

# RISK ASSESSMENT: OFFICE WORK

(Revised May 2008)

## 1. Introduction

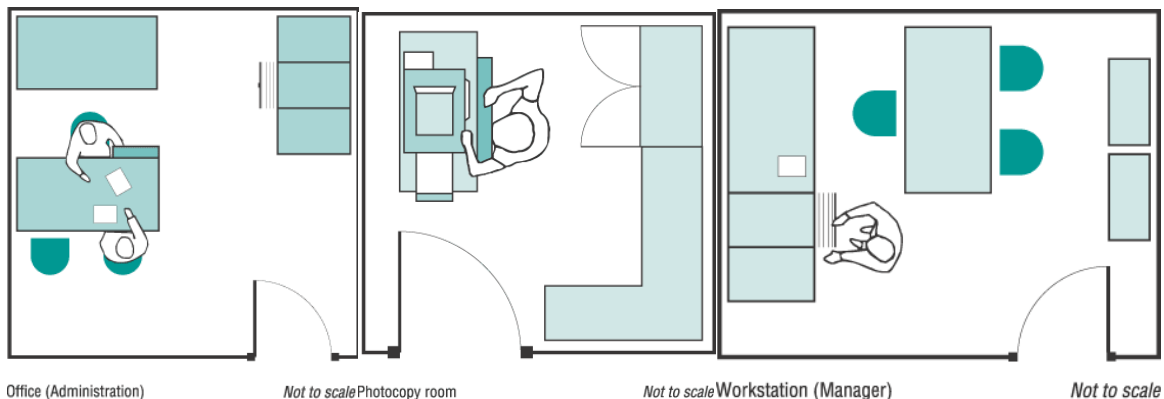
Office work is relatively safe, and accident rates are low. In fact, about half the accidents at work involving full-time office workers happen in corridors, stairs and other areas outside the office. This does not mean however that the office environment is devoid of hazards. To this end, this generic risk assessment has been prepared to provide you with information on the key office environment hazards and the controls necessary to reduce the risk of injury.

## 2. Regulations

The Workplace (Health Safety and Welfare Regulations should be applied - see Safety Circular SC45), especially in relation to adequate lighting, ventilation, temperature, space per person and keeping floors free of anything which could cause someone to slip, trip or fall. Deficiencies should be reported to Facilities Management response desk promptly. A poor environment is likely to lead to minor ailments and absenteeism, and those affected are likely to work at less than the optimum efficiency; so investment in a good working environment make economic sense apart from being required by safety legislation.

## 3. General space

Each person within an office should have sufficient space to be able to move to and from their desk or workstation without difficulty.



The workplace Regulations suggest that each person should have as a minimum 11 cubic metres of space. Care should be taken when applying this figure – if an office has a large amount of furniture and equipment, then this amount of space could be reduced without having an adverse effect on the person's ability to move safely around the office. The principle should be that any reduction in this figure should not adversely affect the persons' ability to carry out their tasks and to move around the office environment safely.

## 4. Office layout

The layout of office furniture and equipment should be such that people can move freely between desks and equipment without the possibility of colliding or tripping over items. There should be adequate space to open doors, filing cabinet drawers and cupboards without having to adopt awkward postures. Electrical equipment should be positioned to allow good access to the plug sockets and to any part that might need to be accessed for short terms repairs or future maintenance. Office furniture should be arranged to minimise the number of cables crossing the floor. Where it is unavoidable, cable treads should be used to anchor cables and minimise tripping risks. Care should be taken not to position items that block access to other items of tasks, e.g. putting items in front of windows making it difficult to open them.

Furniture should be positioned such that tripping hazards, trapping points and accidental collision with doors or shelving is avoided (see below).



**Chair too close  
to shelving**



**Restricted access  
to filing cabinet**



**Likely collision  
when door opened**



**Likely collision  
when door opened**

Staff should also be aware of trapping points between chairs on wheels/arm rests and desks with side drawers.

## 5. Office Environment

The office should provide a comfortable working environment including an adequate amount of lighting for the tasks carried out and reasonable levels of temperature and humidity. Where possible to suit their personal needs, e.g. adjusting the heating by turning off radiators, using portable heaters or fans or using a table lamp to increase light levels. At least one window in an office should be openable to allow fresh air to enter the room.

Lighting codes recommend the following lighting levels (lux) for various tasks:

Filing copying	300
Writing, typing, reading data processing	500
Technical drawing	750
CAD workstations	500
Conference/meeting rooms	500
Reception desks	300

The temperature in an office should not be below 16 degrees C for any length of time. Similarly, if office temperatures exceed 30 degrees C then this should be seen as an unacceptable working environment. Each office should have access to a thermometer to allow temperatures to be monitored.

Humidity levels should be between 40 and 70% relative humidity (RH). Levels above or below these figures can result in uncomfortable working conditions.

