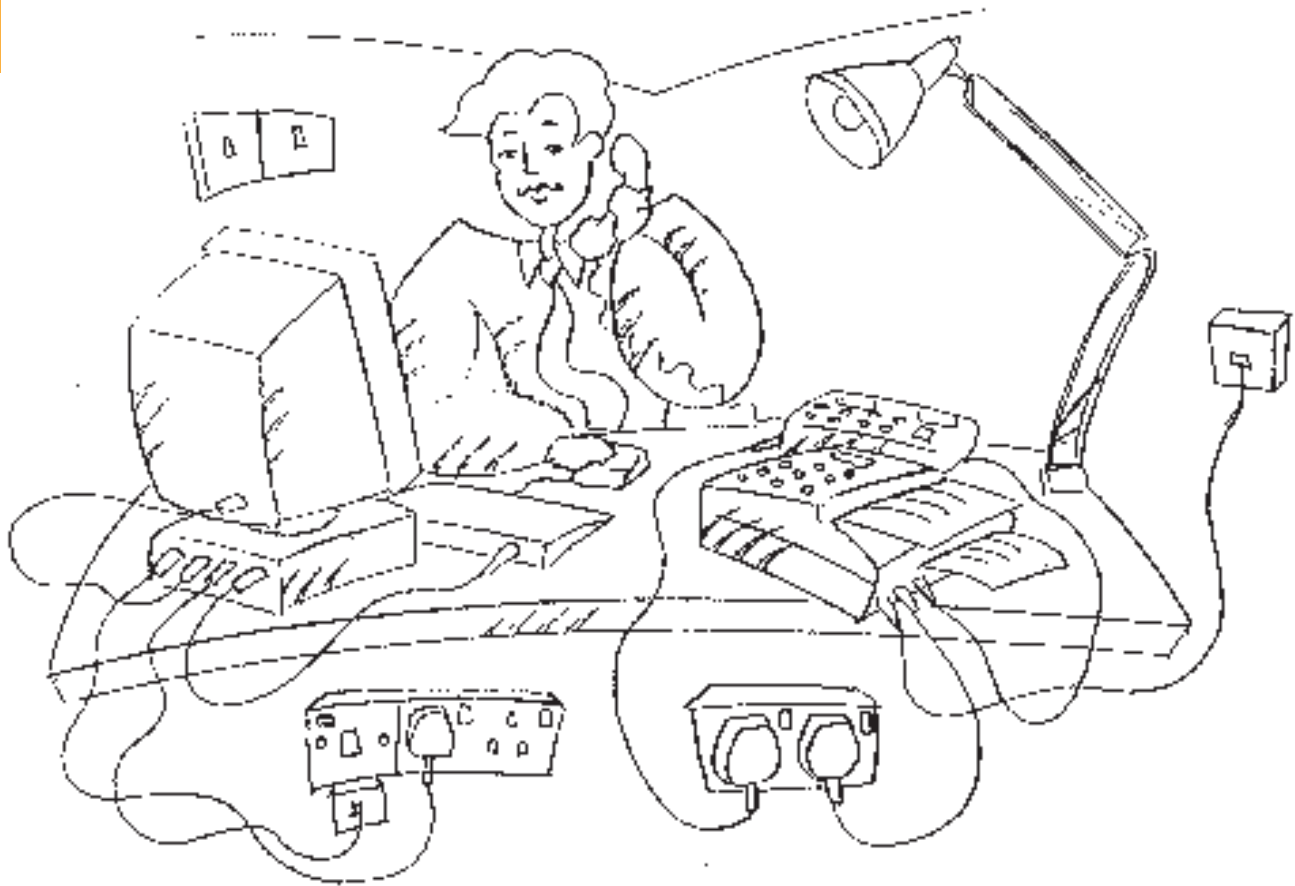
Your certificate of insurance has to be displayed.

Assessments

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations includes a duty to carry out assessments of risk, but you do *not have to record* an assessment if:

- ◆ you employ less than five people;
- ◆ the findings of the assessment are not significant, that is there are no special measures required;
- ◆ the risk can easily be described/controlled; or
- ◆ it concerns an activity which is subject to a specific assessment under other regulations (for example COSHH).

