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HSE Safety Cornerstones Newsletter

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Crendon Insurance Brokers Ltd

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Harness the power of human factors and reap the rewards.

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Read about the vague reasoning for requiring motorcyclists to remove helmets, 'dangerous' plastic knives and unregulated noise.

A 'Human Factors' Approach at Work Can Prevent Accidents and Lower Costs

Adopting a 'human factors' approach when you configure your business' jobs, employees and overall organisation can help prevent accidents, streamline operations and lower overall costs. But there are some businesses that neglect to adopt such an approach and even more that have never heard of it.

Human factors are environmental, organisational and job factors, and human and individual characteristics, that influence behaviour at work in a way that can affect health and safety, according to the HSE. A 'human factors' approach advocates for paying special attention to how workplace configurations support health, safety and productivity. The HSE's definition of human factors hinges on three interrelated aspects, listed below:

1. **The job:** The way jobs are designed has a direct impact on workers' health and safety. Employees will usually try to adapt to poor job, equipment or environment design, but this can negatively affect their health and safety and the safety of the overall work system. The timing of shifts, the length and frequency of breaks, the workload and the physical and mental demands due to the design of the task, equipment, and environment are all important factors to consider, and these factors can harm both the individual and the integrity of the whole work system. Tasks should be designed in accordance with ergonomics, in order to take into account both human limitations and strengths. This includes matching jobs with the physical and mental strengths of employees.
2. **The individual:** When assigning employees to tasks, consider their individual characteristics, such as competence, skills, personality, attitude and risk perception. The slightest variation in characteristics can influence behaviour in profound, complex ways. Some characteristics, such as personality, are fixed; others, such as skills and attitude, can be changed or enhanced. Use your knowledge of your employees' characteristics to support rather than hinder their performance. When recruiting or transferring employees, check if any adaptations to the workplace would make it easier for them to complete their tasks, and would reduce the risk of human error, injury or ill health in addition to boosting productivity.
3. **The organisation:** This refers to the overall impression of the workplace, including work patterns, workplace culture, resources, communication, leadership and more. Such factors are often overlooked during the design of jobs, but they have a significant influence on individual and group behaviour. By scrutinising the impression and configuration of your workplace, you can positively influence your employee's behaviour, ensuring they stay comfortable and productive.

Human factors are about what people are being asked to do (the job), who is doing it (the individual), and where they are working (the organisation). By considering the effect of all three human factors when making workplace decisions, you can tap into employees' true potential. Focus on how to make the best use of employees' capabilities by designing jobs and equipment that are fit for people. This improves health and safety and produces a better managed, more effective organisation.



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Tackling Alcohol and Substance Misuse in the Workplace

Employees under the influence of drugs or alcohol are hazards in the workplace—they are disruptive, difficult to work with and they threaten everyone's health and safety. The negative effects of their substance misuse spread throughout your entire business.

Because alcohol and substance misuse problems tend to be habitual, it may seem easier to ignore the problem. But ignorance or denial will only cost your business more money. Not only will productivity suffer and stress rise, employees' erratic behaviour due to alcohol and substance misuse could cause violent or unsafe outbursts, leading to costly legal action. Do not endanger the health and safety of your employees—tackle alcohol and substance misuse in the workplace head-on. To do so, you must deal with the following two issues:

1. **Identifying and handling substance misuse issues** requires you, as a manager or employer, to strike a delicate balance—you must protect your workforce but at the same time support employees struggling with substance misuse. To decisively prove an employee is misusing alcohol or other substances in the workplace, you have several options, including regular or as-needed drug tests, tests to measure hand-eye coordination and response time, or email monitoring and footage from CCTV cameras.
2. **Protecting yourself and your employees from consequences** involves ensuring that—should something go wrong when trying to help the employee—you and your other employees are safe. Guaranteeing that you have effective workplace alcohol and substance misuse policies helps shield you from liability if you have to dismiss an employee for misusing at work. Such policies provide you with the power to discipline employees without violating their rights. A clear, comprehensive policy should declare how you will carry out tests, what support is available to misusers, possible disciplinary actions, circumstances which warrant tests and how you plan to use test information.

Dealing with a sensitive topic like alcohol and substance misuse in the workplace can be tricky. But you can help and support your employees by providing resources and keeping communication lines open.



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Recent HSE News, Myths and Prosecutions

Motorcyclist told to remove helmet whilst refuelling

A London man, while refuelling his motorcycle at a filling station, was asked to remove his safety helmet before the station attendant would turn on the pump. The man asked why he needed to remove his helmet, and the attendant responded that it was due to health and safety reasons. The HSE Myth Busters Panel concluded that requiring motorcyclists to remove their helmets at filling stations is not a health and safety issue, and is probably a measure to discourage fuel theft. This is an understandable request, but workers should be upfront about the reasoning for such things, rather than invoking vague 'health and safety' reasons.

High street takeaway refuses to provide plastic knives

A Manchester high street takeaway provided a customer with plastic forks for her lunch, but refused to provide plastic knives, citing health and safety laws which prevent the business from supplying plastic knives. However, there are no laws in place which prevent businesses from providing customers with plastic knives. Further, knives and forks carry a similar amount of risk to customers in that they are both sharp, making it contradictory to suggest that plastic forks are safe but plastic knives are not. By citing health and safety as the reason for not providing plastic knives, the takeaway trivialises real health and safety risks.

Lack of volume control leads to hefty fine

A Keighley-based firm specialising in foam and leather furnishings was fined £15,000 and ordered to pay £4,457 in costs after failing to protect its workers from excessive noise made by production machinery. An HSE investigation discovered that the company had not made a mandatory, suitable risk assessment of the factory noise between 2006 and 2013. Noise levels became excessive after the company added a third machine to its pillow production process, boosting their volume output to two to three times higher than the maximum allowed. Such noise levels seriously endanger employees and can lead to noise-induced hearing loss.

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