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The Importance of Checklists

Turning Risk Assessments into Consistent Workplace Action

Checklists are among the most practical tools available to safety representatives, employees and management. However, an effective checklist cannot simply be downloaded, copied from another workplace or drafted from general assumptions. It must be based on the actual hazards, activities, equipment and working conditions present at the workplace.

The correct process is:

Hazard identification and risk assessment → Safe working procedure → Checklist → Training → Supervision → Review → Improve

When this sequence is followed, a checklist becomes more than an administrative document. It becomes a practical control measure that helps employees complete essential safety checks, identify defects and take corrective action before an incident occurs.

Start with Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment

Before developing a checklist, the employer must identify the hazards associated with the work and determine the precautions required to protect employees and other persons who may be affected.

Section 8(2)(d) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 requires the employer, as far as reasonably practicable, to establish:

- the hazards attached to work being performed;
- the risks to health and safety arising from those hazards;
- the precautionary measures that should be taken; and
- the means necessary to apply those precautions.

A suitable Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment, commonly referred to as a HIRA, should consider:

- the task, activity, area, machinery or equipment;
- who may be exposed;
- how injury or ill health could occur;
- the severity and likelihood of the possible outcome;
- existing controls;

- additional controls required; and
- the person responsible for implementation.

Without a proper HIRA, a checklist may contain irrelevant questions while failing to address the most significant risks.

For example, a vehicle checklist that simply asks whether there are “leaks” is too vague. It should identify the relevant inspection points, such as engine oil, coolant, brake fluid, fuel or hydraulic-fluid leaks. Similarly, asking whether the “hooter” has been checked does not confirm whether it is present, operational and sufficiently audible.

HIRAs Must Be Conducted by [Suitably Trained and Competent Persons](#)

A HIRA is not merely a form to be completed. It must be conducted or facilitated by a person who is suitably trained, competent and familiar with the workplace, activities, equipment and hazards being assessed.

The person conducting the HIRA should understand:

- hazard identification principles;
- the difference between a hazard and a risk;
- the workplace risk-rating method;
- severity and likelihood;
- the hierarchy of controls;
- applicable legislation, standards and manufacturer instructions;
- how to identify persons who may be exposed; and
- how to record, communicate and review the assessment.

Where the person conducting the HIRA lacks the necessary knowledge, training or practical experience, significant hazards may be overlooked, risks may be incorrectly rated and unsuitable controls may be recommended. This may leave employees, contractors, learners, visitors or members of the public exposed to preventable harm.

The level of competence required should be appropriate to the nature and complexity of the assessment. A general office HIRA may require different knowledge from an assessment involving machinery, hazardous chemicals, electrical work, construction, ergonomics or confined spaces.

The HIRA process should also involve employees who understand the work being assessed. Supervisors, safety representatives, operators, maintenance personnel and employees performing the task can provide valuable information about:

- how the work is actually performed;
- routine and non-routine activities;
- previous incidents and near misses;
- recurring defects;
- abnormal or emergency situations; and
- controls that may be impractical or ineffective.

Employee participation does not remove the employer’s responsibility to ensure that the HIRA is suitable and sufficient.

Section 8(2)(e) requires the employer to provide the information, instructions, training and supervision necessary to ensure the health and safety of employees. Section 13 further requires employees to be informed of the hazards associated with their work and the precautions that must be taken.

Develop Safe Working Procedures

Once hazards have been identified and suitable controls selected, the requirements should be incorporated into a safe working procedure.

The HIRA identifies what may go wrong. The safe working procedure explains how the work must be performed safely.

A safe working procedure should normally address:

- preparation before starting work;
- competence and authorisation requirements;
- equipment and tools to be used;
- guards and safety devices;
- personal protective equipment;
- the correct sequence of work;
- prohibited actions;
- emergency arrangements;
- defect-reporting procedures; and
- shutdown, isolation and housekeeping requirements.

A procedure that has been filed but not communicated, understood or implemented does not provide an effective control.

Employees must therefore be trained on the procedure and understand the hazards, required precautions and consequences of not following the agreed method of work.

Draft the Checklist from the Identified Controls

The checklist should be developed only after the HIRA and safe working procedure have been completed.

Its purpose is to confirm that the required precautions are in place and that critical actions have not been overlooked. It acts as both:

- a hazard control, by prompting the required inspection or action; and
- a verification record, by showing whether the check was completed.

A good checklist should be:

- specific to the task, area or equipment;
- based on the site-specific HIRA;
- aligned with the safe working procedure;
- written in clear and unambiguous language;
- arranged in a logical inspection sequence;
- appropriate to the knowledge of the person completing it;
- completed at a defined frequency;
- linked to a defect-reporting process;
- reviewed by a responsible supervisor; and
- retained as evidence.

Where appropriate, each item should provide meaningful response options, such as:

Compliant | Non-compliant | Not applicable | Corrective action required

The checklist should also provide space for:

- the defect or unsafe condition identified;
- immediate action taken;
- the person responsible for corrective action;
- the target completion date;
- confirmation that the matter was closed out; and
- the names, signatures and dates of the persons completing and verifying the inspection.

