

Running your group: Risk Assessments

What is a Risk Assessment?

According to the Health & Safety Executive, a risk assessment is nothing more than a careful examination of what could cause harm to people, an opportunity to check whether you have taken enough precautions, or should do more to prevent harm.

It is a technique for systematically identifying and controlling hazards, by exploring an organisation's activities and working environment, and recording the findings. The process should take in to account what actually happens in the work place, rather than what's supposed to happen. For example if staff/volunteers always keep fire doors open - this should be included in the assessment and a decision made on what action to take.

What is meant by a hazard and a risk?

A hazard is something with the potential to cause harm - this can include equipment, substances, methods of work, and the working environment.

A risk is the likelihood of potential harm from that hazard being realised. The extent of the risk will depend on:

- The likelihood of that harm occurring
- The potential severity of that harm - injury or adverse health effects
- The number of people who might be affected by the hazard.

Why are they important?

The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 requires risk assessments to be carried out to ensure any risks are addressed. Voluntary groups with no employees are not bound to undertake risk assessments; however they are strongly advised to do so in order to demonstrate good working practices. In addition, it may be a requirement of the funding or governing bodies; and the use of risk assessments can also provide evidence of good practice that may be used to negotiate better insurance premiums.

The risk assessment process may seem like a chore, but can be enlightening and a good way of raising awareness of safety issues within the organisation. The process also encourages everyone in the organisation to look out for potential dangers.

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Who carries out the assessment?

In voluntary organisations it is considered good practice to nominate one or two persons, normally a committee member to undertake the risk assessments for the organisation as part of the Health & Safety procedures.

Assessing the risk requires detailed knowledge of the organisation's activities and working practices, and should always involve employees and volunteers who actually do the work.

When to assess?

The important thing to be remembered is that risk assessments are working documents and should be regularly referred to, and reviewed as necessary. Revising or undertaking new risk assessments should always occur when there have been any changes with the organisation, such as new working practices, new activities or the purchase and use of new equipment. Risk assessment is also an essential part of planning events, walks, environmental activities etc.

The following examples illustrate what should be considered:

Features of the building / Condition & operation of equipment / Fire Risks / Moving & Handling / External work places / First Aid / Electricity / Control of substances hazardous to health / Computer work stations / Shared work places

The 5 Steps to Risk Assessment (adapted from H.S.E. General Guidance)

STEP 1 - What are the hazards?

Walk around the workplace / community building / external venue and look for what could cause harm. Speak to employees, volunteers and users they may have noticed things which are not immediately obvious. Use manufacturer's instructions, data sheets, accident books and health records to identify things which could cause harm.

Examples: slipping/tripping; fire; chemicals; moving parts; work at height; vehicles; electricity; fumes; manual handling; noise; poor light; low temperatures.

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STEP 2 - Who Might be harmed?

Often it is those who know least about the organisation and its activities who are most at risk from being harmed. These can include young workers, volunteers, trainees, new and expectant mothers, cleaners, visitors, contractors, members of the public or anyone who could be hurt by your activities.

STEP 3 - Evaluate the risks

The organisation needs to determine whether existing precautions are adequate or should more be done. With most activities even after all precautions have been taken, some risk usually remains. What needs to be decided with each hazard/activity is whether this remaining risk is high, medium or low.

The aim is to make all risk as small as possible by implementing the necessary legal requirements, any industry standards as well as the organisation's standards. An action list needs to be drawn up targeting any remaining high risks/or those that can affect people.

The organisation needs to ask:

- Can we get rid of the risk altogether?
- If not, how can we control the risks so that harm is unlikely?
- Has adequate information, instruction and training been provided?
- Do we have adequate systems or procedures?

In controlling risks apply the following:

- Try a less risky option
- Prevent access to the hazard
- Organise the environment to reduce exposure to the hazard
- Issue personal protective equipment
- Provide welfare facilities such as washing facilities and first aid.

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STEP 4 - Record your findings

If you have fewer than 5 employees there is no legal requirement to write any thing down. However it is considered a good working practice to record the findings of the risk assessment process. This means writing down the significant hazards; existing control measures and the extent to which they control, minimise or eliminate the risks; and the people who are at risk. All employees should be told of the findings.

All risk assessments must be appropriate for the organisations activities and highlight the following:-

- A proper check was made
- You asked who might be affected
- You dealt with all the obvious significant hazards
- The precautions are reasonable
- The remaining risks are low

It's important to keep a written record for future reference. In the matter of due diligence, it can help you prove what precautions you have taken, it can remind you to keep an eye on a particular hazard as well as showing that you have done what the law requires.

You can make use of other documents to make the process easier, such as Health & Safety policy, manuals, organisation rules, manufacturer's instructions, and fire safety precautions

STEP 5 - Review & Revise

Risk assessments are working documents, and it is good practice to regularly review the organisations' risk assessments to ensure they are still relevant to its activities and working environment - set a date. It is inevitable that new activities, equipment, substances and legal or organisational standards will be implemented and it's important that any significant change must be added to the risk assessment to take into account any new hazard.

Risk prevention measures need to be part of an agreed and coherent organisational Health & Safety policy that aims to minimise the risks that cannot be prevented or avoided altogether. Avoiding, preventing and reducing risk should be an approach and attitude adopted at all levels of the organisation in order to be most effective.

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Useful Sources of Information:

- PAVS have model Risk Assessment forms available, which can be adapted to meet the needs for your organisation
- www.hse.gov.uk including The Five Steps to Risk Assessment
- The Health & Safety Handbook for Voluntary & Community Organisations, Second Edition.
Al Hinde, Charlie Kavangh, Editor Jill Barlow
Directory of Social Change Phone: 020 7209 5151
- Managing Your Community Building
A practical Handbook for People Running Buildings in Local Communities
Community Matters Phone: 020 7837 7887
publications@communitymatters.org.uk
- Voluntary but not amateur- A guide to the law for the voluntary organisations and community groups. 6th Edition.
J. Reason, R. Hayes & D. Forbes
London Voluntary Service Council
- www.keepwalestidy.org.uk - group start up pack