Effective Workplace Inspections

Why are workplace inspections important?

Workplace inspections help prevent incidents, injuries and illnesses. Through a critical examination of the workplace, inspections help to identify and record hazards for corrective action. Health and safety committees can help plan, conduct, report and monitor inspections. Regular workplace inspections are an important part of the overall occupational health and safety program and management system, if present.

What is the purpose of inspections?

- Inspections are important as they allow you to:
- listen to the concerns of workers and supervisors
- gain further understanding of jobs and tasks
- identify existing and potential hazards
- determine underlying causes of hazards
- recommend corrective action
- monitor steps taken to eliminate hazards or control the risk (e.g., engineering controls, administrative controls, policies, procedures, personal protective equipment)

How do you plan for inspections?

Planning is essential for an effective inspection.

What to Examine

Every inspection must examine who, what, where, when and how. Pay particular attention to items that are or are most likely to develop into unsafe or unhealthy conditions because of stress, wear, impact, vibration, heat, corrosion, chemical reaction or misuse. Include areas where no work is done regularly, such as parking lots, rest areas, office storage areas and locker rooms.

Workplace Elements

Look at all workplace elements – the people, the environment, the equipment and the process. The environment includes such hazards as noise, vibration, lighting, temperature, and ventilation. Equipment includes materials, tools and apparatus for producing a product or a service. The process involves how the worker interacts with the other elements in a series of tasks or operations.

What types of hazards do we look for in a workplace?

Types of workplace hazards include:

- Safety hazards such as those caused by inadequate machine guards, unsafe workplace conditions, unsafe work practices.
- Biological hazards caused by organisms such as viruses, bacteria, fungi and parasites.
- Chemical hazards caused by a solid, liquid, vapour, gas, dust, fume or mist.
- Ergonomic hazards caused by physiological and psychological demands on the worker, such as repetitive and forceful movements, awkward postures arising from improper work methods, and improperly designed workstations, tools, and equipment.
- Physical hazards caused by noise, vibration, energy, weather, heat, cold, electricity, radiation and pressure.
- Psychosocial hazards that can affect mental health or well-being such as overwork, stress, bullying, or violence.

What type of information do I need to complete an inspection report?

Diagram of Area

Use drawings of the plant layout or floor plans to help you draw a diagram. Divide the workplace into areas based on the process. Visualize the activities in the workplace and identify the location of machinery, equipment and materials. Show the movement of material and workers, and the location of air ducts, aisles, stairways, alarms and fire exits. Appendix A shows a sample diagram. Use several simple diagrams if the area is large. Ask workers and supervisors for their comments on the information – they know the area better than anyone else.

Equipment Inventory

Know what type of machinery or equipment is present. Review technical data sheets, or manufacturers' safety manuals. Read work area records to become familiar with the hazards of the equipment.

Hazardous Product or Chemical Inventory

Determine which products are used in the workplace and whether safety data sheets are available. Find out if all sources of exposure are properly controlled. Make sure that all workers have received education and training in how to safely use, handle and store the products they work with. Check that all hazardous products are labelled appropriately according to Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) requirements.

Checklists

A checklist helps to clarify inspection responsibilities, controls inspection activities and provides a report of inspection activities. Checklists help with on-the-spot recording of findings and comments but be careful. Do not allow the inspection team to become so intent on noting the details listed in the checklist that it misses other hazardous conditions. Use checklists only as a basic tool. Refer to the related documents for sample checklists that you can use as a guide to develop a checklist that is customized for your workplace.

- Inspection Checklists – General Information
- Inspection Checklists – Sample Checklist for Manufacturing Facilities
- Inspection Checklists – Sample Checklist for Offices
- Inspection Checklist – Sample Checklist for Chemical or Product Inventory
- Inspection Checklist – Sample Checklist for Outdoor Areas

Reports

Keeping inspection records is important. Past inspection records show what has been previously identified. They also show what an earlier inspection team concentrated on and what areas it did not inspect. Do not simply repeat or copy previous inspection results. Use the older inspection reports to help look for issues, and then determine whether recommendations were implemented. Note if the changes have been effective.

