



Health & Safety **MATTERS**

Health & Safety Information for GMB Safety Reps

May 31st 2012

Vol 9 No 2

Competence in risk assessments

Introduction

Many GMB members are increasingly being asked to carry out their own risk assessment before undertaking a task, on a regular basis. This might be a pro-forma, with just a series of boxes to tick, or it might include a space for recording additional information covering, for example, weather conditions or a new application. These are usually carried out away from any supervision and are often scrutinised in the event of an accident or dangerous occurrence.

Could this cause problems for the worker?

Obviously many GMB members work in occupations that involve mobile working or constantly changing scenarios which will require adjustments each time they approach the task. In essence they are carrying out their own risk assessment with any potential consequences if things go wrong mostly affecting themselves.

Are there any legal implications in this approach?

Some GMB members feel that they are being placed under greater pressure to carry out their own risk assessments while being unsure of where they stand legally. Under the Health & Safety at Work Act every worker has a duty to try and carry out their job without endangering themselves or others. However carrying out your own risk assessment would not be covered by this general duty, but would have more relevance to the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations which introduced the concept of Competence for the purpose of carrying out a risk assessment in 1993.

So what makes a Competent Person?

It might be easier to start with defining incompetence which many would recognise in every day working life and is usually categorised by the inability to follow relatively simple instructions and completing any task badly. A general definition of competence is - *A combination of knowledge, experience and skills demonstrating that an individual can perform to specified standards, rather than simply a record of qualifications.* A competent person therefore does not necessarily need qualifications but can rely on life experience and other positive attributes. In the health and safety context, the HSE go further and would specify that the competent person should be able to:

- Apply the principles of risk assessment and prevention together with an understanding of health and safety legislation and standards

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- Have an awareness of one's own limitations and seek other help if necessary
 - Have possession of qualifications relevant to some more complex industrial processes, for example where radiation is involved.

Employers have a duty to ensure the provision of such information, including training and supervision as is necessary for a competent person to fulfil their role. In addition training should be repeated periodically and adapted where necessary to take account of any changes that take place.

So where does a worker carrying out a risk assessment stand?

As stated at the beginning, in certain occupations undertaking your own risk assessment has become a common occurrence. Workers should be aware of the hazards that they face every day and contribute to their own safety and discuss any worries that they may have with GMB safety representatives. Carrying out your own risk assessment is taking on extra responsibility and infers that the operative has enough knowledge and experience to do this with minimal supervision. The key would appear to be adequate training and GMB would also add that there needs to be **confidence** after training to be able to carry out the assessment correctly. This could involve challenging the employer or trainer that you don't feel that the assessment can be done alone without either some supervision or mentoring for the first few occasions, or additional training to ensure that you understand both the theory behind risk assessment and the practical method of delivering it. This can be very difficult to perhaps articulate what others are thinking, but not saying by insisting on more training or time to absorb the knowledge. Again discuss this with GMB safety representatives and where possible, get them to negotiate the training package to ensure it is sufficient for the assessment and the task to be carried out safely.

Conclusion

The industrial landscape is constantly changing with ever increasing pressure to reduce costs or improve productivity and sometimes safety in the workplace can suffer as a consequence. A reduction in supervisors or a change in processes may result in workers taking on greater responsibility, often without extra pay, including personal risk assessments. Some industries have been doing this for a long time but there does seem to be a rise in reports that GMB members are facing disciplinary sanctions as things go wrong. This might be down to inadequate training, less supervision or an incorrect supply of the proper equipment. Any level of competence can become time bounded as skills and knowledge become out-dated or doing the same repetitive task can lead to workers "switching off". Any training on risk assessments should be refreshed on a regular basis and if you are not confident that you understand all the implications that might arise before undertaking the assessment, make sure your employer is aware of this. If you feel that, by yourself, you cannot challenge management on these issues talk to your GMB safety representatives.

For information on this or any other H&S issue contact either Daniel.Shears@gmb.org.uk or John.McClean@gmb.org.uk

General Secretary
Paul Kenny
GMB
22-24 Worples Road
London SW19 4DD