Introduction
Currently, in excess of 25 percent of all occupational injuries reported to the Health and Safety Executive are attributed to the manual handling of loads. The majority of these injuries have been found to be predominantly associated with the lifting, lowering, carrying, pushing and pulling of the loads; strains; sprains; trapped fingers and cuts from sharp objects. Industries particularly at risk include health and social care, manufacturing and transportation and storage.

There are three main risks of injury associated with manual handling operations. These are:

1. Overexertion usually associated with lifting something that is too heavy or bulky
2. Cumulative strain
3. Accidental injury

Statutory health and safety provisions, namely the Manual Handling Operations Regulations, prescribe duties that employers are required to comply with. These duties can be summarised as a hierarchy of steps which are as follows:

- Avoid hazardous manual handling operations where possible.
- Assess any hazardous operations that cannot be avoided.
- Remove or reduce the risk of injury, using the assessment as a basis for action.

Employees also have a number of duties which they are legally required to observe. These can be summarised as follows:

- Whilst at work employees are under a legal obligation to conduct themselves in a manner that does not endanger themselves or others. Employees must also co-operate with instructions given by the employer regarding health and safety.
- Employees should co-operate with their employer in the making of manual handling assessments, make proper use of equipment provided, report any defects and participate in training.

Manual handling assessment
Hazardous manual handling operations should be avoided wherever possible. Assessments should begin by asking, “Why does an object need to be moved manually at all?” In many cases, handling operations can be removed with a little thought and forward planning.

Many activities, however, include operations that cannot be avoided and which carry a potential for producing injury – i.e. they include some degree of risk. Where it is not possible to completely remove the handling operation, it is necessary for an assessment to be completed.
Outlined below is the path of events that should be followed when looking at a manual handling operation.

Does the task possess a risk of injury?
- Yes
  - Can the risk be avoided or removed?
    - Yes → Do it
    - No → Assess the manual handling operation
  - No → Keep under review

Assess the manual handling operation

Implement necessary changes and provide manual handling training

Has the risk been sufficiently reduced?
- Yes → Keep under review
- No → Has the risk been sufficiently reduced?

When a more detailed assessment is necessary, it should follow the broad structure set out in Schedule 1 to the Manual Handling Operations Regulations. The schedule lists a number of questions (see below) in five categories including the task, the load, the working environment, individual capability, and other factors. Not all of these factors will be relevant in every case.

Problems to look for when making an assessment

The tasks, do they involve:
- Holding loads away from the body?
- Twisting, stooping or reaching upwards?
- Large vertical movements?
- Long carrying distances?
- Strenuous pushing or pulling?
- Unpredictable movements of loads?
- Repetitive handling?
- Insufficient rest or recovery time?
- A work rate imposed by a process?

The loads, are they:
- Heavy, bulky or unwieldy?
- Difficult to grasp?
- Unstable or unpredictable?
- Intrinsically harmful, e.g. sharp or hot?
The working environment, are there:
- Constraints on posture?
- Poor floors?
- Variations in level?
- Hot/cold/humid conditions?
- Strong air movements?
- Poor lighting conditions?
- Restrictions on movement or posture from clothes or personal protective equipment?

Individual capacity, does the job:
- Require unusual capability?
- Endanger those with a health problem?
- Endanger pregnant women?
- Call for special information or training?

Other factors
- Is movement or posture hindered by personal protective equipment or by clothing?

The key to good assessments is the competence of the person who is to carry them out. To start with, it is important that the assessor is a good communicator and is familiar with statutory health and safety provisions. The assessor should have a thorough appreciation of the subject so that he/she is able to observe departures from normal practice, form valid conclusions as to the risk of injury and be able to seek out additional information if this becomes necessary. Finally, once the assessment has been completed, it is important that a clear record of the findings are kept and communicated to the relevant people.

Ways of reducing the risk of injury
In considering ways in which the risk of manual handling injury can be reduced, the following should be considered:

Can you change the environment?
- Improve workplace layout to improve efficiency?
- Remove obstructions to free movement?
- Provide better flooring?
- Prevent extremes of hot and cold?
- Improve lighting?

Can you alter the job?
- Reduce the amount of twisting and stooping?
- Avoid lifting from floor level or above shoulder height?
- Reduce carrying distances?
- Avoid repetitive handling?
- Avoid steps and steep ramps?
- Vary the work, allowing one set of muscles to rest while another is used?
Manual handling safe practices guidance

Can you:
- Consider less restrictive clothing or personal protective equipment?
- Protect those who have a physical weakness or are pregnant?
- Give employees more information, e.g. about the range of tasks they are likely to face?
- Provide training?

Training
Training is important, but on its own it can’t overcome:
- A lack of mechanical aids
- Unsuitable loads
- Bad working conditions

Training should be delivered by competent persons, be relevant and specific to the types of manual handling activities carried out in the workplace, fully documented and cover the following:
- How to recognise harmful manual handling
- Appropriate safe systems of work
- Use of mechanical aids
- Good handling techniques

Recording the assessment
Assessments carried out should be documented and record the significant findings of the assessments. Records in this regard should be kept readily accessible and subject to routine review, in order to confirm that the information noted remains valid.

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