

SAIF Briefing Note: Managing seasonal health & safety risks

Written by Simon Bloxham, Safety for Business for SAIFinsight November 2017

With the nights drawing in and temperatures dropping, one thing is certain: winter is coming. As tempting as it is to be drawn in by the season's celebrations, businesses should not rest on their laurels and must recognise the unique challenges presented during the winter months. Not only can low temperatures, minimal sunlight and Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) associated with the time of year put a serious dampener on workforce moral, they can also prove a serious threat to staff safety and wellbeing.

Additionally, adverse weather conditions are a particular health and safety concern for businesses employing workers operating outdoors, who need to be able to conduct everyday tasks comfortably regardless of wind, rain and the cold.

No complacency

Health-related absenteeism has long been a concern for businesses over the winter months, and while recent years have seen a drop in the number of people taking time off work due to ill health, this should not cause organisations to become complacent as UK businesses still lost a collective 4.3 days per worker in 2016. A recent study by *The Lancet* found that a total of 77% of flu carriers displayed no symptoms whatsoever, making it vital that steps are taken to prevent cross-contamination throughout the workplace.

In their attempts to decrease absenteeism, employers often make the mistake of discouraging sick days. In forcing employees who are ill to come to work, employers are extending the sickness period of the staff member in question, who may not be allowing themselves to rest and recuperate sufficiently, putting all other staff at risk of infection. As a result, organisations can end up losing entire swathes of the workforce rather than the odd one or two employees, and may find themselves running on skeleton staff. If employees know they are ill, and suffering from a fever, they should stay at home until at least 24 hours after the fever has gone, limiting the risk of contagion and also ensuring the unwell employee is fully recovered before returning to work.

Comprehensive tactics

Instead of trying to limit an already existing problem, however, planning and implementing comprehensive tactics ahead of time is the best way to minimise illness related disruption. One important factor to bear in mind is heating. A cold premises can not only be a health hazard but can also damage employee morale. It is best to consult Government guidelines and make sure to keep offices at the required minimum temperature of 16 degrees, while regularly consulting staff as to preferred comfortable working temperatures.

Similarly, it is important not to allow premises to become overly warm. Stuffy workplaces are uncomfortable, can lower productivity and are potentially breeding grounds for germs, so striking a balance is key.

Compliant PPE

Employees who frequently work outside in the open air experience higher risks to their physical safety, especially during harsh or unpredictable weather conditions. As such, it is vital that adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is provided. Since 1992, employers have been legally required to provide workers with adequate equipment related to their specific working conditions and must make every effort to check that all PPE is compliant and suitable to the working environment in which it is used.

For instance, in the cold of winter, employers may be quick to assume that thick gloves are imperative for their employees' comfort. However, many outdoor jobs require manual dexterity for the operation of equipment or completion of tasks requiring fine motor skills and

SAIF Briefing Note: Managing seasonal health & safety risks

large or bulky clothing may not be appropriate. This is why planning and awareness of available products is vital. In this case, employers should seek out alternative gloves, made of material which is protective but also allows for freedom of movement, while also protecting from the cold.

Waterproofing is also important and it goes without saying that wet weather should be a consideration for businesses employing outdoor workers, especially during the winter. Staff need to know that their PPE will guarantee them protection from wet weather related illnesses, while keeping them warm and dry, without allowing them to overheat. The UK's winter weather is famously temperamental and hard to predict. Employers should plan for every eventuality, as well as considering every aspect of indoor and outdoor workers' needs to ensure their wellbeing and productivity are not affected over the colder months. By planning ahead carefully in this way, businesses can avoid suddenly finding themselves unequipped, unproductive and understaffed and can ensure a smooth and safe transition into the winter season.

Help is at hand

Safety For Business Ltd has been providing health and safety advice to SAIF members for many years. But what help is available? Well firstly we provide free telephone and email guidance to all members of SAIF, it is part of your membership plan. If you are uncertain about a matter of health and safety, you are entitled to use our support service completely free of charge. We will not send you an invoice or try to get you to join a membership scheme. You have already done this by being a member of SAIF.

If you think you need a more permanent relationship, we can do two things. We can visit to see where you are with health and safety, and provide you with a full report on what we found and what you need to do (if anything). This costs just the price of travel. You can leave it and have an action plan to work on. But, if you do want our assistance to comply fully with health and safety legislation, the next thing we can do, as part of your SAIF membership, is offer a sizeable discount on our fees. This stands at 20% at the moment so talk Safety For Business by calling 08456 344164.

This article was written by Simon Bloxham of Safety for Business and was printed in SAIFinsight November 2017.