Occupational health and safety are the foundation of wellbeing at work.

The employer is responsible for providing safe working conditions, but working environment is safe only when the employees and their supervisors cooperate and participate. The aim of this guide is to provide basic information on the development of occupational safety and health in the workplace.

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1. Safety management

The employer carries the main responsibility for health and safety at work. The staff as a whole including supervisors and top management needs to be committed to safe practises in everyday work and also in operational planning and development work. Safety management should not be a set of scattered actions. The aim is to manage occupational safety and health risks and to prevent accidents, work-related illnesses and sick leaves.

"Employers shall design and choose the necessary measures for improving the working conditions as well as decide the extent of the measures and put them into practice. The following principles shall be observed as far as possible:

• preventing the creation of hazards and risk factors;
• eliminating the hazards and risk factors or, if this is not possible, selecting a less hazardous or harmful alternative;
• adopting safety measures which have a general impact before individual measures; and
• taking account of technological developments and other available means.

Employers shall continuously monitor the working environment, the state of the working community and the safety of the work practices. Employers shall also monitor the impact of the measures put into practice on safety and health at work."

(Occupational Safety and Health Act, Unofficial translation)

The properly made risk assessment together with the occupational safety and health policy encourage the staff to employ safe working practises and to suggest improvements.

2. Safety culture

The safety culture of a company will determine the status of safety and health issues in the company. It is mostly stemmed from the attitude that employers have toward safety. Safety practises can be developed by making necessary changes.

The company should have clear and high aims for developing safety and working conditions as well as promoting health and work ability of all employees. A zero accident vision shows that the company is committed to preventing accidents and cares about the employees. Employees must report hazardous situations and take note of them. Everyone has the right to get home from work in good health.

Safety culture means

• prioritizing safety and health
• clear and high level goals and responsibility
• intentions and strong commitment
• openness and trust
• safe working practices always and everywhere
• professional skills and competence
• continuous improvement
• a methodical approach
• concrete measures, tools.

Expertise and professional skills are the foundation of good and safe working practises. Everyone should take an active part in developing the working environment. The company should provide for continuous and appropriate occupational safety training.
3. Occupational safety organisation

The aim of regulated cooperation on occupational health and safety is to support the interaction between employer and employee and to provide employees with the opportunity to take part in and influence safety and health concerns in the workplace. Occupational safety work concerns the workplace as a whole, but supervisors and the nominated or elected safety personnel have special responsibilities and roles.

"Employers and employees shall cooperate in maintaining and improving safety in workplaces.

The employer shall in good time give the employees necessary information on any factors that affect safety and health in the workplace and other circumstances that have an effect on the working conditions as well as on any assessments and other analyses and plans concerning them. The employer shall also ensure that these matters are duly and in good time discussed between the employer and the employees or their representatives.

The employees for their part shall act in cooperation with the employer and the employees' representatives in order to achieve the safety and health related objectives. The employees have the right to submit proposals on safety and health in the workplace and other matters to the employer and get a response to them."

(Occupational Safety and Health Act, Unofficial translation)

Every workplace has an occupational safety and health manager appointed by the employer, who is responsible for organising and developing occupational safety work. In workplaces with at least 10 permanent employees, an occupational health and safety representative and two deputy representatives are elected. Workplaces with fewer employees can elect a representative if needed. White collar employees may elect their own representative and two deputies.

Workplaces with 20 or more permanent employees must establish an occupational safety and health committee. In smaller workplaces, without either an occupational safety and health committee or a representative, the work is carried out as circumstances allow by the employer and employees.

Health care personnel and occupational safety authorities are specialists providing their own services in support of occupational safety work.

4. Occupational health care

An employer is required by law to provide professional preventive occupational health care services for employees in order to control work-related health risks.

The health care provider is an important partner for the employer in providing appropriate services for the company and in supporting the workability and well-being of employees.

The employer and the service provider sign a written contract that details the
• general provisions for employee health care plan
• content and extent of the services
• duration of the contract.

The health care service provider is required to
• carry out an assessment of the health risks of the workplace
• include health inspections based on the health risk assessment in the service plan
• present suggestions for improving working conditions and supporting the workability of employees
• provide guidance and information on developing the working environment as well as matters related to employee health
• participate in activities designed to maintain workability
• supervise workplace first aid training
• monitor the state of employee health as the workability of employee decreases, promote the capability to cope at work, to give advice and guide rehabilitation.

The workplace assessment serves as a basis for a written occupational health care plan, which is updated annually. The plan is based on the workplace health assessment as well as on the risk assessment completed by the employer.

The requirements of the workplace and the aims and action plan of the health care service are included in the occupational safety plan. This plan must be on display and accessible to all employees. In matters concerning the implementation of health care, the employer shall work together with the employees or their representatives.
5. Occupational safety and health policy

“The employer shall have a policy for action needed in order to promote safety and health and to maintain the employees’ workability. The policy must incorporate the need to develop the working conditions and the impact of the working environmental factors. The objectives for promoting safety and health and maintaining workability deriving from the policy must be taken into account in the workplace development and planning, and they must be discussed together with the employees or their representatives.”

