

Risky business

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In the first of 3 articles assessing site risks, Gary Blackman considers pre-visit issues

According to the [Health and Safety Executive](#) (HSE)'s report [Health and safety in construction sector 2014/15](#), there were 35 fatal injuries in construction workplaces that year along with 65,000 non-fatal ones. These injuries included:

- slips, trips and falls (23%);
- falls from height (19%); and
- being struck by an object (11%).

While most of these injuries involved construction workers, building surveyors can also be at risk. In an age where corporate manslaughter means that we are not immune from prosecution, managing risk for ourselves and our employees is a fundamental part of our daily lives.

Quite often when we are visiting buildings or sites for the first time, we will know very little about them other than what our clients tell us or what we have gleaned online.

Measuring risk

So how do we measure risk when we have not been to the building or site, and there is little or no information or documentation? Measuring risk will obviously depend on a number of factors, including:

- whether the site is vacant or occupied;
- the type of building or site;
- the purpose of our visit; and

- whether we are working at height.

There are 2 key aspects that enable us to assess risk:

- **hazards:** that is, the potential harm; and
- **the risk itself:** the likelihood of those hazards happening.

Where the severity and likelihood of potential harm increases, so does the risk.

There are many pro forma risk assessment forms available, and the HSE also provides some excellent guidance on creating your own.

Assessing risk

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So how do we assess the risk? After identifying the hazards and the likelihood of harm, we must then manage them so as to reduce the risk to an acceptable level and minimise the chances of personal injury.

The hazards that we encounter during our working day are numerous and varied, and they will depend on what tasks we are undertaking.

Let's use a typical example ? working at height.

If we were to fall more than 2 metres it is highly likely that we will be seriously injured, or even die. Therefore the severity is high and, looking at Table 1, 'high' is given a rating of 4.0. If we then look at the likelihood of us falling in the first instance, you would have to say this was high too. Going back to the matrix, we have another rating of 4.0, giving an overall rating of 16.0 and a high risk factor.

		SEVERITY				
		Very high 5.00	High 4.00	Medium 3.00	Low 2.00	Very low 1.00
LIKELIHOOD	Very high 5.00	25.00	20.00	15.00	10.00	5.00
	High 4.00	20.00	16.00	12.00	8.00	4.00
	Medium 3.00	15.00	12.00	9.00	6.00	3.00
	Low 2.00	10.00	8.00	6.00	4.00	2.00
	Very low 1.00	5.00	4.00	3.00	2.00	1.00

Risk ranking		
High risk	> 10	Review risk in detail and amend project strategy to reduce it
Medium risk	5-10	Develop contingency plans and monitor risk development
Low risk	< 5	Maintain a record of risk and consider contingency measures in outline

Table 1: Risk matrix (Source: Lambert Smith Hampton)

While it may be difficult to reduce the severity by much, we are going to have to put procedures in place to limit the likelihood of a fall occurring.

So if we originally planned to view a roof from a tower scaffold erected by the contractor, where the likelihood of falling was high, were we instead to use, say, an access platform with an experienced operator, and were harnessed correctly and stayed inside the cradle, then clearly the risk would be reduced. The likelihood, it could be argued, is now low, and we have reduced the risk to an acceptable level so we can undertake the task.

We have to go through this process for every hazard that we think we will encounter on our visit ? such as asbestos, moving vehicles or vermin ? to enable us to complete our pre-site assessment of risk successfully.

To carry out our roles as building surveyors safely, undertaking a pre-site inspection risk assessment should be second nature to us all. The completed risk assessment should be in the job folder before we leave. But how many of us are guilty of not completing the assessment before heading out?

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Further information

- Related competencies include [Health and safety](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Building surveying* journal (July/August 2016)