

## Business 2000

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### Good safety standards at work pay off for employers and staff

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Proper health and safety provision will help save lives and money, writes **John Downes**.

It is a fact of life that every year, tens of thousands of people are injured in workplace accidents in Ireland. In 2003 alone, according to the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), an estimated 20,900 persons suffered work-related injuries that required an absence from work for three days or more.

Furthermore, an estimated 18,400 persons experienced a work-related illness caused or made worse by their work, and which necessitated an absence of more than three days. Workplace health and safety also has a significant effect on the Irish economy, with the Small Firms Association (SFA) estimating that firms lost some €12 million in 2002 due to sickness and non-statutory leave.

Last July, a Galway construction company received a €500,000 fine - the largest ever imposed by the courts for breaches of health and safety regulations - following the death of a 25-year-old employee in a work accident.

Clearly, then, adequate health and safety provision is hugely important to any business. So what implications does this have for businesses here? The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act of 1989 requires that premises, equipment, systems of work and articles for use at work (including tools and chemicals) are all safe and without risk to the health of those using them.

The Act also requires all employers to prepare a written safety statement for their workplace. This is basically an action programme which sets out how health and safety is managed in the workplace.

Mr Jim Heffernan is a senior inspector and operations programme manager with the HSA. He points out that any health and safety statement has to be applicable to the particular premises to which it refers. For example, if a company expands its premises over the years, the statement needs to reflect these changes vis-à-vis health and safety.

"I would say about half of our inspections would be of construction sites," he says. "If you are talking about a small business where you don't have any major risk, for example, machinery or chemicals, you would still have to spell out what procedures are in place."

"Over the past 10 years, certainly looking at major employers (in the construction trade), the sites are a lot better, and the scaffolding is a lot better," he says. "But there are still significant problems with smaller businesses, and even some of the bigger ones are not perfect."

Yet according to the SFA, which has conducted a survey of some 565 of its members, employing around 15,300 staff, 87 per cent of respondents would see themselves as being very committed to improving health and safety in the workplace. However, the same research shows that 81 per cent actually have a safety statement in place, when in fact all places of work are required to do so by law.

So what are the problems for small businesses? The SFA's assistant director, Ms Patricia Callan, says that some of its members find it difficult to get advice on whether the statement which they may have produced themselves is adequate.

Another problem is employee attitudes to health and safety: small employers, in particular, find getting the message across to their employees - that health and safety has to be considered at all times - a real challenge. Furthermore, she says, many of the SFA's members find little or no correlation between good health and safety practices and lower insurance premiums.

However, the HSA's own research shows that some 90 per cent of people whose businesses were inspected in 2002 believe this had a positive impact on their workplace. It maintains that businesses who introduce good health and safety practices in their workplace will see significant benefits.

Included among these are a reduction in absenteeism due to workplace accidents or ill-health, and a decrease in the number of claims made against them. These all in turn have an impact on profitability.

It also says it is working closely with the insurance industry to find a way of linking good health and safety practice with lower insurance costs.

Another aspect to health and safety in the workplace is the issue of stress and/or workplace bullying. Longer working hours can increase the likelihood of stress-related health problems, something which EU legislation such as the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997, with its maximum working week of 48 hours, has sought to address.

However, recent CSO statistics reveal that, in Ireland at least, the percentage of workers working long hours has in fact been declining. Measures have also been introduced to combat bullying in the workplace. In recent years, for example, the HSA has established a bullying response unit, and published a code of practice for all Irish workplaces.

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HSA inspectors can also request the anti-bullying policy from workplaces they visit. The issue of health and safety in the workplace is clearly one which continues to be of concern to employers and employees alike.

Employers, on the one hand, have legitimate concerns about implementation of the regulations; employees, on the other, have the right to work in a safe and productive environment.

Useful website: [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)

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