

Systematic work environment management



What is systematic work environment management?

- Observing and taking account, in everyday work, of both psychological and social conditions and work environment issues of a physical nature.
- Taking decisions and measures, in everyday work, so that employees are not injured, do not fall ill and do not fare badly in any other way.
- Observing and taking account of all conditions in the work environment capable of affecting the employees' health and safety.
- Work environment management also applies to work not done at a permanent worksite, e.g. work on construction sites, transport work and work in other people's homes.

Why should there be systematic work environment management?

- It leads to the discovery and prompt rectification of hazards in the workplace.
- It prevents employees meeting with accidents or suffering illness, stress or other negative consequences of work.
- It provides good working conditions, which can mean less sickness absence.
- It enhances job satisfaction and dedication.
- It reduces malfunctions and quality losses.
- It makes the whole undertaking tidier and more orderly, with operations running more smoothly.
- It helps to improve the firm's financial standing.
- It gives the firm a good reputation, facilitating the retention and recruitment of personnel.

Who does what?

- The main responsibility devolves on **the employer**. The head of the undertaking needs to be familiar with the Work Environment Act and the work environment rules applying to the undertaking, so that work environment management can be appropriately organised.
- **The employees** take part in work environment management, e.g. by reporting hazards, incidents, illness and accidents, suggesting measures to be taken and presenting viewpoints on what has been done already.
- **The safety delegate** takes part in the planning and implementation of work environment management, e.g. in the investigation of working conditions, the planning of remedial measures and annual follow-ups.
- **The occupational health service** is an expert resource for work environment management and may, for example, need to be called in for surveys and risk assessments and to suggest remedial measures and train personnel.

Work environment management – a joint concern!

It is important that the employees and safety delegates should be actively involved in work environment management, and the employer should therefore agree with them on how co-operation is to be organised, e.g. through personnel meetings and joint surveys of the work environment.

How do we start?

Following the list below will help you get started with your work environment management.

1. Investigate working conditions
2. Assess the risks.
3. Deal with the risks identified.
4. Draw up an action plan for things which cannot be done immediately.
5. Check the measures taken.
6. Draw up a work environment policy.
7. Decide who's going to do what.
8. Make sure that those who will be taking part in work environment management are equipped for it.

1. Investigate working conditions

Hazards which the work entails need to be discovered so that they can be dealt with as soon as possible. This way you can prevent employees being injured, falling ill or otherwise faring badly.

Examples of factors impacting on the work environment:

- work supervision,
- workload,
- work organisation,
- pace of work,
- working time,
- job content,
- work postures and working movements,
- lighting - noise,
- dangerous substances,
- scope for action,
- machinery,
- opportunities of influence,
- co-operation,
- vibrations,
- heat and cold.

The state of personnel is often detectable in day-to-day work. High short-term absenteeism, dissatisfaction and relational problems are warning signs of hazards in the workplace.

Risks cannot always be discovered all at once, and so you need to examine working conditions regularly, identifying risk sources present in the operation. Here are some investigation methods:

- Safety inspection tours/work environment inspection tours.
- Personnel meetings to discuss scheduled work environment issues.
- Employee interviews/development talks.
- Interviews with employees and safety delegates.
- Written questionnaires.
- Measurement, e.g. of noise.

Usually you will need to employ several different investigation methods in order to identify the risk sources. When personnel are going to work elsewhere, the employer may need to find out in advance what the work environment there is like, e.g. by visiting the worksite or interviewing representatives of the company concerned.

Supporting documentation for the investigation

There are various kinds of supporting documentation which may be of help when investigations and surveys are to be conducted, e.g.:

- The experiences of the employees and safety delegates.
- Illness, accidents and incidents in the workplace.
- Sickness absence.
- Work environment regulations.
- Checklists.
- Information material from the industry.
- Knowledge possessed by the occupational health service.

There is seldom just one single reason for the presence of risks, and so it is important to identify all conditions which may possibly entail risks to the individual employee. Some jobs and work situations are particularly hazardous, e.g. repair and maintenance work, or machinery malfunctions and breakdowns. Work with threatening or violent persons is another example.