A leaflet giving more information on the do's and don'ts of assessing the risk is available - *Five steps to risk assessment*.



Electricity

Defective plugs, sockets and leads cause more electrical accidents than the appliances themselves. Office environments are generally less dangerous than other workplaces but:

- ◆ do provide sufficient socket outlets and avoid or minimise the use of adapters. Overloaded sockets can lead to fire hazards;
- ◆ do test the residual current device, if fitted. This only involves pushing a test button and can help to maintain the effectiveness of the device. Advice on how often to do this is normally given in the manufacturer's instructions;
- ◆ do not use taped joints to connect cables since they have neither the mechanical strength needed nor sufficient insulation or

protection from liquids. Damaged cables should be replaced completely but if cables have to be joined, proper connectors should be used;

- ◆ do carry out your own visual inspections of plugs and leads and get them repaired as necessary. Faults to look out for include physical damage to the cable, failure of the cord grip at the plug and signs of overheating. If faults are found the repair should be carried out by someone who has the necessary skill and knowledge to complete the task safely;
- ◆ do consider whether you have equipment which needs a more detailed inspection and test or whether the installation itself has reached a stage where it is likely to need a test. For example, equipment in offices which is frequently moved or which has a lead which is subject to a lot of twisting may develop an internal fault;
- ◆ do not ignore obvious tell-tale signs such as faulty switching or intermittent stopping. These may indicate an internal fault such as a loose wire which could cause external metalwork to become live;
- ◆ do switch off equipment before unplugging and before cleaning;
- ◆ do find out how to deal with an electric shock incident;
- ◆ do encourage staff to report electrical equipment which is not working properly;
- ◆ do ensure that staff are aware of these safety precautions;
- ◆ do keep vigilant on electrical safety because the consequences can lead to tragedy.

Further advice is given in the HSE leaflet *Maintaining portable electrical equipment in offices and other low-risk environments*.

