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WORK MATTERS

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Risk Assessment: A fundamental tool in OSH

A risk assessment can be defined as a systematic process of identifying hazards and evaluating any associated risks within a workplace, then implementing reasonable control measures to remove or reduce them. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2004 (amended) of Trinidad and Tobago, “every employer shall make a safe and suitable annual assessment of the risks to the safety and health of his employees.” However, section 13A (3) states that the employer shall only keep a record of such where he/she employs twenty-five (25) or more persons at his/her establishment. The Act also states that a Risk Assessment should be conducted annually, but good industry practice dictates that it should also be reviewed where there is a change in operations or if new equipment is brought into the organization.

Although it is mandated by law that only organizations with twenty-five (25) or more employees should keep record of the assessment, it is encouraged that all organizations should practice record keeping in accordance with section 75 of the Act. It is imperative that all organizations carry out a risk assessment because it not only seeks the wellbeing of their employees but it also seeks the employer interest in that it can mitigate the risk of a potential hazard and thus save the company from liability. Liability resulting from an injured worker may come in one or more forms to an organization in the aftermath of an accident.. It may be in the form of having to pay sick leave, increased insurance premiums, fines from local authorities, compensation from the company to the injured party/parties or damage to the company’s reputation. Accidents may also impair industrial relations with employees and their bargaining units and can also have an effect on employee morale and productivity.

A risk assessment is not only an essential tool in preventing liability but it aids in creating awareness of various hazards that are present in the workplace. Once this information is gathered, the professional can then analyze the data which has been collected and develop various control measures for hazards that present sub-

stantial levels of risk. This information can be presented to the executives of the organization, and they can act accordingly by prioritizing the hazards by risk, from high to low, to mitigate the risks that present danger.

When conducting a risk assessment, an organization must seek to hire competent persons who have relevant experience in the field in an effort to ensure the assessment is suitable and sufficient. The individual must be able to determine after a comprehensive examination of the organization’s physical environment and their daily routines, anything which can be a potential hazard to the employees, visitors or to the company itself that can lead to damage or loss of property.

In larger organizations, risk assessments can be broken down into various categories such as fire risk assessment, manual handling risk assessment, and display screen risk assessment. Where there are production lines, a risk assessment can be done for each line. Smaller organizations with a lower risk profile can carry out general risk assessments for their facility. The informal sector in Trinidad and Tobago is one that contributes significantly to the country and accounts for approximately 26%-33% of the economy. In this regard, there is the need for compliance by those in the informal economy in terms of employee health and safety given that workers in this sector stands to lose the most if they were to become victims of poor workplace safety. Those businesses that operate in this sector should practice carrying out an annual risk assessment and also seek advice from safety consultants on how they can continuously improve the safety culture at their place of work.

In the United Kingdom the Health and Safety at work Act 1974 mandates that an employer who has employed five (5) or more persons at his place of business should carry out a risk assessment. In Trinidad and Tobago, our OSH Act states that every employer shall carry out one but only those who employ twenty-five (25) or more should keep a record in accordance with Section 75. Special consideration should be placed on this section

when the Act is being examined for amendments. Once this provision is amended, it will not only require that most businesses do a risk assessment but it will also ensure that those who work in small businesses are covered by the Act because their employer is mandated to do a risk assessment and also keep the records. This will add to worker protection given the requirement that employers must also abide by all of the other statutory obligations that are provisioned in the Act.

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