Pregnant women and minors are two instances of groups who may be particularly at risk.

Before the investigation

- What is to be investigated?
- When is the investigation to take place?
- Which persons are to take part?
- How is the investigation to proceed?
- Is there experience of previous investigations?
- Are there data concerning incidents or injuries at work?
- Are there data concerning sickness absence?
- Which work environment regulations are relevant?
- Which checklists will be useful?
- Is there any suitable material from the industry?

2. Assess the risks

- Identify the risk sources which, in your opinion, can entail a risk of ill-health or accidents.
- Collate the risks and assess whether or not they are serious.
- Put the risks down in writing, indicating which ones are serious.

The written assessment of risks will provide important input data for subsequent work environment management.

3. Deal with the risks identified

Deal with the risks which have emerged, always beginning with the most serious ones. Perhaps not all risks can be completely avoided, in which case they have to be differently dealt with, e.g. by giving the employees special instructions, support and guidance or by the use of personal protective equipment.

You need to decide who will see to it that the risks are dealt with and who will check up on the measures taken. In a small undertaking, work environment issues are often dealt with by the head of the company personally. Otherwise someone else in the company is tasked with taking the measures concerned and following them up afterwards.

4. Draw up an action plan for things which cannot be done immediately.

The things which cannot be done immediately, i.e. today or within the next day or two, you put down in a written action plan. This plan must specify:

- The measures to be taken.
- When they are to be completed.
- Who is to see to it that they are taken.

5. Check the measures taken

When measures have been taken, you check as soon as possible that the outcome is what you intended.

Sometimes further actions may be needed.

6. Draw up a work environment policy

After the first work environment management actions have been taken, you all need to discuss together what you want working conditions to be like in the slightly longer term. The findings of the investigations which have already been carried out are a natural starting point here. An action plan often shows what needs doing in order to improve the work environment.

In a work environment policy you describe working conditions as you want them to be. In order for this policy to furnish guidance for work environment management, it needs to be clear and concrete. In a small undertaking the action plan can serve as work environment policy.

7. Decide who's going to do what

It is important that work environment management tasks should be performed by the person or persons in the best position to complete them. For this reason it is common for work environment tasks to be entrusted to managerial and supervisory staff.

Memorandum for the allocation of tasks

- Start with the firm's existing organisation.
- Allot the task to the person best able to perform it.
- Allot each task to a single person or position.
- Make sure all tasks are allocated.

- Make sure that the person allotted a task is also given the authority, resources, knowledge and competence which it demands.
- Make sure that the person allotted a task understands it properly.
- Let the rest of the personnel know how tasks have been allotted.

A clear allocation of tasks is particularly important when work is being done away from a permanent worksite.

8. Make sure that those who will be taking part in work environment management are equipped for it.

Persons allotted work environment management tasks may need to add to their knowledge. Sometimes the experience derived from dealing with work environment issues in the everyday run of things may be sufficient.

Managers and other supervisory staff need to have a thorough knowledge of the work, the hazards it entails and measures for the prevention of injuries. They also need to know how people react to different situations, e.g. peak workloads, overtime, victimisation, substance abuse and threats and violence.

All employees need to know what risks they are exposed to in their work, so that illness and accidents can be prevented. This knowledge needs to be continuously updated.

What do we do next?

In order for work environment management to be effective, we need to jointly consider how it is to be conducted in future and what routines are needed to safeguard its quality.

- How can the work environment be made visible in day-to-day work?
- How should we act when there is a change in the enterprise?
- What are we to do about illness, accidents and incidents at work?
- How are we to monitor work environment management?
- Do we need any special documents?
- How often are surveys and risk assessments to be carried out?

How can the work environment be made visible in day-to-day work?

If managers and supervisory staff come to work wearing “work environment spectacles”, this will help to ensure that they take account of the work environment all the time in their everyday work. In other words, they should consider how different situations, such as the following, impact on the work environment:

- If an employee acquires additional duties, the resultant mental strain may be excessive. If so, the manager or the supervisory staff often need to help the employer prioritise.
- A person who has been away from work for a long time usually needs support and information when he or she comes back again.

