

Office safety

By Ted Ingalls



Introduce the topic of office safety by discussing the fact that when we think of workplace injuries, office areas are often overlooked. A variety of hazards and potential injury-causing conditions and workstation arrangements can, and often do lead to injuries. Consequently, it is important to ensure to arrange and maintain office areas in ways that prevent injury and plans for emergencies.

Office environment

Ask the group what types of injury causes are common in an office environment. See if the group identifies the following types of injuries:

- Falls;
- Strains and overexertion;
- Struck by falling objects from above;
- Struck by falling objects on the foot or leg;
- Striking against an object;
- Being caught in or between objects.

Ask what can be done to prevent falls.

Examples might include:

- Maintain clear pathways where people walk;
- Close drawers;
- Clear and secure cords;
- Clean up spills promptly;
- Ensure carpet seams are flat and tight;
- Clear the path of obstructions;
- Move waste baskets out of the path of travel.

Also, use chairs and ladders correctly by:

- Avoiding excessive leaning back in a chair or tipping the chair back;
- Making sure chairs have five casters;
- Placing ladders so they are away from doors;
- Ensuring ladders have a solid footing that will not skip.

Ask what are some possible causes of strains and overexertion. Answers could include:

- Lifting heavy objects;
- Frequent lifting efforts;
- Twisting while lifting;
- Moving furniture, cabinets, etc.;
- Falling as a result of a trip or slip.

How to prevent strains and overexertion:

Share with the group how to prevent strains and overexertion injuries. If possible, use a mechanical device to lift and/or move large, heavy or cumbersome objects. Mechanical devices include two-wheeled dollies and carts. One can also ask for help with the lift or with moving furniture. Review the mechanics of a good lift.

1. Use a solid stance with the feet approximately shoulder-width apart.
2. Bend your knees while lowering your body.
3. Get a firm grasp on the object.
4. Position the object as close to your body as possible.

5. When you lift, keep the back as straight as possible.
6. Lift using the muscles in the legs.
7. Do not jerk the load.
8. Do not twist; instead, turn with your feet.

Office hazards

Ask what one could accidentally strike against or be struck by in an office environment. Possible answers might include:

- Office furniture, such as, desks, file cabinets and open drawers;
- Other people;
- Office machines;
- Doors.

Remind the group they could be struck by objects, too. For example:

- Items falling from shelves;
- Doors opening into a person's path;
- File cabinets tipping because one or more drawers are overloaded or open.

Ask the group to name the most dangerous piece of office equipment that represents a severe cutting hazard. The answer: Paper-cutting board.

Ask how good housekeeping practices can prevent injuries in an office environment. See if the group can identify these prevention practices. Prevention practices will:

- Reduce or eliminate tripping and slipping hazards;
- Reduce the hazard of fire;
- Eliminate blocked aisles and exits;
- Prevent objects from becoming falling hazards.

Review correct storage practices for the group.

- Store large, heavy objects at a level between the knee and the chest.
- Stack materials so they are secure.
- Store materials so they do not block exit pathways or access to fire extinguishers or pull stations.

Ask the group to name as many types of electrical hazards as they can. Their ideas should include:

- Damaged plugs at the end of flexible electrical-cords;
- Electrical conductors partially or completely pulled away from the plug;
- Damaged insulation on electrical cords;
- Three-prong plugs with the grounding prong removed;
- Flexible electrical cords run through windows, doors or wall openings;
- Overloaded electrical wall receptacles.

Ask the group to describe what they would do if there was a fire emergency in their area. Their answer may depend on your organization's emergency plan; however, you might ask them to remember the term REACT.

R – Remove persons from immediate danger!

E – Ensure doors and windows are closed (smoke/fire spread prevention)!

A – Activate the building alarm (inform the people)!

C – Call the fire department!

T – Treat all fires as dangerous!

Group Action

Have the group note all the possible risks in their work areas and identify improvements that will eliminate or control the risks. They should share their findings and ideas with their supervisor.

References

Web sites

- Online Safety Library: Office Safety (Oklahoma State University): www.ehs.okstate.edu/links/office.htm
- Evacuating High-Rise Buildings Fact Sheet (Occupational Safety and Health Administration): www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data_General_Facts/evacuating-highrise-factsheet.pdf
- Inspection Checklists - Sample Checklist for Offices (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety): www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/list_off.html

Videos

BWC's Division of Safety & Hygiene video library has a number of videos on office safety. These are available for loan to Ohio employers. Order a catalog by calling 1-800-OHIOBWC (ask for the video library), or visit our web site, ohiobwc.com.

Ted Ingalls, a certified hazardous materials manager, is president of Performance Management Consultants in Dublin, Ohio. The firm provides training and development in safety management and leadership, develops safety problem-solving teams, and helps organizations implement behavior-oriented safety systems and processes. It also conducts safety culture assessments, individual evaluations and technical safety training.

We always strive to improve the Safety Leader's Discussion Guide. Your feedback can help. Please e-mail your comments to Safety@ohiobwc.com.