

# Work environment management

## Background

The work environment is everything around you at work. Human beings are affected by physical factors such as air quality, noise and light levels, dangerous substances and machinery. Organisational and social factors also play a part, for example your workload, the way the work is organised, and the support you get from your team. Work environment management is the ongoing process of identifying risks and removing them so you can get on with your work safely.

## Stop and think!

The most important person at work is you. If you don't stop and think about safety while you work you are putting yourself and your colleagues at unnecessary risk.

## Rules about the work environment are there to protect you against risks at work

Every company must be familiar with the rules that apply to its own activities. The rules apply to any activity carried out by an employee on behalf of an employer, with some rules also covering sole traders.

Most of the rules concerning the work environment come from three sources:

- The Swedish Work Environment Act (AML, arbetsmiljölagen) contains basic rules about the work environment. The rules are general in nature and only provide a broad outline.
- The Swedish Work Environment Ordinance (AMF, arbetsmiljöförordningen) complements the AML and contains specific occupational health and safety rules.
- The Code of Statutes of the Swedish Work Environment Authority (AFS) contains more detailed regulations, with binding rules on particular subject areas or risk factors. The regulations also include general guidance clarifying the rules and describing how they can best be followed.

Some of the Swedish Work Environment Authority's regulations apply to all workplaces, for example the rules on systematic work environment management, workplace layout, ergonomics, and children and young people.

Other regulations are more focused on particular industries. Here are some examples of rules that are important for people like you who work in the wood processing and furniture industry

- how to use the equipment
- how to use forklifts
- chemical hazards in the work environment
- exposure limits
- noise.

The work environment is covered by a number of laws:

- Swedish Working Time Act (arbetstidslagen)
- Swedish Discrimination Act (diskrimineringslagen)

- Acts on electrical, fire and radiation protection.

### **Learn more**

Visit [www.av.se](http://www.av.se) or [www.prevent.se](http://www.prevent.se) to learn more about

- Swedish Work Environment Authority
- Swedish Work Environment Authority brochures
- Work environment rules (AML, AMF and AFS).

### **Failure to follow the rules is punishable by fines, sanction fees or penalties**

The Swedish Work Environment Authority is responsible for checking that the rules are followed. It does this by carrying out inspections in the company. The employer and the safety representative (if there is one) are present during the inspection. If the company does not have its own safety representative, a regional safety representative can attend. If the inspector identifies shortcomings in the work environment, he or she can require the employer to take action.

The Swedish Work Environment Authority's regulations carry varying legal weight. Some rules are punishable directly. If these rules are broken, fines or sanction fees may be imposed.

### **Fines**

The most serious breaches are punished by fines imposed by a court. Examples of actions potentially triggering fines include removing a safety feature or failing to follow certain rules concerning children and young people.

### **Stop and think!**

Removing or disabling a safety feature without good reason is a criminal offence punishable by fines.

### **Sanction fees**

Most directly punishable rules trigger sanction fees rather than fines. It is up to the Swedish Work Environment Authority to determine sanction fees. Examples of sanctionable rules include medical examination requirements, training certificate requirements for certain types of work, the requirement to use fall protection or to obtain permission to drive a forklift.

### **Penalties**

Other rules are indirectly punishable, meaning that the Swedish Work Environment Authority can impose injunctions/bans. Employers failing to comply with the injunction or ban are subject to a penalty.

### **Health and safety offences**

If an accident happens at work, an individual who has acted recklessly or negligently is liable as normal to prosecution under criminal law, for example for causing grievous bodily harm. These are health and safety offences. When passing sentence, the court will consider whether the company has followed the Swedish Work Environment Authority's rules. Serious accidents can happen when machines are used with inadequate safety features, and these situations are frequently prosecuted as health and safety offences.

## **Learn more**

Visit [www.av.se](http://www.av.se) to learn more about Swedish Work Environment Authority inspections.