(Occupational Safety and Health Act, Unofficial translation)

The occupational safety and health policy is an important tool for safety management and it should form an integral part of company policy and its safety principals. The plan defines the principles and aims that guide the work in support of occupational safety, occupational health and wellbeing. The occupational safety and health policy is required by law; it concerns every employer and workplaces of all sizes. The aims are part of the planning and development of the workplace.

The defined goals of the policy might be to e.g. to decrease work related accidents and mental stress, to increase the number of safety reports and audits and to improve wellbeing at work and the motivation of the employees. The occupational safety and health policy may be developed to cover the whole company or, alternatively, the company may create a general policy with complementary policies for specific units.

The occupational safety and health policy may be written as a document on its own or as part of another set of policy, system or instructions in the workplace, e.g. the quality assurance system, the safety system or the human resources instructions. The Policy defines the safety-related responsibilities and obligations of employer and employee and describes the tasks of occupational safety personnel and the health care service. In addition, the plan should show how occupational safety and workability issues are incorporated in work orientation and job guidance.

The occupational health and safety policy should be seen as a guiding tool. It must therefore be monitored and adapted to fit in changing circumstances. It is very important that employees at every level of the organisation be committed to the aims and actions of the policy.

Example of the scope of an occupational health and safety policy

Division of occupational safety responsibilities on the basis of job description and authority

Occupational safety organisation, names and contact information
• occupational safety manager
• occupational safety and health representative and deputies (where applicable)
• the occupational safety personnel and others engaged in occupational safety issues, e.g. safety teams or partners (where applicable)
• organisation of occupational safety committee (where applicable)

Occupational health care
• contract and organisation
• contact person
• services mandated by law
• other services

Work safety instructions
• fire drill
• emergency instructions
• instructions for working alone (where applicable)
• first aid
• internal traffic instructions

Working environment description and development needs
• working conditions
• working environment
• maintaining workability

Working environment monitoring items
• sick leave
• accidents at work
• hazardous situations
• occupational stress monitoring
• working community atmosphere
• workability assessment

Occupational safety issues in the workplace
• planning
• development
• investments
• work orientation and job guidance
• information and training

Monitoring and updating
• person(s) responsible and date of update.
6. Assessing and managing health and safety risks at work

The assessment of occupational health and safety risks is the methodical identification of risks connected to work, the working environment and the working conditions, as well as the assessment of the magnitude of these risks. Risk management is the responsibility of management, but it is important that every employee takes part in identifying risks.

“The employer shall, taking the nature of the work and activities into account, systematically and adequately analyze and identify the hazards and risk factors caused by the work, the working premises, other aspects of the working environment and the working conditions and, if the hazards and risk factors cannot be eliminated, assess their consequences to the employees’ safety and health. When doing so, the following matters must be taken into account among other things:

- accidents, occupational diseases and work-related illness and hazardous incidents at the workplace
- the employees’ age, gender, occupational skills and other personal capacities
- factors related to workload
- the potential risks to reproductive health.

In making risk assessments, the company relies on the aid of occupational safety and health personnel and, if necessary other experts. If the employer does not have adequate expertise for the action, external experts must be used. The employer shall make sure that the experts have adequate competence and other qualifications needed for carrying out the task properly.

If there is a particular risk of injury or illness, such work shall be done only by an employee who is competent and personally suitable for it or by another employee under the direct supervision of such an employee. Access to the danger area by other persons shall be prevented by appropriate measures.

Risk assessment must take into consideration subcontractors, service providers and others who may be subject to risk or who may contribute to risk. In the workplace, the designated persons agree on common cooperative policies, task assignments and responsibilities before the work begins. The responsibility rests with the main executor, the person or entity that orders the service. Identifying risks connected to maintenance, upkeep and other situations outside routine work is of particular importance. Event risks are generally greatest in situations of change, disturbance or halted production.”

(Occupational Safety and Health Act, Unofficial translation)
Identifying risk and risk assessment objects:

- the physical working environment
- machinery, powered tools and hand tools
- working spaces, structures and furnishings
- order and tidiness
- hot work
- working in enclosed spaces
- electrical work
- safe stops, lock and tag system
- use of chemicals
- scaffolding
- hoist work and hoisting in general
- ladders
- forklift trucks
- the use of personal protective equipment
- access, exits, emergency routes
- pedestrian and vehicle traffic.

Physical, chemical and biological hazards

- noise
- vibrations
- temperature (hot, cold, draughts)
- lighting
- radiation
- handling hazardous chemicals
- air impurities
- infection risk.

Physical workload

- difficult working posture
- unsuitable workload
- monotonous work
- working pace and rest periods
- manual lifting and moving
- inappropriate tools.

