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SAFE SYSTEMS OF WORK FACT SHEET

The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 places a general duty on employers as follows; 'It shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety an welfare at work of all his employees'. This general requirement is made more specific in sub-section (2) where the employer has to 'provide and maintain plant and systems of work that are, so far as is reasonably practicable, safe and without risks to health'. This is a qualified duty by the inclusion of the term 'reasonably practicable'. This effectively means that a balance has to be struck between the level of risk and the resources (money, time and effort) necessary to avert it. An employer can only use cost as a reason for not doing something when the risk is insignificant as compared with the cost of eliminating or further reducing it. The burden of proof lies with the employer.

An orgainsation's health and safety policy is likely to establish the general guidelines under which safe systems of work are developed and when they must be followed. Risk assessments must also consider safe systems of work when reviewing continuing effectiveness in practice. A safe system of work must be understood by all employees and by any others who may be involved from time to time (contractors, temporary staff). For this to happen, it must be communicated effectively and be properly documented to provide a precise reference for all operatives. Written documents also provides the employer with a record of action taken in compliance with legislation. This may be essential if there is an inspection by enforcement agencies or any proceedings arising out of an accident or incident in the workplace.

A safe system of work will involve three main areas of control; technological, procedural and behavioural. It should start with a risk assessment to identify hazards and risks and appropriate controls formulated and introduced so that the work can be carried out effectively but in a safe way. There is always likely to be a trade off between the needs of the job and safety controls but these need to be considered in relation to the extent of the risk. Competent persons (someone who has had sufficient training and experience or knowledge and other qualities) along with employee and management involvement will all be required to properly formulate a safe system of work.

Once a safe system of work has been devised it must be fully understood by employees and applied correctly. This involves communication, training, instruction and supervision. These form an integral part of the system in that only persons who are competent by means of appropriate training and instruction may be allowed to undertake the work. The system also needs to be regularly monitored to ensure employees continue to work effectively. Often employees find systems impractical or slow and devise ways to work around it resulting in increased risk to themselves and others.

Another form of safe system of work is the 'permit to work' procedure. This is a formal documented safety procedure designed to ensure that all necessary actions are taken before, during and after particularly hazardous operations. These are normally related to maintenance work which can only be carried out when normal safeguards are dropped. The system requires signed authority before activity commences to show that all forseeable hazards have been considered and all necessary precautions taken.