Are there other types of inspection reports that may be useful?

The following describes three other types of inspection reports:

- Ongoing
- Pre-operation
- Periodic

Supervisors and workers continually conduct ongoing inspections as part of their job responsibilities. Such inspections identify hazardous conditions and either correct them immediately or report them for corrective action. The frequency of these inspections varies with the amount and conditions of equipment use. Daily checks by users assure that the equipment meets minimum acceptable safety requirements.

Pre-operation checks involve inspections of new or modified equipment or processes. Often these are done after workplace shutdowns.

Periodic inspections are regular, planned inspections of the critical components of equipment or systems that have a high potential for causing serious injury or illness. The inspections are often part of preventive maintenance procedures or hazard control programs. Laws and regulations may specify that qualified or competent persons must inspect certain types of equipment, such as elevators, boilers, pressure vessels, scaffolding, and fire extinguishers at determined points in the work process and at regular intervals.

Who should be on the inspection team?

Health and safety committee members are obvious choices of personnel to carry out formal inspections, especially if they have received training or certification.

Other criteria for selecting the inspection team are:

- knowledge of regulations and procedures
- knowledge of potential hazards
- experience with work procedures involved

Engineers, maintenance personnel, occupational hygienists, health and safety professionals, supervisors or managers may be a part of the inspection team or they may be called upon to help with certain aspects of the inspection, or to help explain equipment or processes.

Large workplaces may have more than one inspection team. The various teams can have separate areas to inspect.

Should supervisors be on the inspection team?

It depends. Supervisors are responsible for taking action to prevent incident, illness and injury. Supervisors have an advantage in safety inspections because of familiarity with workers, equipment and environment. This familiarity is also a disadvantage because it can interfere with a supervisor’s objectivity. If the supervisor is not on the inspection team, before inspecting a department or area, the team should contact the supervisor in charge but the supervisor should not act as a tour guide.

If the supervisor of the area does not accompany the inspection team, consult the supervisor before leaving the area. Discuss each recommendation with the supervisor. Report items that the supervisor can immediately correct. Note these on the report as corrected. This documentation keeps the records clear and serves as a reminder to check the condition during the next inspection.

Although a supervisor may interpret reporting as a criticism, inspection team cannot fail to report hazards. Aim to be objective and maintain an attitude that is firm, friendly, and fair.

How long should an inspection take to do?

It is difficult to accurately estimate how long each inspection will take. The time required depends on what is found, how many questions are asked, and how large and complex the work area is. Inspections are ineffective when the given time allows for only a quick look.

How frequent should inspections be done?

The purpose is to keep the workplace free of hazards. The schedule should state:

- when to inspect each area or item within the workplace
- who carries out the inspection
- what degree of detail to inspect each area or item

How often inspections are performed will depend on several factors:

- the frequency of planned formal inspections may be set in your legislation
- past incident records
- number and size of different work operations
- type of equipment and work processes – those that are hazardous or potentially
- number of shifts – the activity of every shift may vary
- new processes or machinery
- legislative requirements for your jurisdiction

High hazard or high risk areas should receive extra attention.

It is often recommended to conduct inspections as often as committee meetings. Do not conduct an inspection immediately before a committee meeting but try to separate inspections and meetings by at least one week. This time allows for small items to be fixed and gives the committee an opportunity to focus on issues requiring further action.

How are inspections actually done?

Discuss the planned inspection route before undertaking the inspection. Review where inspection team members are going and what they are looking for. For example, during the inspection, “huddle” before going into noisy areas. This discussion eliminates the need for arm waving, shouting and other unsatisfactory methods of communication.

For inspections, wear personal protective equipment (PPE) where required. If you do not have PPE and cannot get any, do not enter the area. List this as a deficiency during the inspection. Re-inspect the area when PPE is provided.

Observation

Look for deviations from accepted work practices. Use statements such as: “a worker was observed operating a machine without a guard.” Do not use information derived from inspections for disciplinary measures.