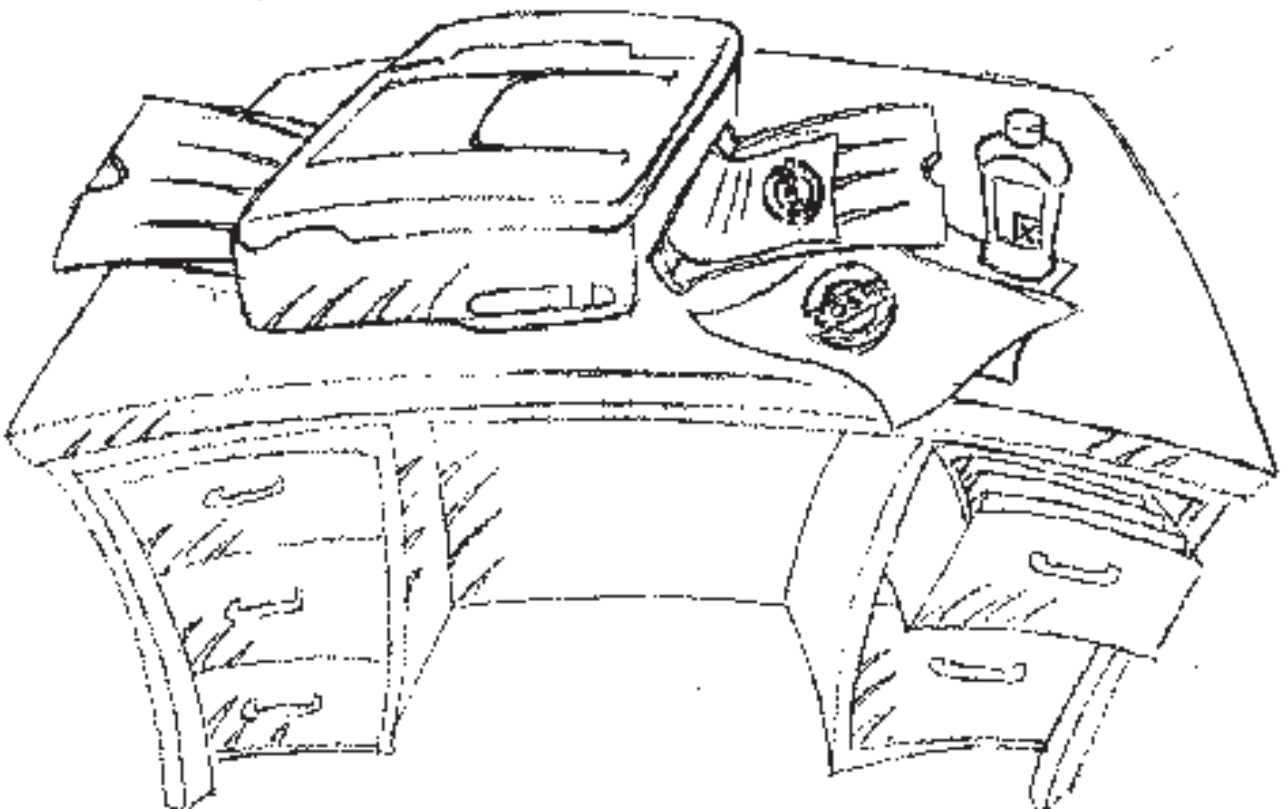
COSHH

These Regulations make sure the risks from hazardous substances are properly controlled. As far as offices are concerned hazardous substances are those with a warning label - if in doubt the supplier should be able to tell you. The supplier must also tell you what precautions to take with the substance. This information is normally provided by a label or data sheet. COSHH makes it your job to see if the use of the substance is really necessary. If it is, you must check that

the precautions fit your circumstances and that they are understood and followed by your staff.

For proprietary substances sold by office equipment suppliers this is all there is to COSHH. Ask for advice, starting with the supplier, if you use more sophisticated substances.

Further information on COSHH is given in the HSE booklet *COSHH: A brief guide to the regulations*.





Safety

Slips, trips and falls account for most of the accidents in offices many of them when staff are moving or carrying loads. They happen because of the condition of floors, poor lighting or untidiness. Such accidents can easily be prevented by remembering the following points:

- ◆ do not allow trailing leads to create tripping hazards;
- ◆ do clear up spillages quickly;
- ◆ do replace or repair torn floor coverings etc;
- ◆ do provide handrails on stairways and ensure stairs are well lit;
- ◆ do not block passageways or corridors.

Small offices are unlikely to require air monitoring or health checks for staff but you should consider the following:

- ◆ do make workstations comfortable with seating where necessary. Seats may need to be adjustable to suit the height of the work table and footrests can reduce muscular strains;
- ◆ do keep your first-aid box fully stocked and appoint someone to take charge in an emergency and call an ambulance. If you have part-time workers arrange for the duty to be shared;
- ◆ you do not require a trained first aider by law in a small office but many businesses recognise the value of having one;

Ill health



- ◆ do make arrangements so that staff can use rest areas/rooms without experiencing discomfort from tobacco smoke. The HSE leaflet *Passive smoking at work* gives further information;
- ◆ handling, lifting and carrying are another major cause of injuries. If cabinets, desks or other heavy or bulky items have to be moved then do take steps, for example providing a trolley or castors, for the move to take place without the risk of a back injury;
- ◆ do notify your local authority¹ if you have an air conditioning system which has a water cooling tower. Do remember that the system will require routine checks and maintenance to prevent the growth of legionella bacteria. Hot water services are also a possible source of legionella bacteria and further information is given in the HSE booklet *Legionnaires' disease: The control of legionella bacteria in water systems. Approved Code of Practice and guidance*;
- ◆ The *main* problems which can occur with the use of VDUs are related to the design of the job or workstation. If there is intensive or continuous use in your office, make sure that there are adequate breaks and that users know how to arrange their work and workstation to avoid awkward movements, reflections, aches and pains. Further advice is given in the HSE booklets *Understanding ergonomics at work* and *Working with VDUs*;
- ◆ do consider whether your staff are at risk from violence when transporting cash or dealing with the public. Guidance is available in the HSE booklet *Violence at work*.

1 Notification is required to your local district council, London Borough Council or, in relation to Scotland an islands or district council.