Lighting, temperature and humidity levels can be measured by the Safety Adviser's Office.

## **6. Storage**

Each workplace should have designated storage areas for office equipment, books, files, paperwork and other office items such that the main thoroughfares are kept clear. They should not be stored on the floor, even temporarily, as people could trip or slip on them. Cupboard tops should also not be used as a convenient storage solution, particularly not for heavy items.

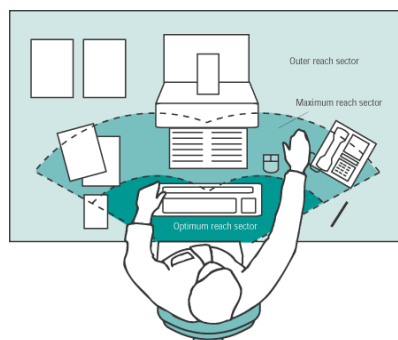
Any shelving unit provided for storing items should be fixed firmly to the walls. Shelves that rest on wall mounted brackets should be securely fixed to the brackets and not just left to rest on the supporting arms. When using shelves, make sure they are not overloaded. Shelving units should normally be marked with the maximum weight of items that can be stored on each shelf. Loose shelving/bracket arrangements may not have the weights specified – in these cases the user should take note of any bowing in the shelf. In these instances the amount of items on the shelf should be reduced.

Store books, files, and other items in a vertical position – this will make it easier to retrieve them and will reduce the chances of items being dragged off the shelf accidentally. If the shelving units are open-ended, use book-ends or similar to prevent items falling. Avoid storing items too deep as the front item can be easily knocked off when attempting to retrieve the items behind. This applies particularly with fragile decorative items, e.g. glass or china vases which ideally should be stored at lower levels away from other items.

Always store the heavier items on shelves between chest and knee height. Infrequently used items or light items should be stored on the high and low shelves. Ensure that filing cabinets are evenly loaded. Do not leave a filing cabinet with drawers open as they could topple over.

## **7. Workstation Design**

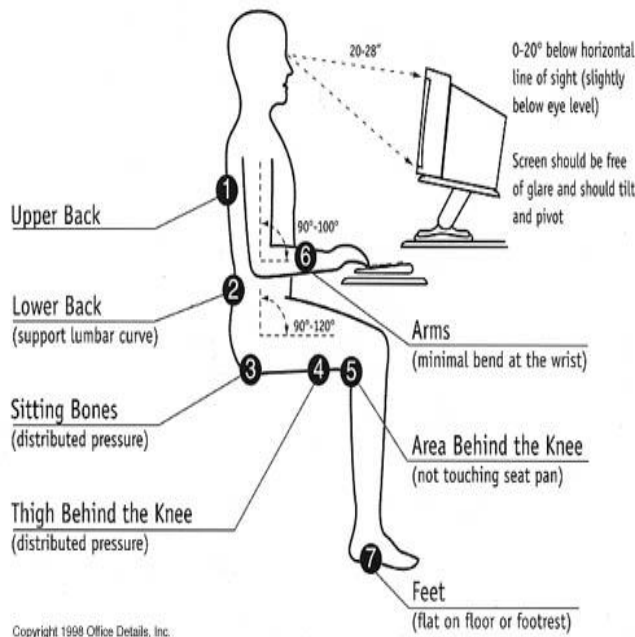
Workstations must be suitable for both the person and for the job done, i.e. must be arranged so that each task can be carried out safely and comfortably. Materials and frequently used equipment or controls should be within easy reach without undue bending or stretching.



Seating should where possible provide support for the lower back, and a footrest should be provided for any worker who cannot comfortably place his or her feet on the floor. Workstations should provide for special needs of individuals, including those with disabilities. The worker should be seated at a suitable height in relation to the work surface.

## 8. Display Screen Equipment (DSE)

DSE workstations must have a separate written assessment. DSE encompasses microfiche readers as well as visual display units. Safety Circular SC43 provides more detail on how to carry out an assessment and an assessment form. The key issues are:



Adjust your chair to find a comfortable position

Keep your forearms horizontal

Make sure you have enough workspace for the task you carry out

Play around with the arrangement of your equipment until you find something that suits your needs.

Use a documents holder if you refer to documents constantly.

Arrange your desk so that screen glare is avoided.

Make sure there is sufficient space under the desk to move freely.

Avoid excessive pressure on the backs of your legs – use a footrest if necessary.

**Keying in** – adjust the keyboard position to a position that suits you, ensuring there is a space in front of the keyboard and this can be useful to rest the hands and wrists when not typing. Try to keep wrists straight and use a soft touch – do not overstretch your fingers when typing.

**Using a mouse** – the mouse should be close to you and the wrist should be straight. Do not overstretch when using the mouse. Try to support your arm on the desk and grip the mouse lightly. Use a light touch when pressing buttons or using roller balls.

