



Risk control

Slips, Trips and Falls Toolkit: Human Factors



In partnership with



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Introduction

Falls are the most common cause of significant injury in the workplace and a contributory factor to these injuries are the behaviours of people. Of all the reportable injuries received annually by the Health and Safety Executive, 31% related to slips, trips, and falls on the level¹.

The person who has fallen often feels embarrassed and they may quickly assume that it was their own fault. However, even though human error is likely to have been a contributing factor, it is rarely the sole cause.

Every employer must address the foreseeable risks and so should be considering the contribution of human factors² when performing risk assessments and implementing risk control measures.

It is important that people have a safe environment and positive safety culture to work in and are provided with the training, equipment and time required to undertake their work in a safe manner.

Causation

We learn to walk at an early age and quickly learn to identify and react to hazards. We only tend to fall if external factors (e.g. slippery floor) overwhelm our ability to react or if our early warning systems are not able to work effectively due to fatigue, distractions or poor visibility of hazards.

Some people's early warning systems and reactions are better than others and they can change for a variety of reasons e.g. medical conditions, age, alcohol, and drugs. Employers should provide a safe workplace and create a safety culture in which employees can work effectively without their ability to react being overly challenged.

People make assumptions about the environments they will be visiting and the choice of footwear that would be suitable. Errors of judgement can have significant consequences.

Spillages

When a liquid spills onto a floor surface the potential for slips and falls can significantly increase. Therefore, a robust cleaning regime can have a considerable influence on the slip risk in an organisation. A safe system of work used by cleaners to ensure the floor surface is cleaned and returned to use in a safe manner is essential.

The whole procedure needs to be explained to the cleaners so that they are not tempted to improvise a quicker way to clean but overlook safety measures that they did not appreciate were important.

As a general principle, training on the system of work needs to cover 'why' and 'how' to be effective and tasks should have realistic timescales to avoid the temptation of rushing.

Passers-by also must be taken into consideration as they may not pay close attention to warning signs. When planning cleaning activity, human behaviour should be taken into account, with consideration for robust physical barriers preventing access during cleaning activities.

Visibility and Visual Impairment

Our ability to see slip and trip hazards is vitally important to avoid falls, and so workplaces should be suitably lit. In some situations, trip hazards cannot be removed, such as changes in level. Hazards should be highlighted using visual contrast. Stair nosing should be a contrasting colour or shade so that when walking downstairs the edge of the stair can be recognised.

It is also essential to consider the needs of the visually impaired³. Modifications that may be needed include:

- Keeping floors clear of clutter and reviewing the placement of low-to-the-ground furniture
- Rapidly detecting and cleaning any spills or mess immediately to avoid injury
- Avoiding or replacing flooring that is slippery or produces glare (floors with a glossy or shiny finish)
- Hanging picture frames or paintings *above* shoulder level, as to not interfere with a visually impaired person needs to use walls to feel their way around the building
- Making sure rugs are placed securely and are a contrasting colour from the floor
- Taping down edges of area rugs to help prevent trips and falls

Distraction

It is possible for a person to be walking in a building and become distracted. The distractions can include mobile phones, talking to other people, or carrying more than they can manage safely.

Employers should encourage employees to challenge colleagues who are distracted and help each other stay focussed. Showing concern can be a highly effective, simple, and non-expensive safety measure.

Rushing

It is natural for people to want to get a job done as quickly as possible, so that the next task can be started sooner. In a

busy workplace it may seem important to get as much done as we can, however rushing to get the job done can mean causing an injury to ourselves or others.

Rushing can lead to errors where a step is missed out in a task, or a mistake is made when a task is not conducted correctly. This could result in the cleaning of floors not being completed thoroughly, warning signage not displayed to alert people of a hazard, or a person not following local rules such as not using mobile phones while using stairs.

These errors or mistakes could cause harm to a person, or others affected by the way they are conducting their work. Employers should encourage people not to rush and pay attention to their surroundings.

Fatigue

When we expect a person to work excessive long hours or with poorly designed shift patterns, the outcome can be fatigue⁴. It can cause a decline in mental and / or physical performance caused by prolonged exertion, sleep loss and / or disruption of their internal clock. Tasks that are complex or monotonous can also lead to the employee becoming fatigued. This can cause slower reactions; a reduced ability to process information; memory lapses; absent-mindedness; a decreased awareness of the surroundings; a lack of attention to visual cues; an underestimation of the level of risk they are facing, and reduced coordination.

Employers should produce and maintain a policy that specifically addresses and sets limits on working hours, overtime, and shift-patterns. Guarding against fatigue is important. It is also necessary to consider that in an environment which involves unsociable hours or night shift working, the level of lighting will need to be increased.

Complacency

In the workplace a person may ignore warning signs because they do not perceive there to be a risk.

The use of toolbox talks highlighting the situations where slips and trips can occur, and the real consequences of accidents can help to improve the perception of risk. Feedback following a slip or trip accident can make the consequences realistic to others.

Supervisors and Managers can play an active part in demonstrating the organisation's low tolerance for slip trip and fall risks by demonstrating and encouraging safe behaviours.

Summary

Any prudent and responsible organisation will regularly review their policies and practices to make sure that they are doing everything they can to ensure the health and safety of those affected by their undertaking.

References

1. Non-fatal injuries at work in Great Britain. Available here: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causinj/index.htm>
2. People or human factors. Available here: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/slips/human-factors.htm>
3. Risk assessment guidance for employers involving individuals with sight loss. Available here: <https://www.rnib.org.uk/living-with-sight-loss/equality-and-employment/employers/risk-assessment-guidance-for-employers/>
4. Why is fatigue important? Available here: <https://www.icheme.org/media/9027/xxiii-paper-18.pdf>

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Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

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