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PREPARING A SAFETY STATEMENT FOR A PROPERTY COMPANY: THE KEY STAGES

By Myles Keaveney MSc, Lecturer in Building Construction, Dublin Institute of Technology

The incidence of workplace deaths fell by almost one-third in 2006. 50 work-related deaths were notified to the Health and Safety Authority last year, compared with 74 fatalities in 2005. 12 people lost their lives in the construction sector, down from 23 in 2005. Over 7,000 non-fatal work injuries were reported to the HSA last year.

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 every employer is required to prepare a safety statement for the workplace to safeguard the safety and health of employees and others who come into contact with the workplace such as clients or members of the public.

A safety statement is an action programme, in writing, setting out how safety and health is managed in the workplace. It must be regularly reviewed and should have the full support of management and employees all the way from the board room to the office floor. The arrangements and resources needed to implement and monitor the safety statement must be put in place.

The employer must ensure that the content of the safety statement is brought to the attention of all employees and others who may be exposed to any risks covered by the document. The latter may include contractors who do cleaning, maintenance or building work, delivery people or self-employed people who provide a particular service. In particular, all new employees should be made aware of the safety statement when they start work.

A comprehensive, well-resourced and implemented safety statement should reduce accidents and ill health at work. A safety statement can be drawn up by following the following series of steps:

1. The company's health and safety policy

This is a declaration, signed at senior management level, setting out the company's commitment to ensuring a workplace that is as safe and healthy as reasonably practicable. It should state that the success of the policy is dependant on the co-operation of employees and others who may be at risk from the work activity. To ensure currency, the policy should indicate that the safety statement is subject to review in the light of legislative change or other change in circumstances.

2. Identify the hazards

A hazard is anything with the potential to cause harm e.g. wet floors, lifting heavy or awkward loads. This will require a systematic examination of the workplace as well as reviewing records of accidents and insurance claims. Some hazards are readily recognisable, such as damaged electricity cables or moving heavy loads. Less obvious, but at the root of many accidents, are hazards presented by untidy workplaces and poor maintenance which can lead to trips and falls. A checklist of

hazards can be found in the Health and Safety Authority publication Guidelines on Preparing Your Safety Statement and Carrying Out Risk Assessments

3. Prepare a risk assessment

'Risk' is the chance, high or low, that someone could be harmed by a hazard together with an indication of how serious the harm could be. Once assessed, steps can then be taken to eliminate or control the risk. For example, where faulty electrical equipment is in use, electric shock is likely to occur resulting in severe injury. The movement of a filing cabinet from one office to another without assistance is very likely to result in a long term back injury. Risk assessments should cover people who may only be in the workplace for short periods of time e.g. cleaners, maintenance personnel or members of the public.

4. Decide on the precautions needed

Improving health and safety need not cost a lot. For instance, applying a non-slip treatment to slippery steps or making available a step-ladder to access high level storage are inexpensive measures considering the risks involved. Hazards can be eliminated altogether by for example replacing torn or worn floor coverings or else they may be controlled. Manual handling risks can be controlled by ensuring that staff are trained in the correct techniques for lifting and handling of loads. Trailing electrical cabling between desks can be covered with heavy rubber mats with chamfered edges to reduce tripping hazards and damage to the cabling.

5. Record the findings and assign responsibility

The findings of the risk assessment are recorded in the safety statement. There is no need to consider every minor hazard or risk that is accepted as a normal part of life. The safety statement should specify the safety management structure put in place along with the names and responsibilities of key personnel. It should outline the arrangements to be used for consultation with and participation by employees on safety and health issues.

6. Review and update

The measures in place for ensuring a safe workplace should be monitored on a periodic basis. Revisions may be necessary in the light of changes in organisational structure, new legislation, moving office etc.

Conclusion

While the preparation of a safety statement is important, the safe working practices contained in the document must be reflected in the everyday actions of employees and others affected by it. Supervisory checks should be carried out to ensure compliance.

As well as satisfying the legal obligation, having a safety statement in place and implementing it makes good business sense. Accidents and ill-health can inflict significant costs on a business in terms of compensation and increased insurance premiums, sick pay, hiring replacement workers, company administration etc. According to the Irish Insurance Federation, employer's liability insurance claims amounted to €260m for 2004 while almost €220m was incurred in public liability claims.

A report on the economic impact of health and safety legislation by economic consultants Indecon for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment concludes that occupational injury and illness cost the Irish economy as much as €3.6 billion a year, or about 2.5% of national income. Surveys of Irish employers carried out by the report's authors found that a majority believed that the benefits of health and safety legislation outweigh its costs.

References

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