

### WHO'S COMPETENT?

#### How safe are DIY fire risk assessments?

**When the RR(FS)O [Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order] comes into force in April 2006, it will be the most significant overhaul of fire safety legislation in the UK for decades. One of the most talked about changes is that any "competent person" will be able to carry out a fire risk assessment on a building, no matter its size or complexity. Many fire safety professionals are questioning if anyone who has not been properly trained can ever be truly "competent". As Paul Bryant, CEO of Kingfell Plc, explains, the answer to the question could mean the difference between life or death.**

For many years the fire protection of buildings has been dealt with through a somewhat loose association between the fire service, the system designer, and the building owner or occupier. The fire brigade was involved through inspections and the issuing of Fire Certificates; the system designer through Codes of Practice and fire strategies; and the owner or occupier through the routine testing of detection, alarm and suppression systems. Now, all that is about to change! Under the RR(FS)O inspection by the fire brigade and the issuing of a Fire Certificate is consigned to the history books. In its place is a non-prescriptive approach to fire safety based around fire risk assessments and the application of fire safety engineering principles.

#### **RESPONSIBLE & COMPETENT.**

So, from April, the responsibility for fire safety switches to the building occupier. Under the RR(FS)O a "responsible person" for each building will be required to carry out an assessment of the fire risks and take steps to reduce or remove the risks. The term "competency" is key to the new legislation but, like the term "responsible person", what precisely does it mean?

There are many definitions, but in essence, competency means the overall capability of a person or organisation to undertake and complete a particular task. In the case of people working in the fire safety business, it could be the competency of the system designer to fulfil the requirements of the initial fire risk assessment; the competency of the installer to ensure that the system is installed in line with the relevant standards; or the competency of the individual maintenance engineer to ensure that the system remains in full working order. But there is also the competency of the person undertaking the fire risk assessment to consider.

Under the RR(FS)O employers will have to assign the task to someone. While some larger organisations do have a professionally trained fire safety specialist on the payroll, this is far from the norm. So the question must be asked: who is really competent to carry out these assessments?

Surely it is reasonable to suppose that where life and property are at risk, such a person has to be formally trained to enable him or her to gauge what the greatest fire risks are to a building, and how they can be overcome. The worrying concern for many professional fire safety practitioners is that the qualifications required for a person to be deemed "competent" for this very responsible task are still yet to be defined.

### **ADVICE & GUIDANCE.**

I am the first to admit that for a small, simple building, there is excellent guidance available to help organisations comply with the new legislation. For example, Colin Todd's "Fire Risk Assessment: Guidance and a Recommended Methodology" is available from most bookshops. The book offers a structured approach to conducting and recording significant findings of fire risk assessments, as a basis for ensuring "adequate" fire precautions.

The Internet also throws out a number of useful sites. Officialdocuments.co.uk features an employer's guide to fire safety that is split into three, extremely detailed steps. There is even a qualification available, should a company wish to give its staff more detailed training.

Developed jointly by the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health [NEBOSH] and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health [IOSH], the new qualification is aimed at people responsible for undertaking fire risk assessments. The course covers a wide range of topics, from identifying hazards to emergency planning, and from principles of fire and explosion to workplace fire

precautions. Unfortunately though, this qualification will help employers do little more than “competently” adhere to the legal requirements.

## **THE BIGGER PICTURE.**

However, no one seems to have considered larger and more complex buildings or campus sites. To start with, it is an awful burden to place on the shoulders of someone whose only knowledge on the subject has probably come from a book. It is indeed alarming that we are prepared to give so much responsibility to someone with so very little understanding and no experience; and for “adequate” fire precautions to be sufficient!

So what about the more complex buildings? Once a member of staff has been appointed, the employer and the building owner have little option but to put their faith in him or her. But how does this “competent” person know the level of protection that is required; how can he be sure that the detection, alarm and suppression equipment is suitable for the risk; who can he turn to for advice? Frankly, the list of challenges is endless.

Each building is unique. For example, it may never have anyone sleeping in it, but people may regularly stay late into the night. Open plan buildings may allow smoke to spread faster than those with cellular offices. The “competent” person must be aware if there are any hazardous materials being stored in the building, and where disabled people are likely to be working or visiting. Again, the catalogue of points to consider is never-ending.

Historically many fire protection systems have been installed on the basis of the minimum requirement, and are all too often not well maintained after installation. Many building owners and occupiers think that a fire is an unlikely event and aim to spend the least possible amount on a fire protection system and its aftercare. However, fires in the UK cost a staggering £6.5billion a year, and result in 75 percent of the effected businesses never recovering. This alone should demonstrate just how dangerous is such an approach to fire protection.

## **THE WAY FORWARD.**

Many years ago the word “architect” became protected, in part no doubt to safeguard the public from buildings designed by inadequately trained individuals. Surely then, with more people in the UK being killed and injured by fire than by building collapses, it is time for similar action to be taken with fire safety engineering. Just as with building design, many small structures are built without the aid of an architect, so fire risk assessment for smaller premises could be left in

the hands of less skilled and experienced employees. But for larger buildings, surely it is time for a professional standard to be set.

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