



Workplace Safety

Why You Need to Perform Workplace Hazard Assessments

Gillian Scott | Nov 21, 2018

What You Need to Know

Hazard assessments help prevent injuries and illnesses by identifying potential hazards and specifying how the risks will be addressed.

Hazard assessments are required by federal safety regulations.

Failure to monitor workplace hazards and protect workers from injury or illness can lead to expensive prosecutions.

Hazard assessments must be conducted regularly to make sure information on workplace risks is up to date.

From pinch points to toxic chemicals, a manufacturing facility can be a dangerous place to work. Hazard identification is a key step in the development of any health and safety program.

After all, how do you keep workers safe if you don't know the risks they face? A workplace hazard assessment is a formal process to identify hazards so they can be addressed with administrative, engineering or work controls or through the use of personal protective equipment.

You may think you already know the hazards in your facility and have the necessary controls in place. Or maybe you did a facility-wide hazard assessment a few years ago and don't want to take the time to do another one. Why should you conduct a hazard assessment now?

Workplace Hazard Assessment Reason No. 1: To Prevent Workplace Injuries and Illnesses

The first step in protecting employees from hazards in the workplace is to identify what those hazards are. Hazard assessments help facilities pinpoint areas or processes where employees could be exposed to elements that could cause injury or illness; facilities can then work to prevent these injuries or illnesses from occurring, either through administrative or engineering controls or through the use of personal protective equipment.

"One of the 'root causes' of workplace injuries, illnesses, and incidents is the failure to identify or recognize hazards that are present, or that could have been anticipated," says the Occupational Safety

and Health Administration on its *Hazard Identification and Assessment page*. "A critical element of any effective safety and health program is a proactive, ongoing process to identify and assess such hazards."

PDA: Another Injury-Prevention Tool

A physical demand assessment, or PDA, provides detailed descriptions of the physical tasks required by a job. According to Christina Bergman, CWCP, CHRS, and Rachel Michael, CPE, CHSP, both consultants with Aon Risk Solutions, this could include information on lifting, pushing, pulling and repetitive motions. Bergman and Michael *write in EHS Today* that PDAs help companies with everything from hiring to post-injury incident analysis.

"The information gathered from the PDA collection process provides the foundational basis to make the job task elements actionable and applicable to multiple departments within an organization," the consultants write. "Notably, they can provide a consistent framework for candidate hiring, safety training and program development, injury reduction initiatives, job rotation assignments, health and wellness programs, claims management considerations and the return-to-work process."

PDAs can help companies identify job tasks that may be more likely to cause injuries and can be integrated into injury and illness prevention plans. The data collected can also be used to make sure facilities are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008, OSHA and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission requirements.

"Ultimately, utilizing PDAs across the injury and safety management spectrum can improve outcomes and support initiatives that help reduce the total cost of risk," say Bergman and Michael.

Workplace Hazard Assessment Reason No. 2: To Meet Safety Requirements

Hazard assessments are required by OSHA under the personal protective equipment standard (**29 CFR 1910.132 - General Requirements**). "The employer shall assess the workplace to determine if hazards are present, or are likely to be present, which necessitate the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)," the standard reads.

OSHA also requires that employers verify that the hazard assessment has been done using a written certification that includes the workplace evaluated, the name of the person completing the assessment and the date the assessment was done. The agency provides *non-mandatory compliance guidelines* to help employers meet the standard. Hazard assessments are also specifically required for entry to confined spaces and for documenting lockout/tagout procedures, *says Velocity EHS*.

Want to learn to become a safer organization with everyone's buy in? Read "How to Improve Safety Culture in the Workplace."

Workplace Hazard Assessment Reason No. 3: To Avoid Fines and Prosecution

“Everyone in the workplace needs to understand that they have legislative-driven responsibilities,” says Jan Hill, a consultant with Workplace Safety & Prevention Services (WSPS). Hill says those responsibilities include taking reasonable precautions, including information, instruction and personal protective equipment, to protect workers. And, of course, assessing and controlling workplace hazards. “Supervisors must know about the hazards and communicate them to workers, and workers must report real and potential hazards up the chain of command. It’s all in the act. You’ve got to do it. Otherwise, you risk facing unnecessary prosecution.”

Hazard Assessment Reason No. 4: To Stay Up to Date on Workplace Dangers

Hill *notes* that a hazard assessment provides a snapshot of workplace hazards at one moment in time.

“To fully benefit from an assessment, review and update it regularly. Workplaces are in constant flux—new equipment, new processes, new supervisors, new workers—so make your assessment a living document that will help protect your workers and your operations on an ongoing basis,” she says.

OSHA also recommends periodic reassessments to take note of any changes in workplace conditions or equipment.

“This periodic reassessment should also include a review of injury or illness records to spot any trends or areas of concern and taking appropriate corrective action,” *the agency writes*.

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Jan Hill

Consultant, Workplace Safety & Prevention Services

What Does Workplace Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment Look Like?

On its *Recommended Practices for Safety and Health Programs website*, OSHA describes six steps in hazard identification and assessment:

1. Collecting existing information about workplace hazards
2. Inspecting the workplace for safety hazards
3. Identifying health hazards
4. Conducting incident investigations
5. Identifying hazards associated with emergency and nonroutine situations
6. Characterizing the nature of identified hazards, identifying interim routine control measures and prioritizing the hazards for control

In *an article in EHS Today*, Dennis Ryan, president of Compass Health & Safety, says there are two main types of hazard assessments: general assessments that look at the risks of a position, job or task, and pre-job assessments that are completed just before carrying out a task.

For pre-job assessments, Ryan says compliance is always an important issue. Supervisors should conduct frequent checks to make sure employees are completing assessments on the job site and before the work starts, not in their trucks after the job is done. Employers can also provide examples of assessments that meet quality expectations and reward employees for completing assessments.

In addition, Ryan says, good general assessments will be specific, including descriptions of how hazards will be controlled, and will evaluate each task and each hazard individually.

“Success in health and safety has a great deal to do with quality of the documents,” Ryan says. “If one doesn’t ensure the assessment documents are of high quality, employees will not value them. If the assessments are not valued, they will not be used for other preventive purposes such as to identify training needs and improve work procedures. Good quality assessments play a central role in any incident prevention program.”

Are you performing safety hazard assessments on the regular?

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