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Risk Control

WFH Series: Office Chairs and Fire Safety



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Introduction

As we know, March 2020 was a very significant time in history as the UK was placed into its first lockdown due to the growing number of COVID-19 cases. This resulted in all but essential businesses and services closing with immediate effect. Members of the public were told to stay at home and only leave to shop for essentials or go out in exceptional circumstances, including for one form of daily exercise¹.

Since that time, each nation within the UK experienced a variation of lockdown constraints in line with increasing and decreasing numbers of infections.

Throughout the timeline of lockdowns, government advice provided to workers was clear and consistent: anyone who could work from home should do so².

Whilst at the time of the initial lockdown our TV screens were not necessarily filled with images of offices workers making their way home clutching armfuls of computers, screens, chairs and other essential pieces of office equipment, it is likely that some workers did require items of office equipment to be relocated to their homes in order to continue working.

The effect of the advice to work from home was significant. By April 2020, 46.6% of people in employment did some work at home, with 86% doing so as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic³.

Post-lockdowns, many organisations have trialled hybrid working models whereby staff can split their time between the office and other locations⁴. These hybrid models are likely to result in office equipment including chairs remaining within employee homes.

Office Chairs – Fire Safety

Fire safety standards differ between chairs manufactured for office environments and those intended for domestic settings.

Upholstered furniture intended for domestic settings should only contain filling materials that are specified within the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Regulations 1988⁵ (FFFSR 1988). Furthermore, permanent covers should comply with the provisions of the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Amendment Regulations 1989⁶ and 2010⁷.

Among other things, domestic chairs must meet specified ignition requirements in respect of filling materials, must be cigarette resistant, and display a permanent label depicting compliance with within FFFSR 1988.

If the chairs meet the requirements of FFFSR 1988, they are likely to be acceptable in all premises.

However, within England and Wales, furniture (including chairs) manufactured for non-domestic environments fall within the jurisdiction of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005⁸, which requires employers to conduct fire risk assessments and remove or reduce the risk from fire as far as is reasonably possible and provide general fire precautions to deal with any possible risk left.

In Scotland the duty to carry out a Fire Risk Assessment is imposed on every employer by the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005⁹. The Act requires that the risk assessment identifies any risks to the safety of employees in respect of harm caused by fire in the workplace.

The levels of ignition resistance required would be determined after completion of the fire risk assessment with specific consideration given to the risk level of the environment in which the furniture is to be located. For example, office environments are considered to be lower risk environments in general terms than environments, such as hotels or hostels, where sleeping may be expected.

Non-domestic furniture is required to meet British Standard 7176:2007 (BS 7176) Specification for resistance to ignition of upholstered furniture for non-domestic seating by testing composites¹⁰ (currently under review), however, the standard describes four different hazard levels for non-domestic furniture and describes differing tests for evaluating furniture materials intended for 'low hazard', 'medium hazard', 'high hazard' and 'very high hazard' environments.

While there is no mandatory requirement placed upon manufacturers to label products under BS 7176, it is prudent for them to do so in order to ensure the furniture is not moved to a higher risk category environment for which it was not designed.

Summary

Clearly, the regulations which relate to furnishings differ between non-domestic and domestic premises. The consequences of this may be that office chairs may not be as fire resistant as chairs designed specifically for use in the home.

Employers who have or who may supply chairs to employees working at home must ensure that the chairs meet the Furniture and Furnishing (Fire Safety) Regulations 1988 (as amended in 1998 and 2010).

If there is doubt over the level of fire resistance of office chairs that have already been relocated into employees homes, then there is no need to panic as those chairs are

likely to have been manufactured to the relevant British Standard and so will offer some level of fire protection.

In these circumstances, it would be worthwhile to set minimum safety standards for any effected employees to adhere to while a programme of chair replacement is developed and implemented. Minimum safety standards to be considered include:

- Keeping the chair away from naked flames such as candles or matches
- Avoiding smoking in or around the chair
- Keeping the area around the desk clear
- Making sure cables are not frayed or damaged
- Turning laptops and monitors off when not in use
- Ensuring smoke alarms are located on each level of the home and are tested weekly
- At night, turning off lights and electrical items, closing doors to prevent the spread of fire and maintaining an escape plan in the event of fire breaking out.

References

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Further information

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