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Risk assessment and work experience

Work experience can be defined as –

“a placement on an employer’s premises in which a pupil carries out a range of tasks or duties, more or less as would an employee, but with an emphasis on the learning aspects of the experience”.

NOTE

It is becoming common for schools to organise work experience placements for their pupils with local charities and other voluntary organisations. Children of school age may also be working as volunteers in their own time.

Employers’ risk assessments

Where a placement provider decides to employ young people or takes any young person on a work experience scheme, the young person must be informed about the risks to their health and safety, as identified by the employer’s risk assessment, and the measures to control these risks.

When the young person is below the compulsory school leaving age, the provider must supply the parents or guardians with the key findings of the risk assessment and the control measures introduced to minimise, or ideally eliminate, any significant risks. Although there is no strict requirement to provide this in writing, it is difficult to see how it can be clearly achieved in any other way. In general, the following is essential.

1. Students should be properly prepared and briefed on the hazards of the workplace and the control measures provided to eliminate or reduce the risk of injury before they start work.
2. Employers, supervisors and employees should know exactly what is expected of them and are aware of their legal responsibilities.
3. The school should be clear about its responsibilities in arranging placements for students and introducing them to general health and safety at work issues, prior to their placement.

Before agreement is reached on possible work experience placements, representatives of the school or agency are strongly advised to look around the employer's premises from the point of view of health and safety, and ask to see the health and safety policy, to have confirmation that the premises have been notified (registered) with the appropriate enforcement authority and to receive confirmation of a number of issues recommended in the Health and Safety Executive guidance. Once agreement has been reached in principle, there needs to be a detailed discussion to ensure clear understanding between employer and school on respective responsibilities. This understanding should include:

- the activities which the students are to undertake, whether there are any areas of work to which access should be denied either to all or to particular students.
- whether any of the students need special arrangements e.g. on medical grounds, for other special needs or for behavioural reasons.
- the arrangements for briefing, health and safety induction, training and supervision, including supervision during meal-times, breaks etc.
- employers' legal responsibilities towards young persons.

In the case of longer or several consecutive placements, it will be necessary to draw up a formal agreement between the employer and the school. Clarity concerning respective tasks and the responsibilities of the partners, however, must be the aim in all circumstances irrespective of the length of the placement.

Risk Factors

Typical hazards encountered by work experience students include; slips, trips and falls; entanglement in equipment; and manual handling. The risks from these hazards are often increased due to; lack of risk assessment of the activity; lack of assessment of the pupil's capability; no effort to match the pupil to the activity; lack of adequate supervision; lack of training and instruction; and lack of personal protective equipment.

Schools must also ensure that pupils understand the following before work experience commences; the difference between hazards and risks; how to identify hazards and risks; how risks can be reduced; their own limitations, the need for disciplined behaviour; accident procedures; first-aid provisions; procedures in the event of fire; evacuation procedures; the meaning of safety signs; the need for safety precautions and safe systems of work; and key safety hazards in the workplace.

The school's general safety briefing should be reinforced by specific induction provided by the employer and as a minimum should cover; safety policy, literature and key individuals; key workplace hazards and safety precautions; and emergency procedures.

CONCLUSION

To place matters in perspective, thousands of young people undertake work experience each year without suffering detriment to their health and safety. This is mainly due to employers adopting a sensible approach by limiting the activities that the young people are allowed to undertake and providing effective supervision.

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