Some common poor work practices include:

- using machinery or tools without authority
- operating at unsafe speeds or in other violation of safe work practice
- removing guards or other safety devices, or making the devices ineffective
- using defective tools or equipment or using tools or equipment in unsafe ways
- using hands or body instead of tools or push sticks
- overloading, crowding, or failing to balance materials or handling materials in unsafe ways, including improper lifting
- repairing or adjusting equipment that is in motion, under pressure, or electrically charged
- failing to use or maintain, or improperly using, personal protective equipment or safety devices
- creating unsafe, unsanitary, or unhealthy conditions by improper personal hygiene, by using compressed air for cleaning clothes, by poor housekeeping, or by smoking in unauthorized areas
- standing or working under suspended loads, scaffolds, shafts, or open hatches
- discussion with or observation of workers who may be overloaded, fatigued, working in conflict with others, or working in isolation (working alone)

Inspection Principles

When conducting inspections, follow these basic principles:

- Draw attention to the presence of any immediate danger – other items can await the final report.
- Shut down and “lock out” any hazardous items that cannot be brought to a safe operating standard until repaired.
- Do not operate equipment. Ask the operator for a demonstration. If the operator of any piece of equipment does not know what dangers may be present, this is cause for concern. Never ignore any item because you do not have knowledge to make an accurate judgement of safety.
- Look up, down, around and inside. Be methodical and thorough. Do not spoil the inspection with a “once-over-lightly” approach.
- Clearly describe each hazard and its exact location in your rough notes. Allow “on-the-spot” recording of all findings before they are forgotten. Record what you have or have not examined in case the inspection is interrupted.
- Ask questions, but do not unnecessarily disrupt work activities. This interruption may interfere with efficient assessment of the job function and may also create a potentially hazardous situation.
- Consider the static (stop position) and dynamic (in motion) conditions of the item you are inspecting. If a machine is shut down, consider postponing the inspection until it is functioning again.
- Consider factors such as how the work is organized or the pace of work and how these factors impact safety.
- Discuss as a group, “Can any problem, hazard or accident generate from this situation when looking at the equipment, the process or the environment?” Determine what corrections or controls are appropriate.
- Do not try to detect all hazards simply by relying on your senses or by looking at them during the inspection. You may have to monitor equipment to measure the levels of exposure to chemicals, noise, radiation or biological agents.
- Take a photograph if you are unable to clearly describe or sketch a particular situation.

What should the final report have in it?

To make a report, first copy all unfinished items from the previous report on the new report. Then write down the observed unsafe condition and recommended methods of control. Enter the department or area inspected, the date and the inspection team’s names and titles on top of the page. Number each item consecutively, followed by a hazard classification of items according to the chosen scheme.

State exactly what has been detected and accurately identify its location. Instead of stating “machine unguarded,” state “guard missing on upper pulley #6 lathe in North Building.”

Assign a priority level to the hazards observed to indicate the urgency of the corrective action required. For example:

A = Major – requires immediate action

B = Serious – requires short-term action

C = Minor – requires long-term action

Report issues in a concise, factual way. Management should be able to understand and evaluate the problems, assign priorities and quickly reach decisions.

After each listed hazard, specify the recommended corrective action and establish a definite correction date if possible and appropriate. Each inspection team member should review for accuracy, clarity and thoroughness.

What should I know about follow-up and monitoring?

Review the information from regular inspections to identify where corrective action was needed. Determine if these actions have been taken. Use older reports to identify trends. Analysis of inspection reports may show the following:

- priorities for other corrective action
- need for improving safe work practices
- insight about why incidents are occurring in particular areas
- need for education and training in certain areas
- areas and equipment that require more in-depth hazard analysis

The health and safety committee can review inspections, identify trends, and monitor the progress of the recommendations. This analysis can be used as part of the continual improvement process for the occupational health and safety program or management system.

Appendix A: an example of a floor diagram

Example of Workplace Inspection Report

Inspection Location: _____ Date of Inspection: _____

Department/Areas Covered: _____ Time of Inspection: _____

Observations					**For Future Follow-up**		
Item and Location	**Hazard(s) Observed**	**Repeat Item Y / N**	**Priority A/B/C**	**Recommended Action**	**Responsible Person**	**Action Taken**	**Date**