

Workplace Housekeeping

Effective housekeeping can help minimise hazards in the workplace. It can also help get a job done safely and effectively. Unfortunately, poor housekeeping can lead to accidents and contribute to the perception that work is not safe. If the sight of paper, debris, clutter and spills is accepted as normal, then other more serious health and safety hazards may be taken for granted.

Housekeeping is not just cleanliness. It includes keeping work areas neat and orderly; maintaining halls and floors free of slip and trip hazards; and removing of waste materials (e.g., paper, cardboard) and other fire hazards from work areas. It also requires paying attention to important details such as the layout of the whole workplace, aisle marking, the adequacy of storage facilities, and maintenance. Good housekeeping is also a basic part of accident and fire prevention.

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Effective housekeeping is an ongoing operation: it is not a hit-and-miss clean-up done occasionally. Periodic “panic” clean-ups are costly and ineffective in reducing accidents. Poor housekeeping can be a cause of accidents, such as tripping over loose objects on floors, stairs and platforms, being hit by falling objects and slipping on greasy, wet or dirty surfaces. To avoid these hazards, a workplace must “maintain” order throughout a workday. Although this effort requires a great deal of management and planning, the benefits are many, which include reduced handling to ease the flow of materials, fewer tripping and slipping accidents in clutter-free and spill-free work areas, decreased fire hazards, lower worker exposures to hazardous substances, better control of tools and materials, more efficient equipment clean-up and maintenance and better hygienic conditions leading to improved health.

Housekeeping Program

A good housekeeping program plans and manages the orderly storage and movement of materials from point of entry to exit. It includes a material flow plan to ensure minimal handling. The plan also ensures that work areas are not used as storage areas by having workers move materials to and from work areas as needed. Part of the plan could include investing in extra bins and more frequent disposal. The elimination of repetitive handling of materials could help minimize costs and improve efficiency.

Worker training is an essential part of any good housekeeping program. Workers need to know how to work safely with the products they use. They also need to know how to protect other workers such as by posting signs (e.g., “Wet - Slippery Floor”) and reporting any unusual conditions.

Housekeeping order is “maintained” not “achieved.” This means removing the inevitable messes that occur from time to time and not waiting until the end of the shift to reorganize and clean up. Integrating housekeeping into jobs can help ensure this is done. A good housekeeping program identifies and assigns responsibilities for the following: clean up during the shift, day-to-day clean-up, waste management, removal of unused materials, inspection to ensure clean-up is complete.

Do not forget out-of-the-way places such as shelves, basements, sheds, and boiler rooms that would otherwise be overlooked. The orderly arrangement of operations, tools, equipment and supplies is an important part of a good housekeeping program.

The final addition to any housekeeping program is inspection. It is the only way to check for deficiencies in the program so that changes can be made. The documents on workplace inspection checklists provide a general guide and examples of checklists for inspecting offices and manufacturing facilities.



ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE HOUSEKEEPING PROGRAM

Dust and Dirt Removal

In some jobs, enclosures and exhaust ventilation systems may fail to collect dust, dirt and chips adequately. Vacuum cleaners are suitable for removing light dust and dirt. Industrial models have special fittings for cleaning walls, ceilings, ledges, machinery, and other hard-to-reach places where dust and dirt may accumulate.

Dampening floors or using sweeping compounds before sweeping reduces the amount of airborne dust. The dust and grime that collect in places like shelves, piping, conduits, light fixtures, reflectors, windows, cupboards and lockers may require manual cleaning. Special-purpose vacuums are useful for removing hazardous substances. For example, vacuum cleaners fitted with HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters may be used to capture fine particles of asbestos or fibreglass. Compressed air should not be used for removing dust, dirt or chips from equipment or work surfaces.

Employee Facilities

Employee facilities need to be adequate, clean and well maintained. Lockers are necessary for storing employees' personal belongings. Washroom facilities require cleaning once or more each shift. They also need to have a good supply of soap, towels plus disinfectants, if needed.

If workers are using hazardous materials, employee facilities should provide special precautions such as showers, washing facilities and change rooms. Some facilities may require two locker rooms with showers between. Using such double locker rooms allows workers to shower off workplace contaminants and prevents them from contaminating their "street clothes" by keeping their work clothes separated from the clothing that they wear home.

