

Writing procedures

Procedures, especially operating and maintenance procedures, are important for the prevention of accidents and ill health. Written procedures are vital in maintaining consistency and in ensuring that everyone has the same basic level of information. They are a key element of a safety management system and an important training tool. However, poor procedures can be a reason for people not following recommended actions.

As well as being technically accurate, procedures need to be well-written, usable and up to date. Remember that even if your procedures are not formally written down they exist through the working practices of staff. Ask yourself:

- Are your procedures accessible?
- Are they actually followed by staff?
- Are they written so that they can be understood and followed easily?
- Do they reflect the tasks as they are actually carried out?
- Do the procedures include key safety information?
- Are they kept up to date and reviewed occasionally?

Procedures ideally need to:

- be accurate and complete;
- be clear and concise with an appropriate level of detail;
- be current and up to date;
- be supported by training;
- identify any hazards;
- state necessary precautions for hazards;
- use familiar language;
- use consistent terminology;
- reflect how tasks are actually carried out;
- promote ownership by users;
- be in a suitable format; and
- be accessible.

Writing better procedures

Start by collecting information about the task and the users. To do this you could carry out an activity analysis. You will also need to have the results of any relevant risk assessments to hand so that the procedure can reflect arrangements to maintain adequate control of identified risks. Here are some issues to think about:

- consider both the difficulty and importance of the task(s) to be documented;
- find out how often the task is carried out and the potential hazards;

- think about who will use the procedure and the level of information they need (providing too much information may lead to less use of the procedure if users find it too detailed and hard to follow, too little information may mean that an inexperienced person will not be able to carry out the task);
- establish the skills, experience level, past training and needs of the users of the procedure; and
- look at whether the procedure needs to be supported by training in order to promote understanding and effective use.

Try to **promote ownership** by encouraging users to participate in the preparation and maintenance of the procedure. For example experienced staff could write the procedure and users could review it. Ask users about the ease of use of a procedure and whether it is easy to understand. Encourage users to suggest improvements to existing procedures.

Procedures can appear in many **different forms**, e.g. as printed text documents, electronically, as quick reference cards, or as posted notices. It is important that users know where the procedures can be found and that this is convenient for them. If it takes too long to find a procedure users will be more reluctant to use it. Procedures which are duplicated, e.g. as posted notices as well as printed text documents, should not contain conflicting instructions.

Think about the issue of **style**. As general guidance keep sentences short and avoid use of complex sentence structure. This will make the procedure easier to read and understand. Try to write the required actions that users need to do in positive active sentences e.g. 'Open valve A then valve B'. This is easier to follow than the more complicated - 'After opening valve B open valve A' or 'Do not open valve B until valve A has been opened'.

Put items in the order in which they need to be carried out. It is easier to follow a procedure which states 'Do A then do B' rather than 'Before doing B do A'. For procedures which are complex, rarely carried out, or performed in adverse conditions it is helpful to document the steps of the procedure one at a time.

Effective use can be made of:

- flow charts;
- decision tables (often in the form of 'if condition X, then go to step Y');
- questions (e.g. 'is the temperature greater than 100o C? Yes, go to step 1; No, go to step 2'); and
- diagrams.

Divide longer procedures into shorter chunks. This helps users to go back to a particular step if they are interrupted or if the task takes some time to carry out.

AVOID USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS FOR THE TEXT. Research shows that this is slower and more difficult for us to read than the lower case text we are more used

to. Decide how features such as capitals, bold, italics, and underlining will be used. Overuse of these features is very distracting for users.

Avoid using very small fonts (e.g. 8 point or smaller) as this is very difficult for users to read.

Make good use of open space in the printed text. If the page appears too cluttered, users will be discouraged from reading it. Although the procedure may have more pages, providing spaces between steps on the page will make it more usable.

Try to use the same **format** for all procedures. This will help users find their way around the text. An inconsistent format could confuse the user. A typical format would include:

- purpose of the procedure;
- precautions which must be observed to avoid potential hazards;
- special tools or equipment needed;
- initial conditions which must be satisfied before starting;
- references to other relevant documents, e.g. data sheets or manuals; and
- procedural steps to perform the task safely and efficiently.

Users may be very familiar with some frequently carried out procedures. Here it may be more effective if the procedure is in the form of a quick reference card containing the key precautions and action steps.

Warning information about potential hazards is usually given in a precautions section at the start of the procedure and in the form of 'cautions' embedded in the procedural steps.

The precautions section needs to give the user information on what can happen, why, and the consequences of ignoring the precaution. It is best to restrict the precautions section to important health and safety issues. Too much information about self-evident issues will reduce the impact of the key messages.

Cautions in the procedural steps reiterate the precautions. Make sure that a caution appears immediately before the relevant step in the procedure and on the same page as the step. Ensure that the caution is clear, concise and contains only the relevant information for the user. Usually a caution or warning contains only information to alert or explain something to the user. Information about actions to carry out are contained in the procedural steps.

Extracted from UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) publication HSG48, "Reducing error and influencing behaviour" (ISBN 978 0 7176 2452 2, Second edition, published 1999), available online at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg48.htm>

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