

# The dangers of “cheap and cheerful” Fire Risk Assessments

A personal perspective by Paul Bryant

## Just Red Tape...

*“UK Fire Safety Legislation has added yet another layer of red tape onto the business sector already trying to survive the recession. For the last four or more years, those deemed to be “responsible persons” are required, by law, to ensure that their offices, shops, factories, etc, are, as far as possible, kept safe from the affects of fire, and that a fire risk assessment must be undertaken annually to ensure this is so.*

*For most business managers or landlords who do not have the knowledge or experience of assessing fire safety, this will mean hiring a person who is competent to undertake the assessment, at additional cost. Fortunately, there is a great deal of competition from those deemed to be “competent persons”; those who have the appropriate levels of expertise. This competition has created a situation where it is possible to get a risk assessment carried out for a relatively modest sum. Therefore, shop around, there are some very good deals out there.....”*

Many may find the statement above discourteous of the fire safety profession, yet most are also in little doubt that such views are commonplace. Many businesses and landlords will go to great lengths to find the best deal possible to save money. Some may even secretly prefer that the fire risk assessor is not *so competent*; who wants to receive a list of expensive corrective actions? It could even be said that there will be some who will not be too bothered about what the assessment finds, but more that they have a report.

Unfortunately, the provision of fire risk assessments have become something of a commodity in some circles; *pile ‘em high and sell ‘em cheap!* Many professional persons and companies, with persons properly competent to undertake fire risk assessments, often lose out to much cheaper competition. Is it therefore the case that this area of legislation has contributed to the thinking; “cheapest is best” ?

## The Shoe Shop Salesman...

Is it not inconceivable that, for example, you could approach a shoe shop salesman, offer them £50, and ask them to undertake a fire risk assessment of their shop premises. If they are provided with an appropriate check list, they may even do a reasonable job. They may be able to identify if the escape routes are safe and are not clogged up with shoe boxes. They may identify that portable fire extinguishers are present and of the right type and possibly that the label confirms that they have been serviced.

There are many others who do earn money from undertaking fire risk assessments; some who may do a good job and others who could miss some key risk factors. These may include the person who once sold portable fire extinguishers and saw this new market open up or someone who undertakes health and safety risk assessments and believes that fire safety can't be that

different. There will of course be the occasional operational fire fighter who seeks to supplement their income.

Third party certification and approvals schemes have been developed to give responsible persons piece of mind when choosing a fire risk assessor. These include schemes by the Fire Industry Association, the Institute of Fire Prevention Officers, the Institution of Fire Engineers, and business organizations such as Warrington. However, in order for these schemes to have teeth, there will need to be support from the various business associations representing the various sectors of business affected by the legislation. This will help stamp out the “cowboy” assessments and give the professional organizations more of a chance. This will also help enhance the general quality of assessments, which has to be good for everyone, and thus ensure that collectively, we meet the letter and the *spirit* of modern UK fire legislation.

## **How specialist should you be?**

The real concern is that, even with a good general knowledge of fire safety, prevention and protection, there will be many who will not be equipped to properly assess more complex buildings. As a good example, I have seen checklists used that include a statement to confirm whether or not an automatic fire detection installation is installed. I assume that the assessor simply enters a Yes or No. Many of us know that this in itself is of very little help on its own, especially when fire detection could be the cornerstone of fire protection provisions. More appropriate would be confirmation of the design, installation and maintenance criteria. Does the design comply to British Standards such as BS 5839 Part 1? Is there an installation certificate? Is the system being properly maintained? Then there is the next level of detail such as consideration of the effectiveness of the cause and effect programming, the false alarm criteria, and so on.

We can then advance the idea to other areas of fire protection such as sprinkler systems, smoke control systems and of course there are the intricacies associated with proper validation of fire compartmentation. The next level still are even more specialist issues, such as the ability to understand the evacuation strategy for large and complex buildings and how the original fire strategy is still fit for purpose.

In some of our major buildings, a fire risk assessment for the protection of the occupants should really consider all these points. Yet, can we expect the assessors to be properly competent in all these areas? Will even the third party approvals schemes validate persons for such high level assignments?

Perhaps the answer for the higher end of building assessment is to ensure that the building has a properly constructed and validated fire strategy and that the annual assessment is undertaken by persons, or a team of persons, able to ensure that the strategy continues to be in place and is also fit for purpose. Much less than this then there is unlikely to be the confidence that the fire provisions are truly fit for purpose. British Standard Specification PAS 911 covers the subject of fire strategies and highlights just how much there is to be considered.

## **Recording your findings and taking action....**

How the results of an assessment are recorded will play a large part in ensuring that any non-compliance is properly attended to. Where risk assessments are presented as completed forms, there may be the tendency to record findings in an abridged version with no real justification for the findings. Consequently, the information may not be sufficient to properly attend to issues. In

the case of scoring systems, the situation may be even more confusing for the responsible person. What do they do with a “score of 9” – do they take action or not?

It is vital that the assessment, is complete, covers all aspects of the building pertaining to fire safety, and is clearly prepared so that action items can be understood and, better still, prioritised. Even with the best will in the world, a completed paper based report will be filed “in George’s filing cabinet”. George then leaves the company or is promoted and the report and all the actions arising may be forgotten about. It is in the management of the findings of the assessment and the undertaking of remedial actions that compliance with the law is ensured. Consequently, the process for monitoring compliance needs to be robust; a difficult exercise for one large building but a nightmare if you are the responsible person for a portfolio of properties. Solutions are being developed for this and mostly revolve around a computerized process.

## Litigation....

Recession or not, the appetite right now and into the future is likely to be for increased litigation. Saving a bit of money at the front end is unlikely to go down well as an excuse in Court. Those who would pay more per hour to a plumber fixing the central heating, than to someone undertaking a life safety assessment of their premises, need to rethink their strategy.

*I can be contacted at: [paulbryant@kingfell.com](mailto:paulbryant@kingfell.com)*

