



Health and safety

The ice-making machine at a fast food outlet had been leaking for several days and although the normal practice was to mop up any spillages as soon as they appeared, on the day of the accident, they were short staffed, and no one had stopped to clear it up.

A sixteen-year-old girl, who had just started working at the restaurant, slipped on the wet patch and instinctively put out her hand to break her fall, but unfortunately, it went into a deep fat fryer and she was very badly burnt.

It's not hard to see how this accident could have been avoided, and in fact, the Environmental Health Officer, who investigated the incident, believed that the accident, and therefore the injury the girl suffered, had been completely avoidable.

Everyone is entitled to work in an environment where risks to their health and safety are properly controlled, and the main responsibility for this falls to the employers.

But you also have a responsibility for your own health and safety and for that of your colleagues, customers, and anyone who may be affected by what you do, or what you don't do. For example, if someone, anyone had cleared up the spillage, that accident almost certainly wouldn't have happened.

So health and safety is about looking after yourself, and those around you, and it's also about how the risk of harm or injury is managed and reduced. We do this with our personal safety. Perhaps we don't think of it in those terms, but we go through a process of assessing risks and taking precautions. Look at this.

Kate rides her bike to work. She knows that there are lots of hazards – the things that can cause her harm - and she's weighed up the risks from these, both in terms of them happening, and also how serious any injury could be, and come to the conclusion that by taking sensible precautions such as wearing a helmet and bright, reflective clothing, and making sure her bike's in good working order, she'll reduce any risk to an acceptable level.



The same three steps form part of a risk assessment at work. The hazards are identified. The risks are assessed and precautions, or control measures as they're called in health and safety, are taken to reduce or eliminate the risks.

When accidents happen, any injuries are often immediate, but sometimes a person's health can be harmed over a period of time. Look at what happened to Jerry.

Jerry had been working in loud factory environment for a number of years. Then one day, when he was at home, he realised he couldn't hear the phone ringing any more. His hearing loss had happened little by little and over a period of time. Although he was only forty when he found out about his loss, now that it's gone, there's no way for him to get it back.

But quieter machines or hearing protection and regular hearing checks could have prevented this.

Both the case we've looked at are based on true stories, and show how small changes to working practices could have made a huge difference to the victims' lives.

So let's look at how risk is managed in a work environment.

Jackie's just started working in an office where she'll spend a large part of the day using a computer. When doing this sort of work, harm such as back pain, eye strain, or painful wrists can come from things like poor posture, or using a workstation that hasn't been set up correctly for the user. So some of the hazards are already known, but Jackie also needs to take part in a risk assessment to identify any particular needs that she may have.

Once the hazards are all identified, the risks are assessed in terms of their severity and the likelihood of them happening. To use one example, a lot people who work at computers for long periods and without any control measures being in place, experience back pain. The problems which cause the pain can be serious, and the pain itself can be quite severe, so the control measures to reduce the chances of this happening will need to match this level of risk.



Jackie will receive display screen equipment training and learn things like how to adjust her chair and monitor correctly so that she can maintain a good posture while working. And there might also be some other recommended measures such as a footrest, or an alternative pointing device as a result of the individual assessment she did. And it doesn't end there. If Jackie's situation changed, for example, if she moved to another desk, or she felt that something was wrong, she'd have to do another risk assessment. So risk assessment is an ongoing process.

Since health and safety legislation was brought in, the numbers of reported fatal and non-fatal injuries at work, have fallen dramatically.

So let's have a look at some of the things everyone needs to do in order to keep the workplace as safe as possible.

You must co-operate with your employers and colleagues on anything to do with health and safety, and follow any training that's provided. Also, let your supervisor, or the person responsible know, if you see anything which you think is, or might be, a potential hazard. Report accidents and near misses. This helps identify any new hazards so that control measures can be put in place.

In our personal lives, we take precautions to keep ourselves, our family and our friends safe. And at work we also have a responsibility and an obligation to help keep ourselves, our colleagues, customers and visitors safe from harm and injury.