Risk Management

Health and Safety
Five Steps to Risk Assessment

Guidance Information
This guidance aims to help you assess health and safety risk in the University.

Health and Safety risk assessment is an important step in protecting your staff and students, as well as complying with the law. It helps you focus on the risks that really matter in your workplace – the ones with the potential to cause real harm.

In many instances, straightforward measures can easily control risks – for example, ensuring spillages are cleaned up promptly so people do not slip, electric cords are carefully placed to ensure people do not trip. For most, that means simple, cost-effective and practical solutions will ensure that the people around you are protected.

It’s not always possible to eliminate all risk; however you are required to protect people as far as ‘reasonably practical’. This guide tells you how to achieve that through a straightforward step-by-step process.

What is health and safety risk assessment?

Foremost, risk assessment is a proactive and practical technique. Risk assessment is a careful examination of what, in your area of work, could cause harm, injury or ill health to people. Through assessing health and safety risk, you can decide whether enough precaution has been taken or you should do more to prevent harm. All staff and students have the right to be protected from harm caused by failure to take reasonable control measures.

Accidents and ill health can ruin lives, damage the University’s reputation and cause considerable disruption to research and education. The costs are also considerably larger than what can be covered by insurance - material damage, lost teaching time, temporary labour requirements, loss of experience, investigation time and loss of morale all negatively impact on University programmes.
How to assess the health and safety risks in your area of work

Follow these five steps of risk assessment:

Step 1  Identify the hazards

Step 2  Decide who might be harmed and how

Step 3  Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions

Step 4  Record your findings and implement them

Step 5  Review the risk assessment and update if necessary

The process will often be relatively simple – in most instances risks are well known and the necessary control measures are easy to apply. For example, you will generally know when staff or students work alone, or may be required to move heavy loads.

Health and safety risk assessment is the responsibility of all staff with line management responsibilities at the University of Auckland. In most instances, with your knowledge of your specific area – the people within it, the physical environment and the nature of the activities – you will be well equipped to assess health and safety risk. However, it is recommended that you consult with staff, students, Health and Safety Representatives and your Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager. You need to involve staff who understand how the work is done to make your assessment of the risk more thorough and effective. If you are not confident you must get help from someone who is competent.

The task of completing a risk assessment can also be delegated; however the chosen risk assessor(s) must understand health and safety risk management and have appropriate experience with the work area, activity or equipment. If the actual assessment is delegated, you as manager still have responsibility for ensuring the risk assessment is carried out properly and ‘signing off’ its accuracy and taking action.
When thinking about health and safety risk assessment, remember:

- **A hazard** is work-related activity that may cause harm, injury or ill health; such as chemicals, electricity, working from heights, an open drawer etc.
- **The risk** is the chance or likelihood that somebody could be harmed by one or more hazards, together with an indication of how serious the harm could be.
Step 1  Identify the hazards

Look around your workplace and see what could reasonably be expected to cause harm – from loose carpets to excessive noise.

First you need to work out how people could be harmed. When you work in the same environment every day, it is easy to overlook some hazards, so here are some tips to help you identify the ones that matter.

- **Walk around** your workplace and look at what could reasonably be expected to cause harm.
- **Review** your completed inspection forms. They contain valuable information.
- **Ask your staff** or their representatives what they think. They may have noticed things that are not immediately obvious to you.
- If you are a member of a **trade association**, contact them. Many produce very helpful guidance.
- **Check manufacturers’ instructions** or data sheets for chemicals and equipment as they can be very helpful in spelling out the hazards and putting them in their true perspective.
- Have a look back at your **accident, ill-health and incident records** – these often help to identify the less obvious hazards.
- **Remember to think about long-term hazards to health** (e.g. high levels of noise or exposure to harmful substances) as well as safety hazards.
Step 2  

**Decide who might be harmed and how**

*For each hazard think about who might be harmed (e.g. students, visitors, specific groups of staff) and how (e.g. back injury from repeatedly lifting boxes). This will help you identify the best way of managing the risk.*

Deciding who might be harmed doesn't mean listing everyone by name, but rather identifying groups of people (e.g. people working in the storeroom, lone workers, cleaners or passers-by).

**Remember**

- Some workers have particular requirements, e.g. new and young workers, migrant workers, new or expectant mothers and people with disabilities may be at particular risk. In these cases extra thought will be needed for some hazards.
- Cleaners, visitors, contractors, maintenance workers etc., who may not be in the workplace all the time.
- Members of the public or visitors, if they could be hurt by your activities.
- If you share your workplace, you will need to think about how the work of your team affects others present, as well as how their work affects your staff – talk to them.
- Ask your staff if they can think of anyone you may have missed.

In each case, identify how they might be harmed, i.e. what type of injury or ill health might occur. For example, library staff may suffer back injury from repeated lifting of boxes of books.
Step 3: Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions

You've identified the hazards; now decide what to do about them. Use your own expertise to evaluate the risk, with support from the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager or Health and Safety Representatives if you need it.

The law requires you to do everything ‘reasonably practicable’ to protect people from harm. You can work this out for yourself, but the easiest way is to compare what you are doing with good practice.

First, look at what you’re already doing; think about what controls you have in place and how the work is organised. Then compare this with good practice requirements and see if there’s more you should be doing to bring yourself up to standard. In asking yourself this, consider:

- Can I get rid of the hazard altogether?
- If not, how can I control the risks so that harm is unlikely?

