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FIRE SAFETY FIRST: KEEPING YOUR PEOPLE AND BUSINESS SECURE



The recent fires in Durban and Cape Town reminded us how quickly disaster can strike. These incidents involved chemical companies but the truth is that fire does not discriminate.

Whether you are running a large manufacturing plant or a small local business, the risks are real, and being prepared could mean the difference between a close call and a tragedy.

No one expects a fire in their workplace but every business owner and employee should ask: ***What if it happens here?***

The following is an easy guide to help you prevent fires and be ready if the unthinkable happens.

Look for risks and fix them

Let us start with the basics.

Fire prevention is not about fancy equipment or endless rules; it is about creating habits that keep everyone safe.

Start by walking through your workplace. What do you see? Are electrical cords worn out? Are rubbish or boxes piling up in the small passage behind the building? Are flammable materials such as chemicals or paper stored safely?

Every workplace poses risks, whether it is faulty wiring in a factory or a blocked fire exit in a small office. Spotting these risks early and addressing them can prevent a tragedy.

Keep things clean and organised

Good housekeeping is not just about making the workplace look clean and tidy; it is also about safety.

- Keep walkways and exits clear.
- Store chemicals or flammable materials in proper containers, away from heat or sparks.
- Make sure that bins for waste are emptied regularly, especially if they contain anything flammable.

Think of a tidy workspace as the first line of defence against a fire.

Electrical safety matters

Electrical faults are one of the most common causes of workplace fires.

Do not overload plug points, and never ignore issues such as flickering lights or strange smells from equipment. If something does not look or feel right, report it immediately to your Health and Safety representative and management.

Why every workplace needs a Fire Emergency Plan

If a fire breaks out, panic can spread faster than flames. A clear, well-rehearsed plan is therefore important. Think of it as your roadmap to safety where every second counts.

What does a Fire Emergency Plan include?

A good fire emergency plan answers three questions:

- **How do we know there's a fire?** Loud alarms and visible alerts are essential to warn everyone, including those in noisy environments or with disabilities. If a fire alarm system hasn't been installed, implement an aerosol fire horn, or press the security system panic button.
- **Where do we go?** Make sure that all employees know the location of escape routes and assembly points. These should be clearly indicated with signage and free of obstacles.
- **Who does what?** Assign roles such as that of fire wardens to help guide people out, check areas, and contact emergency services. The other members of your Fire Emergency team will include certified firefighters and first aiders. Creating a plan is only the beginning and will ensure that people know what to do to save lives.
- **Remember practice makes perfect.** Hold fire drills regularly so that everyone from the cleaning team to top management knows what to do. During a drill, practise using escape routes and gathering at the assembly point. Afterwards, talk about what worked well and what could be improved. These drills should be carried out at least twice a year.
- **Train everyone.** Not everyone needs to be a firefighter, but basic knowledge helps. Show employees how to use fire extinguishers and teach them how to react if they see a fire; for example, to raise the alarm and evacuate, rather than trying to tackle it themselves unless they have been trained.

Special considerations for manufacturing and small businesses

Every workplace is different, but when it comes to fire safety, some require extra care depending on their business scope and operations.

In manufacturing: keep high-risk areas separate

If your business involves welding, spraying or working with chemicals, these activities should happen in well-ventilated, isolated areas away from the main workspace. Proper storage of chemicals is a must.

Store flammable materials in approved cabinets, clearly labelled, and keep incompatible chemicals apart to avoid dangerous reactions. Refer to the chemical's SDS (*Safety Data Sheet*, formerly called Material Safety Data Sheet or MSDS) for guidance on how to store the product safely.

For small businesses: simple steps save lives

Even if you are working with a small team in a compact space, you can still prepare.

A few smoke detectors, portable fire extinguishers, and basic fire training can go a long way. If budget is a concern, prioritise high-risk areas such as kitchens or areas with electronics.

Simple safety habits for everyone

No matter what your role, these everyday practices can make a substantial difference:

- Always keep fire exits clear—do not let boxes or equipment block the way.
- Turn off machines and equipment when they are not in use.
- Report any hazards such as loose wires or damaged plugs, immediately.
- Do not allow unnecessary clutter—it could become fuel for a fire.

Checklist: is your workplace fire-ready?

Here is a quick checklist to keep your workplace safe:

- Fire alarms and smoke detectors are working.
- Fire extinguishers are in place and easy to reach.
- Emergency exits are clearly marked and unobstructed.
- Chemicals are stored safely and correctly.
- Everyone knows the emergency plan and has rehearsed it.
- The workplace is tidy, with no flammable clutter.
- Machines and electrical equipment are well-maintained.

In conclusion:

Ultimately, fire safety is not just the responsibility of management or the safety team; it is everyone's job. Whether you are on the production line, in the office, or keeping the place clean, the small actions you take can help prevent a disaster.

Fires are unpredictable but preparation is not. Take the time to address risks, rehearse your emergency plan, and make fire safety part of your daily routine. By doing so, you are protecting more than just your workplace; you're protecting the lives and livelihoods of everyone who works there.

Let us learn from recent events and act today. After all, a little effort now can save a lot later.

SERR Synergy assists businesses with a wide range of health and safety compliance services. Reach out to us so that our *OHS Consultants* or Health and Safety Practitioners can assist you to identify fire risks in your company, prepare a Fire Emergency Plan, and implement the plan with your team of employees.

About the author: Marius Ferreira joined SERR Synergy in 2019 and currently holds the position of National OHS Manager. He has more than 20 years' experience in the Health, Safety and Education Industries. He prides himself on developing others and transforming the Health and Safety culture of companies.

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