

The importance of Health & Safety

Health and Safety lies at the heart of an organisation's commitment to the people that work for it and to its customers. This case study examines MFI's commitment to Health and Safety and shows how, in recent years, the company has successfully developed new approaches to auditing and measuring Health & Safety performance standards in individual stores. MFI staff have been trained and given the responsibility to implement quality Health and Safety procedures at store level.

As a retailer, MFI is acutely aware that its business not only depends on attracting customers to its superstores to buy products, but that the safety of those customers is of great importance. In addition, MFI places great emphasis on the Health and Safety of its employees. Health and Safety has been successfully integrated into every manager's performance targets and this enables it to remain within his or her focus of attention. Responsibility for Health and Safety performance is clearly quoted in every manager's job description and is part of his/her quarterly performance appraisal criteria with the area manager.

Average audit scores for each retail area are calculated and ranked by the Safety Department so that Regional Managers can compare safety performance between areas. As standards improve, average scores also improve. Annual comparisons are made to ensure continuous improvement towards the goal of excellent safety standards. Many stores now achieve 100scores in one or two sections of their audit. A small number of stores have achieved 100scores in all sections. This helps encourage other stores to strive for excellence because these standards have been proved to be possible.

High standards of Health and Safety bring positive business benefits on three fronts:

- **Economic** - the costs of accidents to a business can be crippling and can destroy the good reputation of the organisation.
- **Statutory** - with 186 MFI stores and over 75 Howden Joinery Depots, the MFI organisation is regularly visited by Enforcement Officers working for local authorities to maintain Health and Safety Standards. MFI needs to make sure it can always satisfy these officers that it is complying with the relevant Acts of Parliament, Regulations and Codes of Practice. In addition, stores must have a Fire Certificate which shows that they are complying with the requirements of County fire brigades. MFI seeks to more than satisfy each and every statutory requirement which can be applied to its Health and Safety performance.
- **Morale** - every successful business needs a motivated workforce which is committed to the business and to improving its performance. MFI actively seeks to develop a partnership with its employees, showing a keen concern for their welfare in the workplace.

Organisation of the MFI supply chain

Distribution of MFI furniture involves a network of links starting from Hygena, MFI's manufacturer. While Hygena is responsible for its own Health and Safety arrangements, MFI has a responsibility for any activity involving its own employees, e.g. transporting furniture from the Hygena factories to MFI Home Delivery Centres. MFI even has to monitor the Health and Safety performance of contractors as part of a 'duty of care' even though kitchen and bedroom assembly takes place in the customer's own home

Health and Safety in MFI

The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) established a responsibility for both employers and employees to provide safe conditions at work. The employer's duty is to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the "health, safety and welfare at work of all employees" The employee's duty is to take reasonable care to ensure both his or her own safety and the safety of others who may be affected by what he or she does or does not do.

MFI sets out responsibilities regarding Health and Safety in its employee handbook and produces a poster which is displayed in prominent locations at all premises. The handbook also gives basic information about safety training, risk assessment and consultation with management or support departments.

All retail staff must receive a safety induction within the first week of employment, carried out by a member of management and assisted by a safety video specially produced for MFI.

Further safety training must then be given within the first two months of employment, covering the subjects of fire safety, manual handling techniques and restrictions and safety rules/procedures which arise from a specific risk assessment covering each retail job. Training videos, overheads and guidance are provided by the safety department to facilitate this task and one of the managers receives specific training on this local safety management role - called the Safety Co-ordinator role.

Incidents of customer or staff injuries resulting from the design of products are reported back to the safety department.

Recurring issues can then be passed on to a Quality Assurance Manager who is a member of the Buying Department, so that they can be resolved with suppliers, or with MFI's merchandising section if the problem lies with display. For example, a loose rug can become a hazard if displayed on the floor of a showroom.

Care must also be taken in the design of racks, shelves, plinths etc. used to display merchandise. Plinths must be very visible to avoid customers tripping, shelves must be secure so that they can withstand children who try to climb up them and racks must be positioned and designed to avoid running children having head injuries from accidental contact. A key principal is to make showrooms 'kiddie-proof'.

As a dynamic retailer, MFI stores will need refitting on a regular basis, which may involve minor or major construction work being carried out during trading. For minor refit work, contractors must work within cordoned off areas of the showroom. For major works, retailing operations take place away from the refit work. MFI works only with contractors it knows to be reliable and who have been involved in effective safety training.

Statutory requirements

In addition to the Health and Safety at Work Act, MFI must abide by many law and safety regulations. Following UK membership of the EU, several sets of Safety Regulations have arisen from directives agreed by member states to ensure common standards of Health and Safety throughout Europe. Member states must introduce laws and regulations which comply with EU directives.

Important examples include:

- The Control of Substances (Hazardous to Health) Regulation 1994 (COSHH)
- The Noise at Work Regulations 1989
- The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1992*
- The Manual Operations Regulations 1992*
- The Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992*
- The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1992*
- The Health & Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992*
- The Workplace (Health, Safety & Welfare) Regulations 1992*
- The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR)
- The Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 1994
- The Construction (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1996

* *One of six sets of regulations simultaneously introduced from 1st January 1993, known affectionately as 'The Six-Pack'.*

Apart from safety regulations, safety standards are also set out in codes of practice, guidance notes and British or European standards which detail best practice.