Are Checklists Specifically Required by Law?

There is no single general provision in the OHS Act stating that every workplace must use a checklist for every activity.

However, checklists are often one of the most practical ways of demonstrating compliance with the employer's broader duties under sections 8 and 13. They may also be required or supported by specific regulations, manufacturer instructions, inspection requirements, maintenance programmes and the workplace's own risk-control system.

Checklists may be appropriate for:

- workplace inspections;
- machinery pre-use checks;
- forklifts and vehicles;
- ladders and access equipment;
- first-aid boxes;
- emergency exits and firefighting equipment;
- electrical equipment;
- kitchens and food-handling areas;
- playgrounds and swimming pools;
- chemical storage;
- personal protective equipment;
- contractor activities; and
- planned preventative maintenance.

A completed checklist does not, by itself, prove that the workplace was safe. Its value depends on whether:

- the HIRA was suitable;
- the checklist addressed the actual risks;
- the inspection was genuinely completed;
- the person conducting the inspection was competent;
- defects were accurately recorded; and
- corrective action was completed and verified.

A checklist completed without conducting the inspection, or completed in advance, creates a false record and may conceal serious hazards.

Training Must Support the Checklist

Employees should not simply be instructed to "complete the form." They must understand what they are checking, why it matters, what the required standard is and what action must be taken when something is wrong.

Training should cover:

- the relevant hazards and risks;
- the applicable safe working procedure;
- each checklist item;
- how to conduct the inspection safely;
- the required standard;
- the difference between compliant and non-compliant conditions;
- when equipment must be removed from service;
- how defects must be reported;
- who must be notified; and
- the importance of accurate and truthful records.

The person completing the checklist does not necessarily need to be the person who conducted the HIRA. However, that person must be trained and competent to understand the inspection requirements and recognise defects or unsafe conditions.

Training is particularly important for operators, drivers, maintenance personnel, supervisors, safety representatives and employees inspecting specialised equipment.

Refresher training should be provided where:

- equipment or processes change;
- the HIRA or procedure is revised;
- new hazards are identified;
- checklist quality is poor;
- defects are repeatedly overlooked;
- an incident or near miss occurs; or
- records are inaccurate or completed without a genuine inspection.

The Role of Safety Representatives

Safety representatives should not be expected to carry the employer's legal responsibility for health and safety. Their role is to inspect, monitor, report and make recommendations.

Under section 18 of the OHS Act, safety representatives may:

- review the effectiveness of health and safety measures;
- identify potential hazards;
- examine the causes of incidents;
- investigate employee complaints;
- inspect the workplace; and
- make representations to the employer or health and safety committee.

Checklists can assist safety representatives to:

- structure workplace inspections;
- identify recurring hazards;
- verify whether previous findings were corrected;
- identify trends;
- raise unresolved concerns; and
- make practical recommendations.

Safety representatives must be appropriately trained and their checklists must be based on the workplace risk profile. A generic checklist that is not aligned with the site's actual activities and hazards will have limited value.

Management Must Review and Act

Management remains responsible for ensuring that suitable systems, resources, training and supervision are provided.

Management should:

- ensure that HIRAs are conducted by suitably trained and competent persons;
- approve suitable risk assessments and procedures;
- involve employees who understand the work;
- ensure that checklists are relevant and understandable;
- allocate time for inspections;
- review completed records;
- investigate recurring defects;
- provide resources for corrective action;
- verify that actions have been closed;
- address false records or repeated non-compliance; and
- revise the HIRA where checklist findings show that controls are ineffective.

Section 19 provides for health and safety committees to make recommendations to the employer and discuss incidents and matters affecting health and safety. Checklist findings, recurring defects and unresolved corrective actions should therefore form part of meaningful committee discussions.

From Paper Exercise to Prevention Tool

A checklist is effective only when it leads to action.

It should not become a repetitive tick-box exercise completed merely to satisfy an auditor. Management and safety representatives should periodically confirm whether:

- the HIRA remains suitable and current;
- the checklist questions remain relevant;
- employees understand the required standards;
- inspections are being conducted properly;
- defects are reported honestly;
- corrective actions are completed on time; and
- the checklist is actually reducing risk.

Well-designed checklists improve consistency, support supervision, identify deterioration before failure occurs and provide evidence that workplace controls are being implemented.

Their effectiveness depends on the process behind them:

- A suitably trained and competent person identifies and assesses the hazards.
- A safe working procedure explains the required precautions.
- A trained and competent person uses the checklist to verify that those precautions are being applied.
- Management reviews the findings and ensures that corrective action is completed.

This article provides general occupational health and safety guidance. It should be applied together with the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993, applicable regulations, manufacturer requirements and the workplace’s site-specific risk assessments and procedures.

For more information, please contact us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

				
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Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	Online	Onsite Excluding travel
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00
Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R875.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00
First aid		
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures – THEORY MODULE	R400.00	-

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses		
Safety representative – Legal Liability		
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability		
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment		
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638		
Basic Ladder Safety Course		
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting		
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning		

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