

Set 3

InfoSheet 3.5

Management of Volunteers

Risk Assessment and Risk Management

Virtually every organisation whether commercial, public or not-for-profit, carries elements of risk within its operations and activities. Risk management is about managing those risks in a way which ensures the safety, as far as possible, of employees, volunteers, assets and operations, and reduces any exposures to a level where they do not threaten the very existence of the organisation.

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Much of the process of risk management can be identified as the application of common sense. Most organisations already undertake at least some of the types of actions referred to in this InfoSheet, although few would recognise themselves to be involved in the discipline of risk management as such.

However, risk management is now more generally recognised as an effective tool in the running of an organisation. At the same time there is a growing awareness of the responsibilities of the people who have the task of controlling and running organisations. This is not only through increasing legislation but also as a result of the publication of the Turnbull and Cadbury reports which refer to good governance and the necessity of risk management.

The primary task of managing risk is to consider and assess every aspect of the organisation's operations in order to identify all risks and hazards to which the organisation and its paid staff and volunteers could be exposed with the object of:

- Identifying the risks and hazards which are significant.
- Eliminating or reducing these to an acceptable level
- Ensuring that where these can not be eliminated proper consideration is given to whether the organisation should carry or transfer those risks completely or partly, i.e. by taking out insurance.
- Integrating into their systems a practical procedure for on-going identification and control of potential areas of risk. To work this must have the full co-operation and understanding of the employees and volunteers.

There are of course various types of risks, e.g. destruction of the building by fire, hazards which could cause injury to employees or members of the public, or loss of funds through theft by employees or volunteers. Each one could be a source of substantial loss.

Organisations large and small have sustained serious losses where more thorough control of risks may have helped:

- A computer system of a charity failed because of incompatible software.
- A volunteer sustains a serious back-injury when lifting a service user.
- A volunteer liaison officer of a small charitable care home was virtually left in charge of a number of accounts and was able to persuade trusting colleagues to sign blank withdrawal forms which she used to steal money from the charity.
- Injuries, such as broken hips, have been sustained by volunteers running charity shops perhaps because the predominance of senior citizens had not been allowed for.

What the examples do not show is the 'iceberg effect' i.e. the hidden cost usually amounting to considerably more than the initial loss as a result of the diversion of valuable time in solving the problems and re-establishing the operations and/or reputation of the organisation.

So the first task is to identify risks and exposures and assess them as to the severity and frequency.

Risk assessment should cover such areas as:

Safety of employees, volunteers, clients/service users and third parties such as spectators.

Any dangers to the organisation's operations generally.

Risk assessment should reveal those situations that need addressing most.

The importance of risk assessment

Risk assessment is a task for which it is understandably difficult to find time but for which all too often time has had to be allocated after a potentially disastrous event has occurred. The advantages of utilising a risk management programme is that many of these potential incidents can be avoided or minimised.

From an insurance liability point of view, should an accident occur, it is important to be able to show written evidence of the potential risk and the steps taken to minimise them. In certain circumstances risk assessment is a legal requirement.

It is important to consider all the possibilities (not only probabilities) for the unlikely worst-case scenarios. An actual example of an organisation having to act as a result of carrying out risk assessment occurred when a medical charity assessed that within their organisation they had an exposure which, although very unlikely, could have resulted in a cost to them of millions of pounds and cessation of operations. They were able to transfer the risk to an insurer at a viable price. Previous to carrying out their assessment they were blinkered to the risks and possible repercussions.

It is wise for every organisation to be positive and construct a written risk management policy fully integrated into procedures with everyone understanding the reasons behind it and fully contributing.

The process of risk management and assessment

Decide the following:

Whether the activity/task/work is risky, e.g. is there a hazards from which somebody could be injured or caused illness?

Is there a risk from, for example:

- Display screen equipment
- Lifting, handling and carrying
- Using substances (i.e. cleaning fluids)
- Operating machinery
- Noise levels

Is there a risk that could impact on the organisations clients or service users? For example:

- Using volunteers without adequate training
- Using volunteers to carry out roles that are usually done by paid staff and which do not form part of the volunteers task description

Is there a risk which could affect the organisation's operations or assets? For example:

- Allowing people to handle cash
- Security and risk to contents
- Risk to buildings

Use the Sample Risk Assessment form provided with this pack (see Appendix IV)

From looking at the sample form you will see that risk assessment is simply a thorough examination of the tasks, location and other surrounding factors to ascertain whether there is anything that could cause harm.

Findings, and where necessary, actions taken must be recorded not only to confirm the assessment took place and risks were acted upon, but also to provide proof in the event of an accident.

Records should be kept for at least five years and a review take place on a regular basis when changes take place.

Health and Safety Policies

If your organisation has no employees, it may not be able to achieve the same standards of health and safety as required for employees in the short term. But by setting a timetable to aim to accomplish this, you will be demonstrating to your volunteers and the outside world the value you place on them and their efforts to support your organisation.

Health and Safety Policy

A health and safety policy is the foundation on which to develop health and safety procedures and practices. The policy announces the organisation's commitment towards good health and safety standards. The policy can help to clarify procedures and areas of responsibility. Employers with fewer than five employees are not obliged to have a policy, but are strongly advised to do so. If an organisation involves volunteers, they should always be included in the health and safety policy as a matter of good practice. The Health and Safety Executive has examples of model health and safety policies which can be used as a template.

Health and Safety Executive

For more information about all aspects of health and safety you can call the Health and Safety Executive Information Helpline on 08701 545 500. Open 8.30am-5pm Monday to Friday. You can also email them at hseinformationservices@natbrit.com or check the website at www.hse.gov.uk/. It also produces lots of useful publications, many of which are free of charge.