Workplace

The basic requirements are given below:

Toilets - provide enough toilets for employees and keep them clean and in good order.

Washing - provide hot and cold (or warm) running water, soap and towels or other means of drying.

Drinking water - provide a supply of wholesome drinking water.

Temperature - the room temperature should be at least 16 °C where people work sitting down.

Cleanliness - keep the workplace in a clean state.

Lighting - make sure there is

adequate light (preferably natural light) to avoid problems of visual fatigue.

Space - provide a minimum of 11 cubic metres for each person permanently occupying a workplace.

Ventilation - for most offices opening windows will provide adequate ventilation.

Information on all these points is given in HSE's Approved Code of Practice and guidance *Workplace health, safety and welfare*.

If you have a lift, make sure it is examined every six months by a competent person (for example your insurance company).

Relevant books/leaflets

Priced publications

Essentials of health and safety at work (Third edition) HSE Books 1994 ISBN 0 7176 0716 X

Legionnaires' disease: The control of legionella bacteria in water systems. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L8 HSE Books 2001 ISBN 0 7176 1772 6

Health and safety law: What you should know Poster HSE Books 1999 ISBN 0 7176 2493 5

Workplace health, safety and welfare. Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 (as amended by the Quarries Miscellaneous Health and Safety Provisions Regulations 1995): Approved Code of Practice and guidance L24 HSE Books 1992 ISBN 0 7176 0413 6

Report of an injury, or dangerous occurrence/Report of a case of disease F2508/2508A HSE Books 1996 Combined pad of forms ISBN 0 7176 1078 0

Free leaflets

COSHH: A brief guide to the regulations. What you need to know about the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) Leaflet

INDG136(rev2) HSE Books 2001 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 2677 6)

Understanding ergonomics at work: Reduce accidents and ill health and increase productivity by fitting the task to the worker Leaflet INDG90(rev2) HSE Books 2003 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 2599 0)

First aid at work: Your questions answered Leaflet INDG214 HSE Books 2000 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 1074 8)

Five steps to risk assessment Leaflet INDG163(rev1) HSE Books 1998 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 1565 0)

Getting to grips with manual handling: A short guide for employers Leaflet INDG143(rev1) HSE Books 2001 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 1754 8)

Health and safety regulation: A short guide Leaflet HSC13(rev1) HSE Books 2003

Maintaining portable electrical equipment in offices and other low-risk environments Leaflet INDG236 HSE Books 2001 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 1272 4)

Legionnaires' disease: A guide for employers Leaflet IAC27(rev2) HSE Books 2001 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 1773 4)

Passive smoking at work Leaflet INDG63(rev1) HSE Books 1992 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 0882 4)

RIDDOR explained Leaflet HSE31(rev1) HSE Books 1999 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 2441 2)

Violence at work: A guide for employers Leaflet INDG69(rev) HSE Books 1996 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 1271 6)

Working with VDUs Leaflet INDG36(rev2) HSE Books 2003 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 2222 3)

Stating your business: Guidance on preparing a health and safety policy document for small firms Leaflet INDG324 HSE Books 2000 (single copy free or priced packs of 5 ISBN 0 7176 1799 8)

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the references listed in this publication, their future availability cannot be guaranteed.

Further information

Free advice can be obtained by contacting the health and safety inspector at the local council, usually located in the Environmental Health Department, or from HSE.

If your office is attached to or part of a factory then the Health and Safety Executive will be your enforcing authority.

If you need advice on fire precautions, you should get in touch with the fire prevention officer of your local authority.

This leaflet is available in priced packs of 10 from HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 1518 9. Single free copies are also available from HSE Books.

HSE priced and free publications are available by mail order from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995 Website: www.hsebooks.co.uk (HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops and free leaflets can be downloaded from HSE's website: www.hse.gov.uk.)

For information about health and safety ring HSE's Infoline Tel: 08701 545500 Fax: 02920 859260 e-mail: hseinformation@natbrit.com or write to HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG.

This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

© *Crown copyright* This publication may be freely reproduced, except for advertising, endorsement or commercial purposes. First published 5/94. Please acknowledge the source as HSE.