**Reading the screen** – Make sure the brightness and contrast is suitable for you and takes into account the office lighting. Make sure that the character size is sufficiently large and that there is no flicker on the screen.

**Posture and breaks** – ensure you take regular breaks away from your workstation. Change your posture as much as you can – do light stretching exercises to keep the body from remaining in the same position for too long.

## 9. Manual Handling

Office staff will be frequently involved in handling items in the office but in most cases these will not pose a significant risk. Most items will be relatively small and easy to handle. All members of staff should read the booklet “What you should know about manual handling” and the generic

risk assessment “Occasional manual handling of medium loads” – these documents will cover the risks associated with a variety of office items up to about 15kg. Where items are large (desks), have an awkward shape (large monitors), or are likely to be too heavy to carry (photocopying machines) then an assessment should be conducted before anything is moved. A manual handling risk assessment and guidance is available on the safety website.

## **10. Electrical Equipment**

Office electrical equipment should be checked for safety at least every 2 years and a dated test label applied. It is recommended that staff carry out regular visual checks on their equipment to see if there is any obvious damage to cables and plugs. Staff should not use electrical equipment that is damaged, does not have a test label on it or is out of date. Office staff should not attempt to carry out electrical repairs themselves but should use the services of a competent electrician.

So far as is possible, electrical equipment should be turned off at the end of the working day, particularly computer monitors which have been known to catch fire due to overheating.

Water and electricity don’t mix – take care if you have a drink at your desk. Make sure it is placed in a position where it is unlikely to get accidentally knocked.

See Safety Circular SC5 for further details.

## **11. Office Machinery**

A wide variety of equipment will be used in the office but most will pose very little risk if used correctly. Some items of office equipment (e.g. guillotines, scissors, hole punches, etc) have the potential for cutting and penetration injuries so care should be taken not to become distracted when using them. Larger electrical items (photocopiers, faxes, printers, etc.) should be safe to use if the operating instructions are followed correctly and they are electrically tested at suitable intervals. Items such as shredders have been known to catch dangling items such as id badges on chains. Staff should ensure that items such as these (including ties and necklaces) are not close to the top of the shredder when in use.

If equipment is provided with safety guards these must always be in place when the machine is operated. Under no circumstances may such a machine be used without its guards.

Staff should not attempt to carry out repairs on electrical equipment.

## **12. Hazardous substances**

Use of hazardous substances in the office is minimal. For use of small quantities of Tippex or cleaning fluids, it is sufficient to read and follow the instructions on the container. However, larger quantities of solvent cleaners should only be used where ventilation is very good. If there is any doubt, the advice of the Departmental Safety Coordinator should be sought in the first place. Copiers and printers can sometimes release small amounts of ozone, but this could only reach an unacceptable atmospheric concentration in the case of intensive use in a small room with no ventilation. No copier or printer in the University has been found to produce an ozone concentration of even 10% of the exposure limit. Laser printers contain ozone filters which should be changed after the number of copies recommended by the manufacturer.

### **13.Smoking**

From the 1st July 2007, smoking is not permitted in any office or workplace. For full details, see the University's Code of Practice on Smoking.

### **14.Fire**

Staff should be aware of the fire drill and all alternative fire exits. There should be a fire drill and fire safety training every year. Fire exits must be kept clear of obstruction. Self-closing fire-resisting doors must not be wedged or propped open. The amount of combustible material should be minimised as far as possible to reduce the fire load. In particular loose paper should be kept inside metal cupboards or cabinets so far as is possible.

Staff should not use candles, incense burners or any other similar items that introduces a naked flame into the office environment.

For more detailed guidance on Fire Safety management, see Safety Circular SC03.

### **15.Working at height.**

In some office environments, space restrictions and lack of storage space has resulted in high level shelving being fitted. If you have storage areas that you cannot reach from floor level, a step stool or set of steps should be made available to allow access to stored items. No member of staff should have to stand on a chair, table or other piece of office furniture to access items that are out of reach.

### **16.Damage**

All damaged furniture should be removed from service immediately and either replaced or repaired. Foam-filled furniture is generally covered with fire resisting material, but where the cover is damaged or worn and the foam is visible the item should be upholstered or disposed of.

### **17.Waste Disposal and Recycling**

Staff should take care not to put any sharp items into the general waste bins. Numerous accident reports have been received by the Safety Advisers Office detailing how office cleaning staff have been injured when emptying the bins. Ideally, items such as broken glass, tins, skewers, etc. should be taken directly to an outside "Biffa" bin. Alternatively, items should be wrapped up in newspaper and secured before disposing of.

Paper and cardboard should not be stored in corridors and stairwells but should be kept in the office until a time for collection has been arranged.