

Safe Systems of Work



Occupational Safety and Health Branch
Labour Department



OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY & HEALTH COUNCIL

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This guidebook is issued free of charge and can be obtained from offices of the Occupational Safety and Health Branch. Addresses and telephone numbers of the offices can be found in website of the Department at <http://www.labour.gov.hk/eng/tele/osl.htm>.

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SAFE SYSTEMS OF WORK

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1. Introduction

Section 6A of the Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance, Chapter 59 and Section 6 of the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance, Chapter 509 require respectively every proprietor of an industrial undertaking and every employer, among other things, to provide “systems of work” that are, so far as reasonably practicable, safe and without risks to health.

This guidebook intends to assist proprietors, employers, managers and others responsible for health and safety at work to understand the principles and to provide a framework for developing safe systems of work.

2. Safe Systems of Work

2.1 What is a safe system of work?

A safe system of work is a formal procedure which results from systematic examination of a task in order to identify all the hazards. It defines safe methods to ensure that hazards are eliminated or risks minimised.

2.2 When is a safe system of work needed?

Many hazards are clearly recognisable and can be overcome by physically separating people from them, e.g. by using effective guarding on machinery.

A safe system of work is needed when hazards cannot be physically eliminated and some elements of risk remain. You should apply these principles to routine work as well as to more special cases such as:

- cleaning and maintenance operations
- making changes to work layouts, materials used or work methods
- employees working away from base or working alone
- breakdowns or emergencies
- controlling activities of contractors on your premises
- loading, unloading and movements of vehicles

FIVE STEPS TO A SAFE SYSTEM OF WORK

Assess the task
Identify the hazards
Define safe methods
Implement the system
Monitor the system

2.3 Assessing the task

Assess all aspects of the task and the risks it presents. Hazards to health as well as to safety should be considered.

Take account of:

- what is used, e.g. the plant and substances, potential failures of machinery, toxic hazards, electrical hazards, design limits, risks of inadvertently operating automatic controls.
- who does what, e.g. delegation, training, foreseeable human errors, short cuts, ability to cope in an emergency.
- where the task is carried out, e.g. hazards in the workplace, problems caused by weather conditions or lighting, hazards from adjacent processes or contractors, etc.
- how the task is done, e.g. the procedures, potential failures in work methods, lack of foresight of infrequent events.

2.4 Identifying the hazards

When you have assessed a task, you should be able to spot its hazards and weigh up the risks. Where possible you should eliminate the hazards and reduce the risks before you rely upon a safe system of work.

2.5 Define safe methods

Your safe system of work may be defined orally, by a simple written procedure or in exceptional cases by a formal permit to work system.

- Consider the preparation and authorisation needed at the start of the job.
- Ensure clear planning of job sequences.
- Specify safe work methods.
- Include means of access and escape if relevant.
- Consider the tasks of dismantling, disposal etc. at the end of the job.

Involve the people who will be doing the work. Their practical knowledge of problems can help avoid unusual risks and prevent false assumptions being made at this stage.

In those special cases where a permit to work system is needed, there should be a properly documented procedure. It is important that everyone understands which jobs need a formal permit to work. Permits to work should:

- (a) define the work to be done;
- (b) say how to make the work area safe;
- (c) identify any remaining hazards and the precautions to be taken;
- (d) describe checks to be carried out before normal work can be resumed;
and
- (e) name the person responsible for controlling the job.

Jobs likely to need a permit to work system include:

- working in confined spaces
- hot work on plant containing flammable dusts, liquids, gases or residues of these
- cutting into pipework containing hazardous substances
- work on electrical equipment

2.6 Implementing the system

Your safe system of work must be communicated properly, understood by employees and applied correctly. They should be aware of your commitment to reduce accidents by using safe systems of work.

Ensure that supervisors know that they should implement and maintain those systems of work and that employees, supervisors and managers are all trained in the necessary skills and are fully aware of the potential risks and the precautions they need to adopt.

Stress the need to avoid short cuts. It should be part of a system of work to stop work when faced with an unexpected problem until a safe solution can be found.

2.7 Monitoring the system

Monitoring means periodically checking:

- that employees continue to find the system workable;
- that the procedures laid down in your system of work are being carried out and are effective; and
- that any changes in circumstances which require alterations to the system of work are taken into account.

3. Useful Information

If you wish to enquire about this guidebook or require advice on occupational safety and health, you can contact the Occupational Safety and Health Branch through:

Telephone : 2559 2297 (auto-recording after office hours)
Fax : 2915 1410
E-mail : enquiry@labour.gov.hk

Information on the services offered by the Labour Department and on major labour legislation can also be found by visiting our Home Page on the Internet. Address of our Home Page is <http://www.labour.gov.hk>.

Information on the services offered by the Occupational Safety and Health Council can be obtained through hotline 2739 9000.