The first hurdle to meeting all these standards is to keep abreast of changes as they take place. Only a small proportion of the total mass of regulations and standards will relate to any one business.

Safety advisors

Each business must have the services of a competent safety professional - this has been made a legal requirement by the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations, 1992. The named person can be directly employed as a Safety Advisor or Safety Manager. In a smaller business, a Safety Consultant may be employed.

MFI uses a team of four Safety Advisors under the direction of one Safety Manager for its retailing business (MFI Furniture Centres Ltd) and its trade business (Howden Joinery Ltd). Following training, safety professionals have to keep up-to-date with legislative changes by:

- reading journal articles
- attending regional health and safety meetings
- attending seminars and conferences on safety issues
- reading specialist safety bulletins and updates produced by information companies.

Risk assessments

Each MFI store is provided with a file of safety information including risk assessments, guidance documents, training overheads etc. which is known as the Risk Assessment Folder. In addition, a Health and Safety Documentation File is also supplied which is used to keep all records of staff safety training, safety bulletins, equipment checks by contractors and visiting service engineers.

To ensure all managers can clearly identify and remember the safety standards which must be maintained in each store, MFI also supplies a safety audit document which sets out the details and prioritises requirements under the four section headings of Fire Safety, Documentation, Warehouse Safety and Showroom Safety. This document is also used by external safety auditors to check the stores' Health and Safety standards during an annual (unannounced) safety audit of every store. This audit is 'scored' across the four sections, using different priorities listed (A, B or C) as a marking mechanism. A percentage score is calculated for each section and an overall percentage for each store.

Each store is expected to carry out checks regularly and to monitor performance. All MFI employees are expected to participate in making the checks and recording the results in order to involve everyone in good Health and Safety practice. MFI's Safety Department has also devised questionnaires to check on the current understanding of employees at any one time.

Examples of unsafe practices which employees are instructed to avoid include:

- jumping off fork lift trucks before they come to a halt
- climbing up warehouse racking, rather than using airport ladders, to pick customer orders
- handling heavy boxes incorrectly
- stacking shelves incorrectly or overloading
- leaving items on the floor where people might trip over them.

Health and Safety policy

Policies provide working guidelines for employees to follow. MFI's safety policy has been continually updated and developed over time in response to changes in store layouts, distribution arrangements, changes in management structures and changes in legislation.

The most recent major changes occurred in 1992 when some of the responsibilities for Health and Safety were moved from a centralised Health and Safety function to empowered store managers who were made fully responsible for their own Health and Safety standards, supported by good quality safety training for management. At the same time, an auditing system was established which made it possible for stock auditors to check the performance of stores compared to national norms. Cash prizes are awarded to stores which are able to exceed specified targets. These targets are established on the basis of previous performance. Stores are supplied with information on a regular basis on how they are performing compared to the targets set for them (enabling them to try to improve performance). Individual managers who are able to produce excellent Health and Safety results are recognised (named) in a special bulletin at the end of the financial year.

The MFI Safety Policy statement presents an overview of how it shares the task of ensuring good standards of Health and Safety within the business. Detailed policies are primarily contained within risk assessment documents, the safety audit documents and associated guidance documents.

Safety bulletins are issued every one to two weeks which draw attention to specific problems or concerns. Often these involve requests for feedback from retail managers about potential safety problems. Safety policy is implemented through safety training of staff by management. It is also communicated during training of management by the safety advisor team.

Safety bulletins (known as Hotlines) are issued during the year, and risk assessment documents, which contain safety rules, are reviewed and redistributed to keep people up-to-date with changes.

National legislation which is likely to impact on businesses is always published as a 'Consultative Document' before it becomes law. This gives organisations like MFI the opportunity to voice their opinion about anything they are unhappy with. It also helps MFI to anticipate likely new changes. MFI belongs to the British Retail Consortium, which acts as an influential voice for the retail sector. Through membership of the BRC, MFI is given advance warning of new EU directives which impact on working practice.

Policy management

MFI's Health and Safety performance is monitored by the Safety Department. A monthly report is sent to the director responsible for Health and Safety and includes a tabulation of all customer accidents and 'most time' staff accidents, the number of hours lost through occupational sickness and the number of visits by Environmental Health Officers and Fire Officers. These statistics are compared with figures for the same period in the previous year.

MFI has been able to maintain a very good record on accidents at work. In the period 1992-97, reportable accidents averaged 63 a year. With a total average workforce of approximately 5,500, this worked out at 1.1 compared with figures produced by the European Safety Agency of 4.5 for all European workers during 1993.

Improving performance

The essence of MFI's success in Health and Safety improvements is in having changed Health and Safety performance into something that could be quantified and measured.

MFI's safety standards follow the acronym SMART:

Simple - by the creation of simple audit questions that are easy to follow

Measurable - a scoring system which allows direct comparisons

Accountable - managers are made directly responsible for store performance

Realistic - performance benchmarks are based on past performance

Time related - there are scheduled safety checks and target staff training times.

MFI has introduced a system to measure safety performance through its safety auditing programme. In the same way that retailers are set sales or profit targets, they are also set safety performance targets and are then rewarded via a bonus scheme if those targets are achieved.