

FIRST AID FOR OFFICES

The concept that employees should be safe at work is not a recent phenomenon.

BY JANE SMITH

In the '70s, legislation was developed to streamline the many different statutes governing safety issues making management responsible for the provision and maintenance of adequate standards and policies. In addition, under common law an employer has a duty of care to protect their employees. Employees too have responsibilities and should work with their employer to develop a safe place of work.

The most important piece of legislation relating to health and safety is the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HSWA). All work places are covered by this legislation, which says 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 guidance and many of the regulations made since 1974 have been introduced as a result of European Directives. The most significant ones being the 'six pack', which implemented the Health and Safety Framework Directive (89/39/EEC) in January 1993.

In total there are 18 key sets of regulations, the details of which can be easily obtained from places such as Health and Safety Executive www.hse.gov.uk or www.cipd.co.uk. In the office products industry,

the regulations that we will be most familiar with are the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992.

Awareness of the impact of stress and other health risks associated with highly pressured work environments is growing all the time. Companies too are now analysing the costs associated with absenteeism and lower productivity through sub-standard or inadequate health and safety policies.

Enlightened organisations are working proactively and positively with their staff to change but there are still many organisations that would rather 'ignore' such matters for as long as possible.

At Acco it's Thomas Sorrell's job to understand the issues and legislation surrounding the Health and Safety aspects of working with computers and he had this to say: "While there is a lot of 'hype' over the new focus on ergonomics and work place use, the majority of office environments are still the same as 10-15 years ago.

However, the only time things change is when it becomes too expensive for companies NOT to change. This will come though further or tighter legislation or lawsuits."

The Health and Safety Display Screen Equipment Regulations (1992) discuss equipment used at a computer screen and what practical measures should be taken to

reduce the risks of repetitive strain injury (RSI) and eyestrain etc. They state that employers must carry out a risk assessment of their computer users to identify possible problems that may result from inadequate placement of monitors and keyboards.

The products that can be brought into play to solve such risks are wrist rests/mouse pads, screen filters, copyholders, monitor arms, notebook risers and footrests.

Fellowes also provide a wide range of products suited to addressing this important regulation. Emma Crelin, Fellowes UK marketing manager told us, "Fellowes has launched an interactive ergonomics guide and seminar with the aim of increasing awareness and understanding of ergonomic working environments. These focus on the science of ergonomics through looking at different body zones and how each is affected by a user's workspace and how improvements can be made."

Far from being strangled by legislation, Phil Jones, 3M Computer Filters market development manager – Europe, believes dealers could make more use of legal directives to leverage filter sales. He says, "Employers have a legal obligation to safeguard the health of their employees and also have a legal obligation to protect confidential and sensitive data on

computer screens from being seen by unauthorised people (The Data Protection Act) – two legal obligations for the use of Privacy Filters."

Other pieces of legislation promote 'good practice' and give dealers scope to sell a wide range of possibly less obvious health-related (but certainly healthy margin) products. These include: visitors books and security badges to monitor people in and out of buildings, accident books to record accidents correctly (now a legal obligation), signage (from wet floor signs to non-smoking, directional and fire point signs), fire extinguishers and first aid products.

"Current Health and Safety legislation states that an employer is responsible for carrying out an assessment of the First Aid requirements of their premises and employees and providing such equipment, signage and training as is appropriate," Pamela Christie from Wallace Cameron told us.

Many companies are now operating a 'continuous improvement' programme for health and safety in the workplace. Find out who in the company is responsible and see whether or not you can get an appointment with them.

A more recent piece of legislation to come into existence relates to the new provisions of the

disability discrimination act (DDA) 1995. These come into effect on 1 October and all employers, large and small, must comply. Designed to end the discrimination that many disabled people face, the most relevant aspect of this Act for dealers is 'access to goods, facilities and services'. Dealers may need to make adjustments to the way services are delivered so that disabled people can access them. In particular, should a customer request a catalogue, product guide or instruction manual in Braille, large format print, tape, email or disk, you will be legally obliged to find a way of providing it.

Employers have a legal obligation to safeguard the health of their employees

During 2002-2003, there were over 1500 successful cases taken out against both service providers and employers at tribunal and appeals tribunals.*

In terms of opportunity, this new legislation can also help you. Your customers will need to know about the new legislation. Be proactive and provide them with the information as an added value service. It can't do you any harm and could very well result in more sales. ■

* Source: Maurice Press, MD The Disability Resource Team (DRT), providers of tailored disability awareness training covering a range of subjects.

