



HEALTH, SAFETY AND ERGONOMICS

Info for the end user.

BY JANE SMITH

This aspect of our working lives is becoming more and more important and, for employers, ever more costly and complicated. But when you look at the statistics and the impact upon workers and business economics you can see why such an emphasis is being placed upon it.

Latest government figures 2004/2005 show that 220 employees were fatally injured and a further 361 members of the public were fatally injured as a result of accidents in the workplace. There were 150,559 non-fatal injuries at work in the same period compared to 363,000 reportable injuries.

And it doesn't stop there. Over two million people suffered from an illness they believed was caused or made worse by either their current or past work. A quarter

of these were new cases in the last 12 months.

A massive 35 million working days were lost overall (that's 1.5 days per worker in the country) due to work related ill health and another seven million days were lost due to workplace injury.

The government is aiming to reduce these numbers by 10% for ill health and 15% in days lost. As a result there is much greater emphasis being placed on Health & Safety and ergonomics than ever before and with it a whole lot more legislation and a greater determination to police it. Work Place Liaison Officers are now employed to carry out checks on businesses and report findings. Many enforcing authorities are now also issuing highly detailed self-assessment questionnaires to businesses. Failing to

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return the questionnaires or providing inaccurate information can lead to very serious consequences. Maybe it's time to assess your own Health & Safety policies?

The mainstay of legislation exists in the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974* (HSWA). All work places are covered by this legislation, which states that an employer must do everything reasonably practicable to provide a safe and healthy workplace with adequate welfare facilities. HSWA has been supported and extended by various sets of regulations, codes of practice and guidelines and many of the regulations made since 1974 have been introduced as a result of European Directives. Details of all of these can be easily obtained from places such as the Health and Safety Executive www.hse.gov.uk or www.cipd.co.uk.

One of the latest is the *Control of Noise at Work* legislation that came into effect on 6 April 2006. The Health and Safety Executive is currently campaigning to remind employers that prolonged exposure to noise at work can cause hearing loss.

This is preventable but once the damage has been done it is most often permanent. Potential solutions need to be found to both reduce levels of noise in the workplace and at the same time measures taken to protect workers. As the office products industry becomes more oriented towards providing business solutions its product portfolio is naturally expanding beyond the obvious boundaries. Not only do most office products distributors supply coffee, they are now beginning to carry an array of health and safety products including ear defenders and workwear.

In other areas of compliance, take a look at your signage. There are about six signs that a company needs to have by law including fire exit, fire doors, fire extinguisher and the Health & Safety Law poster.

Whether you are a large or smaller organisation it is your responsibility to ensure you are compliant. You don't necessarily need to be an expert but you do need to understand the basic requirements.

Another more recent regulation is

Part 11 of the Disability Discrimination Act, which came into effect in October 2004. All companies that serve the public, such as shops, restaurants, pubs, clubs, gyms, libraries and hospitals etc may have to make physical alterations to their premises to overcome access barriers. Clear signage, which also highlights danger areas for visually impaired customers, is one of the four alternations that the DDA recommend to business. Labelling systems such as Esselte's Dymo range and Brother's P-Touch range can be a great help.

Working ergonomically is also now recognised as a contributing factor to lowering ill health in the workplace. *The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992* promote light, airy, comfortable and pleasant work environments are provided to employees working at computer screens. Repetitive strain injury, radiation from computer screens and lower back pain caused by bad seating are not medical myths, they are modern day reality and we are much more open to accepting this than when

the regulations were first introduced. Screen filters, copyholders, backrests, footrests, wrist rests and monitor stands to raise the viewing screen to the correct height are the main products to be considered in complying and lowering keyboard operator's potential health risks. Cleaning products for computer screens are also important. After all, there is no point having a screen filter to promote better computer screen viewing if it's filthy dirty!

Effective health & safety management (including ergonomics) clearly helps reduce the unacceptable toll of suffering that accidents and ill health bring. But that's not all. The Health & Safety Executive promotes 'Good Health & Safety is Good Business' and that's because they have proven that the benefits to business are huge. Benefits include lowering sickness absence, lower staff turnover, improved productivity and an enhanced reputation and lower risk of legal actions. The government website is a goldmine of information www.hse.gov.uk. ■