Smoking, eating or drinking in the work area should be prohibited where toxic materials are handled. The eating area should be separate from the work area and should be cleaned properly each shift.

Surfaces

Floors: Poor floor conditions are a leading cause of accidents so cleaning up spilled oil and other liquids at once is important. Allowing chips, shavings and dust to accumulate can also cause accidents. Trapping chips, shavings and dust before they reach the floor or cleaning them up regularly can prevent their accumulation. Areas that cannot be cleaned continuously, such as entrance ways, should have anti-slip flooring. Keeping floors in good order also means replacing any worn, ripped, or damaged flooring that poses a tripping hazard.

Walls: Light-coloured walls reflect light while dirty or dark-coloured walls absorb light. Contrasting colours warn of physical hazards and mark obstructions such as pillars. Paint can highlight railings, guards and other safety equipment, but should never be used as a substitute for guarding. The program should outline the regulations and standards for colours.

Maintain Light Fixtures

Dirty light fixtures reduce essential light levels. Clean light fixtures can improve lighting efficiency significantly.

Aisles and Stairways

Aisles should be wide enough to accommodate people and vehicles comfortably and safely. Aisle space allows for the movement of people, products and materials. Warning signs and mirrors can improve sightlines in blind corners. Arranging aisles properly encourages people to use them so that they do not take shortcuts through hazardous areas.

Keeping aisles and stairways clear is important. They should not be used for temporary "overflow" or "bottleneck" storage. Stairways and aisles also require adequate lighting.

Spill Control

The best way to control spills is to stop them before they happen. Regularly cleaning and maintaining machines and equipment is one way. Another is to use drip pans and guards where possible spills might occur. When spills do occur, it is important to clean them up immediately. Absorbent materials are useful for wiping up greasy, oily or other liquid spills. Used absorbents must be disposed of properly and safely.

Tools and Equipment

Tool housekeeping is particularly important, whether in the tool room, on the rack, in the yard, or on the bench. Tools require suitable fixtures with marked locations to provide orderly arrangement, both in the tool room and near the work bench. Returning them promptly after use reduces the chance of being misplaced or lost. Workers should regularly inspect, clean and repair all tools and take any damaged or worn tools out of service.

Maintenance

The maintenance of buildings and equipment may be the most important element of good housekeeping. Maintenance involves keeping buildings, equipment and machinery in safe, efficient working order and in good repair. This includes maintaining sanitary facilities and regularly painting and cleaning walls. Broken windows, damaged doors, defective plumbing and broken floor surfaces can make a workplace look neglected; these conditions can cause accidents and affect work practices. So, it is important to replace or fix broken or damaged items as quickly as possible. A good maintenance program provides for the inspection, maintenance, upkeep and repair of tools, equipment, machines and processes.

Waste Management

The regular collection, grading and sorting of scrap contribute to good housekeeping practices. It also makes it possible to separate materials that can be recycled from those going to waste disposal facilities.

Allowing material to build up on the floor wastes time and energy since additional time is required for cleaning it up. Placing scrap containers near where the waste is produced encourages orderly waste disposal and makes collection easier. All waste receptacles should be clearly labelled (e.g., recyclable glass, plastic, scrap metal, etc.).

Storage

Good organisation of stored materials is essential for overcoming material storage problems whether on a temporary or permanent basis. There will also be fewer strain injuries if the amount of handling is reduced, especially if less manual materials handling is required. The location of the stockpiles should not interfere with work, but they should still be readily available when required. Stored materials should allow at least one metre (or about three feet) of clear space under sprinkler heads.

Stacking cartons and drums on a firm foundation and cross tying them, where necessary, reduces the chance of their movement. Stored materials should not obstruct aisles, stairs, exits, fire equipment, emergency eyewash fountains, emergency showers, or first aid stations. All storage areas should be clearly marked.

Flammable, combustible, toxic and other hazardous materials should be stored in approved containers in designated areas that are appropriate for the different hazards that they pose. Storage of materials should meet all requirements specified in the fire codes and the regulations of environmental and occupational health and safety agencies in your jurisdiction.