

Fact Sheet No. 4

Fire Marshals - The Front Line of Defence



A well-trained team of Fire Marshals is not only a legal requirement for many firms, but it can also have a dramatic effect on the safety and security of your business. This training session is designed to introduce you to some of the concepts of Fire Marshals and help you formulate a structured approach to your company's fire safety planning.

What does the Fire Marshal do?

The principle role of the Fire Marshal is to ensure the safe and efficient evacuation of the premises in the event of fire; but they may also be a fire prevention officer, a fire trainer and potentially a fire fighter. Specific responsibilities will often include:

- Carrying out fire risk assessments
- Identifying fire hazards and minimising the risks they pose
- Insuring adequate fire safety signs are in place and of the correct type
- Checking escape routes to be functional and free from obstruction
- Overseeing the checking and maintenance of the fire detection system, fire extinguishers and emergency lighting
- Helping to devise a fire evacuation plan and overseeing regular fire drills
- Ensuring good security is in place to minimise the risk of arson; and
- Developing a habit of good housekeeping and fire action awareness amongst all staff with regular training.

These requirements apply to all firms, even those where there are only a handful of staff in a low risk environment. In this case, the responsibilities should be straightforward and could easily be handled by one senior member of staff.

Prevention is better than cure

Once fire risk assessments have been completed and any major issues addressed, maintain your high levels of safety with regular checks of the building, paying special attention to high-risk areas. These are like mini fire risk assessments where you:

- Try to IDENTIFY any hazards
- Decide who might be in DANGER
- EVALUATE the risks; and
- CORRECT the situation as soon as possible

Regular maintenance and good housekeeping are the keys to a safe workplace. Make sure all the fire safety measures on site are kept in good working order and pay special attention to fire doors, escape routes, fire extinguishers, fire notices, fire alarms and emergency lighting.

Daily Fire Safety Checks

To protect your workplace you should ensure a full daily check is carried out before it is vacated. You should make sure:

- Where possible all windows and doors are closed – including those held open by automatic release units
- Electrical equipment not in use is switched off and where possible unplugged
- All smokers' materials have been properly extinguished
- All naked flames are extinguished and where possible portable heaters are switched off
- All flammable materials including waste is moved to a safe place

Don't forget general security. Over one third of all fires in the UK are caused maliciously. The Home Office estimates that over 40% of all fires in the workplace are caused by arson, with costs of over £360 million; 80% of companies suffering from a major fire never recover. Fire prevention makes good business sense.

Your daily practice of good housekeeping will help to minimise the risks, but it could be worth reviewing your security procedures and emergency plan. Ask yourself what would happen if a fire started in the early hours of a morning or a weekend. Are there detection measures in place and who would call the fire brigade?

Weekly Fire Safety Checks

Make a schedule of each area of your workplace and its fire precautions. Use it as a checklist for a weekly survey of the whole

premises. Specifically you should make sure that:

- Fire extinguishers are in their correct positions and show no signs of use
- Emergency lighting and fire alarm call points have no signs of use or damage
- The means of escape are clear of all obstructions; and
- The fire notices are clearly visible.

Electricity is far the biggest cause of fires in the British workplace with £100's of millions lost every year through carelessness and poor maintenance. The most serious fires are often caused by simple things like overloaded plugs and poorly wired appliances, so pay special attention to office equipment and make sure your electrical testing is up-to-date.

Monthly Fire Safety Checks

In addition to the weekly checks, we recommend that once a month you physically test emergency lighting and fire alarm systems. Remember to record the results.

Annual Fire Safety Checks

There should be a full annual service of the equipment by trained and 'competent' engineers. You should keep copies of all maintenance records. If you discover a fire...

Fire can spread very quickly; so if you discover one in your workplace, don't lose precious seconds trying to handle the situation on your own. Remain calm and raise the alarm. This may be by operating the nearest fire alarm call point, sounding a bell, simply shouting or following your company's own internal procedure.

Fire extinguishers are provided as a means of first aid fire fighting; and armed with the proper training, you should tackle the fire only when it's totally safe to do so. Never risk the safety of yourself or your colleagues.

Once the alarm has been raised, you – as a Fire Marshal – may have specific duties to perform, including:

- Calling the fire brigade helping with the evacuation of the premises
- Escorting people out of the building, including those less able bodied
- Making sure nobody uses the lifts or re-enters the building
- Identifying and isolating the area around the fire
- Making sure the emergency services have got easy access to the premises and advising them of the situation when they arrive
- Taking a roll call at the fire assembly point
- Conducting a sweep of the building to make sure it is fully evacuated

Make sure your role has been clearly defined, and that someone else can take your place if you're not around.

Are you doing enough?

Review your systems regularly. Always ask yourself:

"If a fire did occur, am I satisfied that adequate arrangements are in hand to handle the situation well, with minimum risk to life or property?"