

Slips and trips

Human factors

Introduction

Falls are often attributed entirely to human error. The person who has fallen often feels embarrassed and they can be quick to assume that it was their own fault. However, even though human error is likely to have been a factor, it is rare that human error is the sole cause. Some may argue that human errors are inevitable, but by the same argument, they are a foreseeable risk, and so should be considered when performing risk assessments and implementing risk control measures.

It is important that people have a safe environment and positive safety culture to work in and are provided with the training, equipment and time required to undertake their work in a safe manner.

Why do humans slip, trip or fall?

We learn to walk at an early age and quickly learn to identify and react to hazards, as well as subconscious reactions to maintain our balance. We only tend to fall if external factors (e.g. a slippery floor) overwhelm our abilities to react or if our early warning systems are not able to work effectively due to distractions or poor visibility of hazards.

Some people's early warning systems and reactions are better than others and they can change for a variety of reasons, e.g. medical conditions, age, alcohol and drugs. Try to provide a workplace and safety culture in which workers can work effectively and where their ability to react is not overly challenged.

Cleaning

Human factors in cleaning can have a big influence on the slip risk in a business. If there is a reliance on a particular cleaning practice to keep people off wet floors for instance, has the whole procedure been explained to those cleaners? Why do we do it this way? It may be possible for staff to improvise a quicker way to clean but overlook safety measures that they didn't appreciate were important.

As a general principle, training needs to cover 'why' and well as 'how' to be effective and tasks should have realistic timescales to avoid rushing. Consider passers-by too, as they may not take much notice of warning signs. They will take more notice of barriers. Take account of this behavior when planning the activity.

The influence of the workplace on human factors

The design of the workplace can have a huge influence on the likelihood of falls. Slip and trip hazards should be eliminated wherever practicable, e.g. by ensuring floor surfaces are slip resistant in common workplace conditions and the workplace is kept tidy and well maintained.

Having a safely designed workplace reduces the risk of falls for everyone without relying on individuals successfully spotting and safely negotiating a hazard. Where tasks are undertaken with little conscious thought, like walking and using stairs, anyone can be caught out by unexpected hazards. Consistent common design conventions help the mind to understand the environment with minimal conscious effort.

Slips and trips - Human factors

If the workplace is untidy, cluttered or poorly designed with multiple slip and trip hazards, we can become overloaded and we may become blind to the hazards. Try to avoid the need to climb over things and provide storage to help keep the workplace tidy.

Visibility

Our ability to see slip and trip hazards is vitally important to avoid falls, therefore workplaces should be suitably lit. Where trip hazards cannot be removed, such as changes in level or bunding around machinery, they should be highlighted using visual contrast. When reviewing the workplace, consider if hazards are obscured or are clearly visible?

Other influences

A poor safety culture can result in people ignoring or being unaware of hazards and working in a way that puts them and others at greater risk of a slip, trip or fall. Work activities should be well planned, and the appropriate equipment, training and time should be provided to allow tasks to be undertaken safely.

Training should be provided to all staff and, where appropriate, tailored to their specific role. Ensure that everyone is aware of potential hazards and knows what they are expected to do to keep themselves and others safe. Attempt to highlight that, although they are often seen as trivial or even amusing, falls can be very serious. There are likely to be some incidents of serious slips within any organization that can be used as examples.

It is important that workers feel empowered and know that they have the support of management to raise concerns and identify solutions. As well as being made aware of the existing procedures, processes and risk assessments that are relevant, they should be encouraged to look for improvements and undertake their own dynamic risk assessments. Their ideas should be valued, and they should be involved in the development of any new or revised procedures, processes or risk assessments.

Make sure employees know that their health and safety is taken seriously, and the organization is prepared to invest time and money to protect it. Make sure that any actions are consistent with the message - don't say one thing and do another.

Individual human factors

Walking faster increases the amount of grip an individual requires. If tasks require rushing from one place to another, the risk of slipping is increased. A good control might be to organize the workplace in a more streamlined manner, allowing staff to walk at a normal pace.

Studies have shown that if people are distracted by a conversation, perhaps on the phone, they will be less aware of their surroundings. The more challenging a conversation, the greater the distraction, so chatting about the weather might have little effect, but a detailed discussion about production numbers last week might be more distracting. Medical conditions and some medication can also impair cognition and slow reaction times, reducing our ability to react.

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