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Contact details:

Pat: 082 442 8521 (08h00 – 16h30)

Email: p.wessels@topcompliance.co.za

Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (HIRA): A legal and practical imperative for every workplace

In today's fast-paced and complex working environments, safety cannot be left to chance. Employers and employees alike bear the responsibility of ensuring that the workplace is safe, legally compliant, and structured in a way that prevents harm. At the heart of any proactive Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) programme lies a powerful, preventative process: Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (HIRA). This process is not just a recommended best practice it is a legal requirement in South Africa under the [Occupational Health and Safety Act, 85 of 1993](#). Specifically, Section 8(2)(d) mandates that every employer must identify potential hazards in the workplace and assess the associated risks to ensure the safety and health of employees as far as reasonably practicable.

A hazard is defined as any source, situation, or act with the potential to cause injury, ill health, or damage to property or the environment. Hazards can be physical (e.g. noise, heat, electricity), chemical (e.g. toxic fumes, cleaning agents), biological (e.g. bacteria, viruses), ergonomic (e.g. poor posture, repetitive strain), or psychosocial (e.g. high stress, harassment). A risk, by contrast, is the likelihood that exposure to a hazard will lead to harm. For example, a spill of oil on a workshop floor is a hazard; the risk is someone slipping and injuring themselves. Understanding this distinction is crucial, as it forms the foundation of a meaningful HIRA process.

The legal framework further distinguishes between incidents and accidents. An accident is an unplanned event that results in injury, illness, or property damage, whereas an incident includes both accidents and near misses, events that could have caused harm but did not. According to [General Administrative Regulation 9](#), employers are required to record and investigate both to prevent recurrence. For instance, a scaffold tool falling without hitting anyone is an incident; if it strikes and injures someone, it is an accident. Both must be addressed as part of ongoing risk management.

Similarly, it's important to differentiate between unsafe acts and unsafe conditions. An unsafe act refers to behaviour that increases the risk of an incident, such as bypassing a safety mechanism or failing to wear PPE. An unsafe condition involves environmental or equipment-related hazards, such as exposed wiring or inadequate lighting. During a HIRA, both must be carefully identified and addressed. For example, a forklift driver operating at unsafe speeds is committing an unsafe act, while blocked emergency exits constitute an unsafe condition. Both increase workplace risk and must be mitigated accordingly.

Conducting a HIRA is not a once-off or box-ticking exercise. According to [Construction Regulations 2014, Regulation 9](#), a baseline risk assessment must be carried out by a competent person, someone with the

necessary knowledge, training, and experience. Competency ensures not only compliance but also a practical understanding of the hazards involved. For example, assessing the risks of working at heights requires knowledge of anchorage systems, weather impacts, physical fatigue, and proper use of PPE.

Training in HIRA is essential to empower both safety personnel and general employees. Trained individuals are better equipped to identify hidden hazards, anticipate indirect risks, and implement effective control measures. This aligns with Section 14 of the OHS Act, which outlines the duty of employees to take reasonable care for their own health and safety as well as that of others. A trained laboratory assistant, for example, is more likely to notice improperly stored chemicals or gas leaks before an incident occurs. Training builds confidence and fosters a culture of safety in the workplace.

Control measures identified through a HIRA should follow the Hierarchy of Controls, which prioritises interventions from most to least effective:

- Elimination: Remove the hazard entirely (e.g. discontinuing the use of a dangerous chemical).
- Substitution or Isolation: Replace the hazard with something less harmful or isolate it (e.g. use water-based paint instead of solvent-based).
- Engineering Controls: Modify equipment or environments to reduce risk (e.g. install machine guards, enhance ventilation).
- Administrative Controls: Change how people work, including safe work procedures, training, job rotation, and signage.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): Use protective gear only as a last line of defence (e.g. gloves, masks, goggles).

Consider a woodworking shop where sawdust poses an inhalation risk. Installing dust extraction systems would be an engineering control, while providing dust masks would be a PPE measure. Similarly, in a school science lab, expired chemicals present an unsafe condition. Lighting a Bunsen burner without checking for gas leaks is an unsafe act. A student tripping over an extension cord is a near miss. Each example illustrates how HIRA, when done competently and routinely, prevents harm and improves outcomes.

HIRA must also be a dynamic process, reviewed and updated regularly, especially when introducing new equipment, changing procedures, or following any incident. It should form part of the workplace's broader safety strategy, feeding into training programmes, emergency response planning, and incident investigation procedures.

Ultimately, HIRA is about foresight and responsibility. Employers who embrace this process demonstrate their commitment to not only legal compliance but also to the genuine protection of their workforce. The result is a safer, healthier, and more productive work environment for all.

Workplace safety begins with awareness. It thrives with competence, and it is sustained through proactive, systematic, and continuous action. [For HIRA training, user-friendly templates](#), or assistance with developing or reviewing your risk assessments, contact [Top Compliance \(Pty\) Ltd.](#)

Together, we can make safety second nature.

Should you require further assistance or advice feel free to email us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

				
<u>Occupational health and safety auditing and consulting</u>		<u>Online safety shop</u>		
				
<u>Appointments, checklists and templates</u>	<u>First aid equipment</u>	<u>Signage</u>	<u>Legal posters</u>	<u>Safety Equipment</u>

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - <u>https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/</u>		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	Online	Onsite Excluding travel
<u>Safety representative – Legal Liability</u>	R980.00	R1300.00
<u>The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability</u>	R1250.00	R 1730.00
<u>Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment</u>	R735.00	R875.00
<u>Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638</u>	R735.00	R875.00
<u>Basic Ladder Safety Course</u>	R735.00	R810.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
<u>Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting</u>	R735.00	R875.00
<u>Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning</u>	R810.00	R950.00

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ONSITE TRAINING
First Aid Courses:

Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days
Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days
Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
Basic Ladder Safety	6 hours
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	6 hours
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	1 day