Independent Guide
What are the 5 key steps to a Fire Risk Assessment?

Aim of a Fire Risk Assessment

The simple aim of a Fire Risk Assessment is to identify any significant fire risks in the workplace and work activities that could cause harm to people. It should confirm and promote the correct fire safety precautions that are in place, as well as where further action is required to avoid harm to people and property from fire.

To formulate a methodical structure in undertaking a Fire Risk Assessment it is best broken down into steps. AS 79-1 Fire Risk Assessment Part 1: Premises other than housing Code of Practice, 'sets out nine steps in the FRA process' with guidance for each. For simplicity, the guide below lays out a typical five step process, in line with most Health and Safety risk assessments and HM Government 'Fire safety risk assessment for offices and shops' guidance. As also stated in PAS-79-1 'The number of steps defined is irrelevant; the important matter is that an appropriately structured approach is adopted and that all relevant issues are addressed'. No matter how many steps you apply it is essential the hierarchy of risk control is adapted alongside.

Five step Fire Risk Assessment process

Step 1: Identify the hazards

It's almost impossible to provide guidance on fire safety without reverting to the fire triangle. Identify the hazards is exactly that, identify the elements of the fire triangle in your workplace, sources of ignition, fuel, and oxygen. Once the hazard has been identified it's a matter of using the hierarchy of risk to control and manage these hazards. Two examples from an extensive list provided below:

1. Elimination – One type of ignition source was removed from all workplaces with the introduction of the Smoke-free (Premises and Enforcement) Regulations on the 1st July 2007, making it illegal to smoke in all public enclosed or substantially enclosed area and workplaces. With the obvious caveat that all occupants stick to this law!

2. Substitution – often known as the second-best option. This involves replacing an identified risk with an alternative that poses less of a fire risk. For example, replacing flammable cleaning products with non-flammable alternatives.

Step 2: Identify persons exposed to risk

When deciding who might be harmed all occupants should be considered with particular focus given to those that are more likely to be at increased risk of harm in the event of a building fire. In a workplace setting this could be:

- Visitors who are less familiar with the layout of the premises and likewise contractors for the same reason, but also due to the potential high fire risk nature of their work activities (hot works);
- Lone workers in making sure others are aware of their presence in the workplace and they know of the need to evacuate in a building fire;
- Young persons who's perception of fire risk maybe very different; and
- Those with disabilities that may affect their ability to evacuate a property.

When applying the next hierarchy of risk control there are some 'engineering controls' that can be implemented to assist occupants in safely evacuating, for example:

3. Engineering controls – providing engineering solution to reduce the risk or eliminate the chance of human error, such as the installation of magnetic self-closure devices on fire doors that automatically activate and close the fire doors upon the fire alarm activation. Closed fire doors will help to reduce the spread of smoke and flames in a building fire, thus giving occupants more time to escape.

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Step 3: Evaluate the risks

As documented in HM Government 'Fire safety risk assessment for offices and shops' evaluation is required on 'the risk of a fire occurring, the risk to people from fire, detection and warning, firefighting, escape routes, lighting, signs and notices and maintenance'. Arguably the most involved step with sufficient knowledge and experience essential to competently evaluate and decide whether action is required to remove the hazard, if practicable, or to 'administrative control' and manage the risks more effectively, with the potential need for PPE, for example:

4. Administrative controls – by educating to reduce the risk helps make people be more aware of fire hazards. One such example is to teach staff to check electrical equipment for any signs of damage before use. This will help to reduce the chance of an electrical malfunction igniting a fire.

5. Personal protective equipment (PPE) - the lowest option (often mistaken as the first) in the hierarchy of risk control, and involves wearing a type of personal protective equipment. Whilst the Fire and Rescue Service have much need for PPE in the event of tackling a building fire, the most likely for workplace staff is a Hi-Viz jacket for the fire wardens to be identified by.

Step 4: Record the findings and actions taken

If your organisation employs five or more people, your premises are licensed, or an alterations notice requiring you to do so, you must record the significant findings of your Fire Risk Assessment according to The Regulator Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Equally as important you must also formulate an action plan to further reduce the risk of fire and actively manage it. An electronic copy of your report that can be managed via an online portal is the most effective and reliable method.

Step 5: Review the assessment

There is no set frequency on regular intervals to review a Fire Risk Assessment. The risk assessor should provide guidance on this based on their observations and conclusions. It is also important to remember a risk assessment is a snapshot in time that can easily change. There are several trigger points that would warrant the need for a review, including when:

- Any fires or near misses have occurred;
- There has been a visit by the Fire and Rescue Authority where an enforcement/prohibition/improvement notice has been issued;
- Any significant alterations have been made to the building, such as structural changes or new installations;
- Any significant changes in the use (or work activity) have been made to the building;
- Any significant changes in the occupation of the building have been made, such as introducing a children's nursery for office staff;
- There have been findings from a fire evacuation drill that identify the need for a change; and
- There have been changes made to the Responsible Persons.

Using the five-step risk assessment process and applying the hierarchy of risk control will evidence that it is not possible to remove all fire hazards, but it is essential to formulate an action plan for improvements, to help reduce the risk of fire in your workplace to 'as low as reasonably practicable' (ALARP).

This guide is of a general nature; specific advice can be obtained from Assurity Consulting. Assurity Consulting is the UK's leading independent compliance consultancy specialising in workplace health, safety and environmental solutions. We have over 35 years' experience of helping customers of all sizes, from across all sectors, manage their compliance responsibilities, making sure that their organisation is compliant, their employees are safe, their processes are cost effective and their management team is in control.