

JUST HOW SAFE IS YOUR WORK AREA?

A “No” Answer Could Mean Trouble

By Richard G. Ensmann, Jr.

Hear the word “safety” and you quickly think of industrial accidents, construction mishaps and a variety of well-publicized workplace disasters. Yet the great majority of injuries and accidents are much less visible. They occur, day in and day out, in offices and shops around the nation-in work areas just like yours.

Just how safe is your work area? What physical features and equipment might pose health and safety problems to you and your visitors? What precautions can you take to ensure that your work area is comfortable and safe?

While every workplace requires unique safety features and precautions, this handy question-and-answer checklist can help you address these all-important safety concerns. A “no” answer to any of the questions on the checklist may indicate a potential safety risk.

Are cords or plugs draped across any open space on the floor?

Are numerous appliances or equipment items plugged into the same socket or extension cord?

Are the cords of power tools or appliances exposed?

Is machinery properly grounded?

Have you placed reinforced “guards” on the rear of file cabinets and other furniture that can easily “tip” when drawers are open?

Are hot or toxic surfaces clearly marked?

Are your chairs, tables and desks engineered for safe and comfortable use?

Are ladders, docks, platforms and climbing equipment sturdy?

Are guards and safety devices present on all machinery?

Are florescent bulbs within your reach, or do you change these bulbs yourself? If so, do you know how to handle them?

Does your work area contain one or more smoke detectors? Do you periodically check the condition of the batteries?

Are your fire extinguishers inspected regularly?

Are you thoroughly familiar with emergency exits you’d use in the event of fire? If your work area is on an upper level, are you familiar with escape procedures through your windows?

If you have a sprinkler system, is it regularly inspected?

Do you use space heaters in your workplace? If so, have you taken fire safety and ventilation precautions against overheating?

Do you store or use flammable liquids? If so, have you taken precautions against fire and explosion?

Do you use liquid office products in well-ventilated areas?

Have you made a thorough inventory of potential air contaminants, and instituted precautions and safety procedures involving their use?

Have you checked your ceilings and insulation for the presence of asbestos? If so, do you meet

mandated or suggested standards for asbestos safety?

Are your work areas well-ventilated?

Do you limit smoking to limited spaces within your work area or building?

Have you conducted a "noise" audit recently? Do you regularly monitor your work area for the presence of sound above a safe threshold?

Are your stairs in a state of good repair, with no loose or ill-footing boards?

Do you place safety mats or "caution" signs near slippery or waxed floors?

Is your carpeting securely attached to the floor?

Are your corridors, closets and exterior exits well-illuminated? Do you regularly check these areas for broken or burnt-out bulbs?

Are first aid supplies conveniently and centrally located within your work area?

Are special articles of clothing, masks, plugs, hard hats, respiratory devices and protective wear available for individuals handling potentially harmful or toxic substances?

Are all employees familiar with emergency procedures?

Do you periodically review workplace accidents, and conduct a "hazard analysis" to prevent future accidents and safety problems?

If you answer "no" to any of these questions, take action now. Consult with an industrial safety expert, your own workplace safety committee or a nearby contractor to institute accident prevention measures. Remember: Prevention can save you significant expenses over the long term. More important, it can increase the comfort and productivity of the people responsible for your success: your employees.

About the Author

Richard G. Ensman Jr. is a freelance writer based in Rochester, N.Y.