

SAFE SYSTEMS OF WORK

One of the elements of the Health & Safety at Work Act, in “Section 2”, is a duty “to provide”, so far as is reasonably practicable, a “Safe System of Work”.

Although this duty is in no way subordinate to the requirements of “Section 7” (which places a duty on employees), in some previous cases employers have argued that the duty to devise and maintain a Safe System of Work was partly the responsibility of the employees engaged in the work. The courts rejected these attempts. It is clear therefore, that the duty to devise a Safe System of Work rests with the employer. The employer must consider what work is to be done, and how it is to be done, and issue appropriate instructions.

By definition, a Safe System of Work is a method of performing a task which has been planned, not only in terms of economy and resources, but also to eliminate, or effectively reduce, known hazards of the site, equipment, articles or substances associated with the task which is to be carried out by persons suitably informed, instructed, trained and supervised as far as is necessary to ensure their health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable, and the health and safety of others who may be affected. In many cases, Systems of work are regulated by codes of practice, industry rules etc.

The concept of a “Safe System of Work” is not a new one, but the need for supervisory and management involvement in ensuring that each and every system of work is as safe and healthy as is reasonably practicable, requires to be better understood.

Well established sequences of planning, action, result and feedback, rightly applied to all other management functions must equally apply to the provision of Safe Systems of Work, the design of which requires deliberate thought on the part of supervisory management.

Therefore the supervisory management needs:

- To know the capabilities of individuals under his control
- To know the correct sequence of performing a given task
- To specify precautions to be taken to deal with known hazards
- To communicate the whole intention of the operation
- To analyse feedback from Health & Safety monitoring systems
- To give the following considerations to an employee required to perform a given task:
 - a) That he / she is fit and able to carry out the task.
 - b) That he / she is trained in the skills required.
 - c) That he / she is familiar with, and able to use properly, the safety aids and equipment provided.
 - d) That he / she is aware of any special hazard associated with the task and with the necessary precautions to overcome or minimise the hazard.
 - e) That suitable and adequate protective clothing / equipment is provided and used.
 - f) That items of equipment to be used are in a serviceable condition.
 - g) That alternative methods of performing the task have been investigated to ascertain whether a more safe system of work can be devised.
 - h) That alternative articles and substances have been sought to replace those to be used and known to be hazardous.
 - i) That an inspection of the site has been made to ensure that there are safe and amenable working conditions.
 - j) That clear instructions have been given and understood and that supervision and accompaniment will be adequate.
 - k) That consideration has been given to the provision of written instructions in situations where

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these may be necessary and could be advantageous.

- I) That a suitably qualified and experienced person is empowered to modify the system of work in the case of unforeseen snags arising.

Other matters pertinent to particular circumstances may be considered, such as:

1. Necessity and availability of specialists and specialised equipment.
2. Other persons and other equipment and processes that may be affected by the work undertaken.
3. The effect of other persons' activities, other equipment and processes on such work.

All such factors, and perhaps many others, must be considered and satisfactorily concluded by any person instructing others to carry out a work task, and action taken accordingly.

In many instances, mental considerations of these factors will suffice.

In others, particularly machining work, or work involving a process unfamiliar to the operative, or for work which must be done in a place or area in which there are known hazards, it is advisable, more often necessary, for written procedures to be drawn up; and / or emergency procedures to be established.