How should we act when there is a change in the enterprise?

When changes are planned to the operation, the employer must carry out a work environment impact assessment so as to decide whether the changes entail health or safety hazards requiring action.

This applies, for example, in connection with job cuts, other reorganisation measures, rebuilds, changes of production or the impending introduction of new production methods. The impact assessment must be put down in writing and must describe:

- The nature of the changes.
- Where the changes are to be made.
- Which groups of employees will be affected.
- What health and safety hazards the changes are expected to entail.
- How the personnel have taken part in the impact assessment process.

Risk elimination or reduction measures which cannot be taken immediately must be put into a written action plan.

What are we to do about illness, accidents and incidents at work?

The Work Injuries Insurance Act requires the employer to report all work injuries to the Social Insurance Office. If, for example, there is a serious accident or incident in the workplace, the employer must notify the Work Environment Authority without delay (Section 2 of the Work Environment Ordinance).

A report is made to the Work Environment Authority inspection district in which the workplace is located. Illness, overexertion, accidents and incidents show that there may be risks present in the work environment. It is important that you investigate the workplace factor which caused the occurrence and that you take action to ensure that the same thing will not happen again.

Investigation checklist

- Describe what happened.
- When, where and how did it happen?
- What helped or may have helped to cause the occurrence?
- What action could have prevented the occurrence?
- What action needs taking immediately?
- Are similar occurrences possible elsewhere within the undertaking?

How are we to monitor work environment management?

You need to find out how effective work environment management has been during the past year. This review may reveal a need for improvements, e.g. through changes of routine.

Some topics for monitoring

- How successful is the allocation of tasks relating to work environment management?
- Have employees and safety delegates had an opportunity of participating in work environment management?
- Have working conditions been regularly investigated?
- Have changes been preceded by work environment impact assessments?
- Have the actions in the action plans been completed on schedule?
- Are the routines up to date?

Do we need any special documents?

Risk assessments following regular investigations, work environment impact assessments and action plans. Where serious risks are present, there must be written instructions. Otherwise, in a small undertaking with fewer than ten employees, work environment management requires no documents. No special file or handbook is stipulated.

In an operation with ten or more employees, the work environment policy, routines, allocation of tasks and annual follow-up (monitoring) also have to be written down. This documentation should be clear and easy to understand.

How often are surveys and risk assessments to be carried out?

- Investigation of working conditions and assessment of risks take place every day, as a part of day-to-day work.
- There is no set interval for regular investigations and risk assessments. Basically, these have to be carried out frequently enough for you to obtain a clear picture of the risks present in the operation and the action needing to be taken.
- A work environment impact assessment has to be undertaken when changes are planned.

The Work Environment Authority assesses systematic work environment management (SAM) status on a 4-point scale

Systematic work environment management has to be assessed by work environment inspectors on a 4-point scale, the purpose being to provide supporting documentation for the inspectors' follow-up of developments in the undertakings visited.

SAM status can be rated during inspections when the employer's systematic work environment management is inspected to a large enough extent for the inspector to be able to assess the worksite's SAM.



The SAM scale

1. No SAM.
2. SAM commenced:
Managers and supervisory staff have special knowledge of the work environment. The employer has clear plans for carrying out an initial safety inspection tour, a questionnaire survey or some other investigation of the work environment.
3. SAM viable:
Investigation, risk assessment, remedial action and an action plan occur regularly and are documented. A work environment policy, routines and an allocation of task have been worked out. The employees are being given the opportunity of taking part. Work environment aspects are taken into account in decision-making with work environment implications.
4. SAM viable and producing effects:
The employer is conducting active systematic work environment management as per level 3, and this is producing effects in the form of ongoing work environment improvements.

SAM at large worksites – e.g. hospitals

SAM status ratings of large worksites such as hospitals depend on the inspection carried out being sufficiently comprehensive for the inspector to work out a SAM rating for the whole worksite. A SAM status rating, then, refers to the whole worksite, regardless of whether it incorporates a variety of activities.

This information is also available in Swedish: <http://www.av.se/teman/sam/>

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