TechNet: Technicians Network
Health, Safety and the Technician’s Role

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Tom Fleming; Head of Health & Safety
A potted work history!

• BSc Applied Microbiology – Glasgow Uni.
• 1980 - Microbiology Research Technician, Strathclyde Uni. – at same time studying for MSc in Microbial Genetics.
• Teaching/research technician role at De Montefort Uni.
• Head of Technical Services, Faculty of Science at Derby Uni. – while doing MBA, then NEBOSH Diploma (I blame the ‘Six Pack’ 1992!).
• Head of Health & Safety at Derby Uni.
• Head of Health & Safety at Sheffield Hallam – MA Law
• Director of Health and Safety, University of York
• 2012-present, Head of Health and Safety, University of Sheffield.
How UoS manages H&S

• University of Sheffield Health and Safety Policy, identifies a clear devolved responsibility through management structure.
• Council ➔ VC ➔ DVC/PVCs ➔ Heads of Dept ➔ Line managers/supervisors ➔ all staff

The University’s Health & Safety Policy can be found at: https://hs.shef.ac.uk/attachments/170?updated=1416223290

• The H&S Policy is a legal document and forms part of the conditions of service of all staff.
From a Health & Safety Perspective
Technicians are:..........

• Absolutely pivotal in any University H&S system. Why?
  – Competent, practical skills, practical attitude
  – Are actually there, on the spot! (more about the academic/technician relationship later)
  – Are a consistent link between different ‘generations’ of undergraduates and postgraduates.
  – Are local ‘custodians’ of records and history of equipment e.g. hoists/lifting gear; pressure vessels; and.....dare I say it LEVs?
The Lab, Workshop and Studio Environment

Requisite H&S competencies for technical staff:

- Relevant practical experience/skills and a demonstrable qualification.
- Good working knowledge of the equipment/materials (chemicals, machinery, radiation sources, biohazards, etc)
- Clear understanding of the risks associated with the work.....and of the control measure in place.
- Clear idea of any relevant statutory inspection or maintenance requirements
- Require a commitment to CPD
Technician – Academic Relationship

• Can often be stressful – e.g. several PIs/researchers expecting simultaneous support!

• Can have confused areas of responsibility; e.g. the academic is in Guatemala and the PG is here in the studio/lab/workshop working dangerously without any risk assessment. Who’s responsibility is it?

The basic rule is – if you see unsafe practices intervene. If not could this happen to us?
The Story of Sheri Sangji, Post-Doctoral Researcher

https://youtu.be/F6NEEdcZY2WY
Risk Assessments – Who’s role?

The Tale of Dr Bird of King’s College

• Dr Bird was a Reader in Chemistry Dept at Kings College, London.

• Disagreed with the need to produce a risk assessment, despite explicit instructions from his Head of Department.

• Two of his PGs were injured (one lost a thumb the other suffered an eye injury) when they incorrectly mixed chemicals in the wrong sequence.

• HSE prosecuted Dr Bird!
Technicians in the ‘Front Line’!

• Burnley College technician injured in fall from height – led to HSE prosecution.
• The technician fell three metres while changing an air filter on an extraction system. The technician had to put one foot on a cabinet and his other on the top of a stepladder. The ladder toppled from under him and he fell, breaking his back in several places, causing ‘life changing injuries’.

Question: should a technical professional have taken these risks?
Burnley College (continued)

• His supervisor (also a technician) had witnessed him in exactly the same way just over a week earlier, but had failed to take any action to ensure the work was carried out safely in future. The college had not given the employee any training on working at height, and had failed to produce a risk assessment.

• Result = Successful prosecution of Supervisor and Head of College. £20,000 fine...plus PR damage...plus award of the civil claim!

Question: could a simple risk assessment have avoided this?
Risk Assessment Training and Templates

• Online training and risk assessment templates (as well as specific topic guidance) are available at the University Health & Safety webpages

http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/hs/riskass
So What Happens Next?

• In the academic year 2016-17 the central Health & Safety team will be focussing strongly on the following:
  
  – Improve the EFM service to Depts. in relation to safety critical equipment
  
  – Re-auditing higher risk departments.
  
  – Staff (particularly academic staff) producing *suitable and sufficient* risk assessments.
  
  – Participating in departmental inspections – and inviting TU Safety Reps to participate.
  
  – Asking ALL staff to step up and feel able to report unsafe systems. We WILL support you....promise!
Thank You Ladies and Gentlemen

Our technical staff are the unsung professionals of the University

Have a Fantastic Weekend!