## **A good work environment is built on cooperation**

An employer must take all the necessary steps to prevent employees injuring themselves or suffering ill health because of their work. Anything dangerous must be modified or replaced in order to remove the risk. If a risk cannot be removed completely, the employer must instead make the changes necessary to minimise the risk.

One of the fundamental principles of the AML is that although the employer has primary responsibility for the work environment, the employer and the employees must work together to create a truly safe work environment. This gives employees and safety representatives an important part to play and a responsibility in work environment management.

## **Responsibilities and roles**

The following roles are involved in work environment management:

- employer
- employee
- safety representative/work environment representative
- chief safety representative
- regional safety representative
- pupil safety representative and student safety representative
- safety committee
- occupational health service.

The responsibilities of each role are as follows.

### **Employer**

The employer is responsible for ensuring that the work is planned and carried out in accordance with the work environment rules – in other words making sure it is safe. The employer must implement systematic work environment management, provide information and instructions about risks, and make sure the employees have the right skills. The employer must also arrange rehabilitation and adaptation activities.

### **Employee**

Employees must follow any instructions that have been issued and must help to ensure that the working conditions in their area are safe. Employees must play an active part in work environment management by reporting risks and near misses, suggesting action and giving feedback on the action taken.

### **Stop and think!**

Everyone in the company is responsible for helping to create a good work environment. If you break the company's safety rules you may be held to account. Repeated wrongdoing can lead to dismissal for gross misconduct.

### **Safety representative/work environment representative**

The safety representative is the employees' representative in work environment management. The safety representative is chosen by his or her colleagues, usually through the local union with a collective agreement with the employer. The safety representative is usually a union official but is not required to be. A safety representative must be appointed for all workplaces with more than five employees.

The safety representative

- monitors the work environment to ensure it is up to standard
- verifies that the employer implements systematic work environment management (investigating and addressing risks, following up work environment management)
- takes part in the planning of everything affecting the work environment, for example before a reorganisation or when new working methods are introduced.

Powers of the safety representative:

- The safety representative may require the employer to take action if he or she believes the work environment is not up to standard, figure 11.
- The safety representative can stop a task if he or she feels there is a direct and serious risk to life or health and the employer fails to address the risk immediately. Stopping work in this way is a last resort. The safety representative must first draw the employer's attention to the problem so that something can be done.

### **Stop and think!**

Ask your manager or a colleague who is the safety representative for your workplace.

### **Chief safety representative**

If the workplace has more than one safety representative, one of them is appointed chief safety representative. The chief safety representative coordinates the activities of all the safety representatives.

### **Regional safety representative**

If a workplace does not have its own safety representative, a union can appoint a regional safety representative. The regional safety representative acts for everyone in the same union, regardless of the company they are working for. The regional safety representative visits workplaces throughout the region, meeting employers and discussing work environment management.

### **Pupil safety representative and student safety representative**

Pupils over the age of 13 in primary school, upper secondary school and in adult education are entitled to participate in their establishment's work environment management by appointing a pupil safety representative. The pupil safety representative must be invited to participate in work environment management on more or less the same terms as the staff safety representative.

### **Stop and think!**

Pupil safety representatives act for the pupils and work to improve the work environment in the school.

Adult students are represented by a student safety representative. A student safety representative is chosen by the students and must be at least 18 years old.

### **Safety committee**

There must be a safety committee in large workplaces with more than 50 employees or if one is requested by the employees. The safety committee is a working group made up of representatives of the employer (the company or organisation) and the employees (safety representatives). The safety committee discusses issues affecting the work environment across the entire workplace.

### **Occupational health service (OHS)**

An independent expert resource in work environment management and rehabilitation, bringing together nurses, doctors, health and safety engineers, psychologists and physiotherapists. The occupational health service takes a preventive approach, aiming to prevent anyone being injured or falling ill because of work. Employers can call in the occupational health service if they need outside help to resolve a specific work environment issue.

### **Learn more**

Visit [www.av.se](http://www.av.se) or [www.prevent.se](http://www.prevent.se) and **search for**

- safety representative
- regional safety representative
- pupil/student safety representative
- safety committee
- occupational health service.