Psychosocial stress

- lack of job security
- lack of influence in the work
- atypical working hours
- solitary work
- monotonous work
- threat of violence
- personnel conflicts
- inappropriate treatment
- harassment.

Risk Assessment action plan example

Planning

- Establishing risk assessment (RA) committee
- Resources, responsibilities, cooperation: management and supervisors, occupational safety and health personnel, human resources administration
- Choosing the tool for assessment
- Timetable

Information gathering

- Statistics, questionnaires, hazardous situations reports
- Earlier studies, workplace inquiries

Training and guidance of those responsible/supervisors

Informing all personnel

Realisation

- Identified hazards to be discussed at the workplace/in committees
- Hazard descriptions are specified on the basis of discussions

Follow-up in RA committee

- Risks are assessed (seriousness and probability)
- Where necessary, internal and/or external consultants are used in assessing risks
- Additional studies and measurements are undertaken if necessary
- Risks are classified and arranged in order of priority
- An action plan and follow-up scheme is set up, appointing responsible persons and devising a timetable
- Evaluation of the process
- Feedback and information is given to personnel.
7. Work orientation and job guidance

“Employers shall give their employees necessary information on the hazards and risk factors of the workplace. They have to take the employees' occupational skills and work experience into consideration and ensure that:

- the employees receive an adequate orientation to the work, working conditions, working and production methods, work equipment used in the work and the correct method of using it, as well as to safe working practices, especially before the beginning of a new job or task or a change in the work tasks, and before the introduction of new work equipment and new working or production methods;
- the employees are given instruction and guidance in order to eliminate the hazards and risks of the work and to avoid any hazard or risk from the work jeopardising safety and health;
- the employees are given instruction and guidance for adjustment, cleaning, maintenance and repair work as well as for disturbances and exceptional situations; and
- the instruction and guidance given to the employees is complemented, when necessary.

In a shared workplace, the main employer must make certain that outside contractors and their personnel receive all necessary instructions and guidance concerning the hazards and problems of working on the site. When an employer uses temporary personnel, he must inform the employer of the temporary employee in sufficient detail of the skill requirements and special characteristics of the job. The employer of the temporary employee shall then inform the employee, and make certain that the employee has the necessary skills, experience and aptitude for the task. The client company shall ensure that the employee is given the necessary orientation for the job and the working environment.”

(Occupational Safety and Health Act, Unofficial translation)
8. Monitoring and developing the working environment

The development of working conditions and the working environment is based on continuous improvement. The employer should keep up with technical advances and the development of risk prevention. The content of the work, the characteristics of the tasks and the hazards of the working environment are central in determining ways to gain the best results in the workplace. The company should choose appropriate and effective methods and practices for their risk assessment and safety management model.

A properly organised health and safety plan provides a working environment where noise, temperatures, lighting, ventilation, work hygiene and ergonomics are in good shape. A safe environment and healthy working conditions are the foundation of wellbeing at work, of productivity and a competence.

Occupational stress factors can be removed by planning work, methods and tasks in an ergonomically sound manner, focusing on human requirements. The guiding principles concern work posture, tools, body motion and work-related psychosocial stress.

Order and tidiness are an integral part of safety and if daily attention is paid to this, the entire company personnel can commit to systematic development. Supervisors should arrange regular occupational safety inspections of the workplace.

The effects of risk management must be monitored continuously as a part of the safety management and the occupational safety plan of the company. Near miss reporting is designed to help in predicting areas of risk. Creating a system for gathering information on close call incidents will benefit the company. The company should motivate employees to make notes and reports related to safety.

Investigating hazardous situations and accidents is basic occupational safety work. Investigations reveal the cause of an accident which, when removed, results in improved occupational safety. All serious accidents must be thoroughly investigated. The investigation is aimed at preventing similar situations arising in future.

The working environment should be regularly and methodically tested and assessed. The company should organise the assessment work by appointing the persons responsible, deciding on timetables and methods of implementation. Various occupational safety meters are available as an aid. Tools, machinery and equipment must be inspected when taken into use and periodically, according to user instructions.

The results of safety assessments are compared to prior goals. Changes are analysed and the occupational safety plan is given updated goals.

9. Good practises

Safety meetings: The company should arrange regular employee meetings to discuss current safety issues. Safety issues should be a central item on the agenda of management meetings, department meetings and staff meetings.

Occupational safety partners: The company can pair an employee representative with a supervisor to establish an occupational safety partnership. The safety partners make regular rounds to check on the working conditions and safety issues and to identify points of improvement. The partners serve as liaison and support for the occupational safety personnel. Larger companies could establish departmental groups with the task of monitoring and developing working conditions.

Bench marking: Safety personnel may benefit from visiting other companies and studying their safety practises with a view to apply them in their own company.

10. Sources and information

Finnish Centre for Occupational Safety  www.ttk.fi/en
Occupational safety and health administration  www.tyosuojelu.fi