Workplace Risk Assessment in Five Steps

Many accidents at work come from hazards that nobody looked at carefully. A risk assessment is a careful look at what could cause harm at work and what we do to prevent it. The UK Health and Safety Executive, HSE, set out five simple steps in its well-known guide INDG163, Five Steps to Risk Assessment. The international standard ISO 45001 also places risk assessment at the heart of a health and safety management system. This summary gives practical, general information, not legal or medical advice.

1. Identify the Hazards

A hazard is anything that could cause harm, such as a wet floor, a chemical, a ladder, noise or heavy lifting. To find hazards, we walk around the workplace and look with fresh eyes. We also ask the people who do the work, because they often know the problems best.

Example: Before a baby starts to crawl, parents walk around their home at floor level. Identifying the hazards, they find loose cables, a low glass table and cleaning products under the sink. They now know exactly what needs attention.

At work: Ziyad, a warehouse supervisor, walks the site with two forklift drivers. Identifying the hazards, they list a blind corner, a loading door where people and forklifts meet, and boxes stacked too high. His list now shows three clear hazards instead of a vague worry.

2. Decide Who Might Be Harmed and How

Next, we think about which people could be harmed and in what way. We think in groups, not names: staff, cleaners, contractors, visitors or members of the public. Some people need extra thought, such as new or young workers, pregnant workers or people with a disability.

Example: A family plans a birthday party at home. Deciding who might be harmed and how, they think of small guests near the hot oven and an elderly grandmother on the stairs. They plan for both groups.

At work: Ziyad asks who might be harmed at the loading door, and how. Drivers could be hit by forklifts, new temporary staff may not know the routes, and visitors walk through to the office. Each group now has a clear line in his notes.

3. Evaluate the Risks and Decide on Controls

Now we judge how likely the harm is and how serious it could be. If we can remove a hazard completely, that is the best choice. If not, we control the risk, for example by using something safer, separating people from danger, training staff or using protective equipment. Protective equipment is usually the last line of defence, not the first.

Example: Parents evaluate the risk of a hot pan on the cooker and decide on controls. They turn the handles inwards and use the back rings first. The risk becomes much smaller.

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At work: Ziyad evaluates the loading door as the highest risk, because a collision could be serious. He decides on controls: a separate walkway with barriers, a mirror at the blind corner and short training for new staff. High-visibility vests come last, as an extra layer.

4. Record Your Findings

The main findings should be written down in a simple form: the hazards, who might be harmed and the controls agreed. In the UK, employers with five or more employees must record the significant findings. A record is only useful if the controls actually happen, so each action needs an owner and a date.

Example: A sports club records the findings for its summer camp on one page. Each control has a named volunteer and a date. Nothing is forgotten on the first day.

At work: Ziyad records his findings in a short table and gives each action an owner and a date. He shares it with the team at the morning briefing. Within two weeks, the walkway and the mirror are in place.

5. Review and Update

A risk assessment is a living document, not a file that stays in a drawer. We review it when something changes, such as new equipment, new processes or new staff, and after an accident or a near miss. ISO 45001 supports this cycle of planning, doing, checking and improving.

Example: When the family's toddler learns to open doors, the parents review and update their home check. They add a lock to the cleaning cupboard. The home stays safe as the child grows.

At work: Months later, the warehouse starts night shifts with lower lighting. Ziyad reviews and updates the assessment and adds better lights at the loading door. The near misses at the door stop.

Conclusion

In summary, a workplace risk assessment follows five steps: identify the hazards, decide who might be harmed and how, evaluate the risks and decide on controls, record the findings, and review and update. The goal is simple: everyone goes home safe at the end of the day.

Sources

- Health and Safety Executive (HSE): Managing risks and risk assessment at work – https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/index.htm
- HSE: Steps needed to manage risk (identify, assess, control, record, review) – https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/steps-needed-to-manage-risk.htm
- HSE (classic leaflet): INDG163, Five Steps to Risk Assessment (the five steps used in this summary; HSE now words them as identify, assess, control, record, review).
- ISO 45001:2018 Occupational health and safety management systems, International Organization for Standardization – https://www.iso.org/standard/63787.html
- General information only, not legal or medical advice.

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