When controlling risks, apply the principles below, if possible in the following order:

1. try a less risky option (e.g. switch to using a less hazardous chemical);
2. prevent access to the hazard (e.g. by installing locks with security codes);
3. organise work to reduce exposure to the hazard (e.g. put barriers between pedestrians and traffic);
4. issue personal protective equipment (e.g. clothing, footwear, goggles etc.); and
5. provide welfare facilities (e.g. first aid and washing facilities for removal of contamination).

Improving health and safety need not cost a lot. For instance, placing a mirror on a dangerous blind corner to help prevent vehicle accidents is a low-cost precaution considering the risks. Failure to take simple precautions can cost you a lot more if an accident does happen.

Involve staff, so that you can be sure that what you propose to do will work in practice and won't introduce any new hazards.
Step 4 Record your findings and implement them

Once you've decided how best to protect people, use the HSW Risk Assessment form to record your findings. Share them with your colleagues and make sure everyone puts the results into practice.

Writing down the results of your risk assessment and sharing them with your staff encourages you to put results into practice. When writing down results, keep it simple; for example 'Floor often slippery': warning signs posted, cleaners instructed, weekly housekeeping checks', or 'Fume from experiments: local exhaust ventilation used and regularly checked'.

Risk assessments are not expected to be perfect, but it must be suitable and sufficient. You need to be able to show that:

- a proper check was made;
- you asked who might be affected;
- you dealt with all the obvious significant hazards, taking into account the number of people who could be involved;
- the precautions are reasonable, and the remaining risk is low; and
- you involved your staff and students in the process.

If you find that there are quite a lot of improvements that you could make, don't try to do everything at once. Make a plan of action to deal with the most important things first. Health and safety inspectors acknowledge the efforts of organisations that are clearly trying to make improvements.

A good plan of action often includes a mixture of different things such as:

- a few cheap or easy improvements that can be done quickly, that could act as a temporary solution until more reliable controls are in place;
- long-term solutions to those risks most likely to cause accidents or ill health;
- long-term solutions to those risks with the worst potential consequences;
- arrangements for training employees on the main risks that remain and how they are to be controlled;
- regular checks to make sure that the control measures stay in place; and
- clear responsibilities – who will lead on what action and by when.

Prioritise and tackle the most important things first. As you complete each action, tick it off your plan.

You will be able to key information from the Health and Safety Risk Assessment form directly into The Vault (University of Auckland software), or if your preference is to maintain a hard copy system, retain the Health and Safety Risk Assessment within your own area in a common location.
Step 5  
**Review the risk assessment and update if necessary**

*Few workplaces stay the same. Sooner or later, you will bring in new equipment, substances and change procedures that could introduce new hazards and change risk. It makes sense therefore, to review what you are doing on an on-going basis. Schedule an annual formal review to make sure you are still improving and not sliding backwards.*

Look at your risk assessment and think about whether there have been any changes. Are there improvements you still need to make? Have your staff or students spotted a problem? Have you learnt anything from accidents or near misses? Make sure your risk assessment stays up to date.

When you are running a department or service it’s all too easy to forget about reviewing your risk assessment – until something has gone wrong and it’s too late. During the year, if there is a significant change, don’t wait: check your risk assessment and where necessary, amend it. If possible, it is best to think about the risk assessment when you’re planning your change – that way you leave yourself more flexibility. Always review your risk assessment after an accident.
Some frequently asked questions

What if the activities I manage tend to vary a lot, or staff and/or students move from one site to another?
Identify the hazards you can reasonably expect and assess the risks from them. This general assessment should stand you in good stead for the majority of your work. Where new activities or locations are introduced, cover any new or different hazards with a specific assessment. You do not have to start from scratch each time.

Do staff and students in my area have responsibilities?
Yes. Both staff and students have legal responsibilities to co-operate with their manager’s efforts to improve health and safety (e.g. they must wear protective equipment when it is provided), and to look out for each other.

What if one of my staff or student’s circumstances change in a way that could impact on their health and safety?
You’ll need to look again at the health and safety risk assessment. You are required to carry out a specific risk assessment for new or expectant mothers, as some tasks (heavy lifting or work with chemicals for example) may not be appropriate. If someone in your area develops a disability then you are required to make reasonable adjustments. People returning to work following major surgery may also have particular requirements. Consider the best way forward that works for you, your staff and students.

Who needs to know about the risk assessment?
You need to tell anyone who may be affected by the risks. This includes staff and students, but might also include people like cleaners, estates staff or contractors or carry out maintenance work.

In the simplest of cases, information can be given by word of mouth. More usually it will need to be written down and copies of the health and safety risk assessment made available.

How important is training following risk assessment?
One of the control measures may include specialised training for all those working within the area of risk. Training is particularly important when people are new to the job, have exposure to new or increased risk or when their existing skills have become rusty or need updating.

Training is not a substitute for proper risk control, e.g. to compensate for poorly designed equipment. However it may be appropriate as a temporary measure of control until permanent improvements can be made.

Getting help
If you get stuck, don’t give up. There is a wealth of information available to help you. Contact your Faculty or Division’s Health and Safety Manager or talk to your Health and Safety representatives.

You can download the Health and Safety Risk Assessment Form at www.auckland.ac.nz/hsw.