

risk assessment top tips

Risk assessment means taking a systematic approach to looking at what could cause harm to people. By assessing risk, you know where potential problems and dangers lie, and can therefore take measures to prevent harm.

Organisations have a duty of care towards their volunteers. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 also places a duty on employers to assess risk to those who may be affected by their activities, which would include volunteers.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) recommends a five-step approach to risk assessment.

1. Look for the hazards.
2. Decide who might be harmed and how.
3. For each hazard, evaluate the chance (big or small) of harm actually being caused and decide whether existing precautions are adequate or more should be done.
4. Record the significant findings of your risk assessment, eg the main risks and the measures you have taken to deal with them.
5. Review your assessment from time to time and revise if necessary.

some health and safety jargon

Hazard: Something with the potential to cause injury or damage, ie something that could be dangerous.

Risk: The probability of the hazard causing harm, combined with the degree of seriousness of the consequences. In other words, how likely and how bad?

So, the first step is to isolate an activity and identify who and what would be involved. This means creating a list of hazards. It helps to involve people actually engaged in the activity. At this point, don't think about how serious or trivial the hazard is, just list everything you think could potentially go wrong.

Then comes assessing the actual risk. It may help to break this down into **how likely is it to happen?** and **how serious could it be if it did?**

Then attribute points to each. You can then use the points to see how serious the risk associated with the hazard is.

For example:

You could have a point scale of 1–4, with 4 being very likely to happen, or very serious consequences depending on the context.

Hazard: Volunteers are tightrope walking over crocodile pools and face the risk of falling in.

You score: How likely is it that the volunteers will fall in? – 4
How serious is the risk? – 4
Multiplying them together gives a level of risk out of 16.

Hazard: Volunteers are cleaning the clubhouse with feather dusters and face the risk of breaking their arms?

You score: How likely are the volunteers to break their arms? – 1
How serious is the risk? – 1
Here the level of risk is 1.

If doing this as a group exercise, it can help to use a grid (as in the above cases, 4 x 4 and 1 x 1) to help visualise the levels of risk for each hazard.

The points scoring system gives you a reasonable guide to prioritising when taking measures to reduce risk.

Having done this, it makes sense to record everything in a table. This might list each hazard, the points you have assigned them, the level of risk this suggests and the steps you will take to reduce risk.

Please note: This is only one suggested method of risk assessment. Some people prefer not to use such a points system. It would be equally fine to simply list hazards, prioritise them and record the steps taken to lessen the risks.

taking measures

The entire risk assessment exercise is worthless if you do not take actions based upon it.

For each risk, identify a measure or measures that will either eliminate the risk or reduce it to acceptable levels.

There are many ways of doing this. However, they largely boil down to three broad categories:

- Inform – provide adequate information or training to volunteers (or staff, or clients, depending on the situation).
- Change the way you do the activity to avoid the hazard or lower the risk (that is, take physical measures – use safety equipment, increase supervision etc).

- Stop the activity. If it's still too dangerous, even after training and changing the way volunteers work, then don't do it.

Say, for example, you have identified that volunteers lifting boxes have a high risk of injury. You could:

- avoid the activity altogether
- change working practices – make sure that two people lift one box, rather than one person
- give volunteers sufficient information to avoid the hazard – guidance on lifting techniques
- address the issue through training – eg showing volunteers how to lift safely
- provide better supervision – making sure that someone is monitoring how lifting is carried out
- ask volunteers if they have a history of back problems or if they believe they are physically fit enough to carry out the lifting.

In practice, there is likely to be a combination of the latter six measures.

Top Tip: Keep a record of the significant hazards and what you've done to avoid them, and remember Point 4 of the HSE risk assessment guidelines.

Top Tip: Regularly review the risk assessment and how the activity is being carried out on the ground. Circumstances change, people bend rules or get complacent.

further information and useful contacts

Health and Safety Executive

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For further information regarding health and safety, view the 'Health and Safety of Volunteers' Top Tips at www.runningsports.org

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