

# Emergency!



The OHS Act and emergency management services stipulate that companies must ensure that their workforce is trained in fire fighting, first aid and evacuation. Training and monitoring are therefore vital.

by Alastair Farish, Action Training Academy

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), more than 2 million people die from occupational accidents or work-related diseases every year. The Department of Labour (DoL) reports that occupational accidents and diseases cost South Africa in

the region of 3.5% of GDP, which translates to approximately R30 billion.

The safety of one's workplace varies enormously according to country, economic sector and social group. One thing is certain though: regardless of these factors, the possibility of being confronted with an

unexpected emergency is a reality in any of today's evolving work environments. Creating a work environment that is healthy, safe and prepared for emergencies gives workers the power to act when disaster strikes.

Companies may think they are prepared for emergencies such as heart attacks, where first-aiders need to perform CPR on a fellow employee, or a fire or gas leak requiring a building evacuation. However, these scenarios necessitate a structured approach to health and safety that is aligned with the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act (No 85 of 1993), and the applicable South African Bureau of Standards (SABS) regulations:

- **SABS 0400 (Section T Fire Protection):** This regulation looks at aspects such as the building's occupancy classification, how many extinguishers there are per square metre, the number of people per square metre and the location of the extinguishers within the building.
- **SABS 0139 (Fire Protection Planning):** This regulation looks at emergency evacuation routes and their width, the number of people the staircases can handle, and how many routes there should be per floor and throughout the entire building, depending on occupancy.
- **SABS 1475 (Fire Fighting Equipment):** This regulation looks at aspects such as how to service fire extinguishers, hose reels and hydrants, including the required flow rate.

## Steps for preventing catastrophe

### Health and safety training

Health and safety training consists of first aid, fire fighting, emergency evacuation and various other health and safety courses. According to the OHS Act and emergency management services, companies must ensure that their workforce is trained in fire fighting, first aid and evacuation.

There have been instances in which all the first aiders for an organisation are located in one building, but it is important that the trained health and safety team is evenly spread out across the organisation's building structure. Take, for example, a large organisation that is spread across 10 building blocks. If someone has a heart attack in building number eight, it is essential that there be a person trained in first aid in that same building.

If someone suffers cardiac arrest, artificial ventilation should be administered within four minutes if irreversible tissue damage





to the brain is to be avoided. South Africa's emergency management services typically arrive on the scene of an emergency within 10 to 12 minutes, which is too late. Best practice therefore dictates that it is favourable to have a first-aider located within four to six minutes of any location within the organisation.

When selecting the health and safety team, the type of person must be considered: a first-aider should not shy away from blood and the fire fighter should be fit and reasonably strong in order to lift fire-fighting equipment, for example.

Take time to nominate the right staff, noting their location within the company to ensure the best ready-for-action environment. Nominating the right staff means putting the time into selecting someone who could be a fire warden, first-aider or evacuation leader.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure that every health and safety team member is trained in only one of the disciplines. Very often we find that in their haste to complete training requirements, organisations train one person in first aid, fire fighting and evacuation, only to find that during an emergency or drill the person can only fulfil one role. Have three people trained in separate disciplines, as opposed to one person in all three disciplines. Again, it is important to spread these life-saving skills across the workforce.

#### Health and safety equipment

In addition to having a trained health and safety team and workforce, an organisation needs to ensure that the legislative

requirements with regard to emergency health and safety equipment are up to scratch.

It is very difficult for organisations to determine what they actually need according to the regulatory requirements as the process is quite complex and there is a definite science behind it. The premises size, production and occupancy classifications need to be taken into consideration, from which a detailed emergency evacuation plan can be drafted and installed. Technicians then supply, install and maintain the fire-fighting and health and safety equipment, such as:

- First-aid boxes: The Regulation 7 first aid kit is the ideal kit to have on site, as determined by the DoL.
- Fire-fighting equipment: The correct volume and quantities of the correct type of equipment are critical and legislated in various SABS regulations.
- Emergency directional signage and planning: To evacuate successfully and locate the emergency equipment, the organisation needs to have correctly planned and displayed directional sig-

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nage and detailed evacuation plans.

- Emergency evacuation drills: Organisations are required to carry out emergency evacuation drills biannually. The drill report should be kept on file in the event of any queries being raised by the DoL.

Action Training Academy recently coordinated an emergency evacuation drill for a large organisation that had to be carried out across 10 buildings containing over 3 500 staff. In such drills the academy uses simulation kits which create realistic scenarios. Once the drill is complete, our instructors usually compile a report for the organisation, which includes aspects such as problems encountered (for instance, staff using lifts, not stairs), evacuation timing and methods for improvement. The

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organisation's health and safety committee then relays the feedback to the staff.

Regulations stipulate that these emergency evacuation drills should be practised twice a year, irrespective of whether the organisation is a large corporate or a small company. The DoL is placing more and more inspectors in the field to monitor the health and safety activities of organisations. If an inspector finds that there has been loss of life or limb as a result of negligence, the senior management of an organisation could be liable to a heavy fine or imprisonment.

#### Health and safety management

Creating a healthy, safe and prepared environment depends largely on senior management or executive buy-in, as well as the establishment of a health and safety committee. This committee forms the backbone of an organisation's health and safety strategy.

I have found that a significant amount of money is often invested in only one person, instead of a health and safety committee. It is very difficult for only one person to maintain a healthy and safe work environment continually and successfully. However, if you have a health and safety committee made up of representatives from the entire company, these people are able to enforce health and safety within their division, branch or floor.

The committee is made up of health and safety supervisors and representatives, who are required by law to meet at least every three months. An effective health and safety committee will provide guidance on:

- the health and safety executive policy and statement
- health and safety organograms (where the health and safety team is based within the organisation)
- health and safety appointment letters (according to the act, you have to appoint health and safety team members)
- health and safety check sheets
- incident, accident and workmen's compensation commission correspondence.

In creating awareness and preparedness, risk is minimised. Health and safety is an obligation. **35**