

Display Screen Equipment Regulations

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) (DSE) Regulations govern the safe use of computers used for work. They came fully into force on 31 December 1996 and apply to all employers. While far from perfect, they offer some protection to computer workers. This factsheet offers guidance to safety representatives on how to get the best out of them.

The Regulations cover computer and other equipment used for the display of text or graphics. Laptops and hand-held display equipment are covered if in frequent and regular use. Screens which show television or film pictures are excluded, as are calculators, cash registers and most scientific and medical devices.

Regulation 1 plus guidance defines DSE "users", employees who habitually use display screen equipment as a significant part of their normal work. The other Regulations apply to users who work:

- at their employer's workstation
- at home
- at another employer's workstation

Regulation 1 also defines an "operator", a self-employed computer worker, to whom the other Regulations partly apply.

A user must fulfil most or all of the following criteria:

- be dependent on a computer to do the job
- have no discretion on the use of a computer
- need significant training and skills
- use a computer for an hour or more at a time
- use a computer more or less daily
- need rapid input and output of information
- have high levels of attention and concentration

Most computer workers meet these criteria. In any case, other legislation imposes the same level of obligation on employers towards non-users as the DSE Regulations towards users, with the possible exception of the eye test and glasses provision (see later). Safety representatives should argue that the same standards should apply to all the computer workers they represent, these being not less than the minimum prescribed by the DSE Regulations.

Regulation 2 sets out the duty on employers to carry out risk assessments of the workstations of users and operators, including homeworkers, in order to identify risks and reduce them "to the lowest extent reasonably practicable."

Assessments should be repeated when they are no longer valid or when circumstances change significantly. They should be systematic, appropriate to the risk and comprehensive. They are often carried out by means of checklists completed either by users or assessors; both categories should receive suitable training. Assessors should be familiar with the main requirements of the Regulations and have the ability to:

- assess risks
- draw upon additional information
- draw valid and reliable conclusions
- make and communicate clear records of assessments
- recognise their own limitations and call on extra expertise.

The opinions of workers should always be consulted and they should be provided with the results. Union representatives should be involved in the design of assessment, should advise their members on the suitability of the method to be employed and should obtain the results. They should press for all workstations to be assessed, this being required under some legislation. They should monitor recommendations for improvements and ensure they are carried out.

Regulation 3 and a Schedule set the standards for equipment, dealing with:

- adequate lighting, including adequate contrast with no glare or reflections
- noise minimisation
- comfortable temperature and humidity
- reduction of radiation to negligible levels
- software which is appropriate to the task and user, provided feedback on system status with no secret monitoring
- window coverings
- adjustable, readable, glare/reflection free screen with no flicker
- usable, adjustable, detachable, legible keyboard - there should be adequate space in front of the keyboard to support hands and wrists
- glare-free work surface with adequate space for all necessary arrangements
- adequate leg room and clearance under desk
- chair with adjustable height and back support

In the recommended set-up, workers should have good support for their feet and backs, look at the screen near horizontally, and address the keyboard with their forearms horizontal with minimum flexion of the wrists.

Workers are entitled to a footrest if they want one. When a case can be made for document holders, supplementary personal lighting and anti-glare screens, these should be provided. The legislation makes no mention of mice, trackballs and similar devices.

Safety representatives should press for these minimum standards to be applied to all equipment whoever uses it; some piece of legislation will require this.

Regulation 4 requires employers to plan breaks or changes of activity into the work routine, these being part of working time. These can be taken at the keyboard, or preferably by performing other tasks away from the keyboard or by stopping work. Short, frequent breaks are better than longer, occasional ones. Continuous keyboarding should not take place for more than 2 hours and preferably for no more than 1 hour, with a break of 5-10 minutes or more. The timing of breaks should be at the discretion of the worker rather than the computer. Safety representatives should seek negotiations or consultations on

the planning of work routines to enable breaks to be taken; this should include training and information.

Regulation 5 gives users a right to free eye and eyesight tests upon starting computer work and at regular intervals thereafter. Employers have arranged a variety of ways of meeting this requirement:

- by allowing the user to go to his/her own optician who bills the employer
- by providing the employee with a voucher for a certain amount
- by directing the employee to an optician of the employer's choice.

The first method is preferable. Many employers have introduced vision screening tests carried out on their premises. This is not a proper eye and eyesight test nor an acceptable alternative to one. Workers and their representatives should insist on the full test by a suitably qualified person.

The optician, not the employer, should say how often a repeat test is needed.

Where tests show that spectacles are required for computer work, the employer must pay for these. The employer's obligation extends only to the provision of the basic lenses and frames.

Regulations 6 and 7 oblige employers to provide education and training in the health and safety aspects of computer work. These activities should take place in working time and should cover:

- health effects of computer work
- exercises for relieving eye and muscle stress
- optimum set-up of the workstation
- good posture and keyboard technique
- work routines and breaks
- special characteristics of software
- legislative requirements and workers' rights

Workers should have the opportunity to attend a discussion on these topics with a lead speaker, in addition to any leaflets or videos that might be used, to enable them to ask questions and raise their own concerns.

Related Legislation. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations set up a general requirement to carry out risk assessments which will cover all workers not subjected to the DSE Regulations. They require employers to appoint competent persons to carry out day to day safety functions. They give representatives of recognised unions consultative rights on the safety needs of the members they represent, the appointment of competent persons, on the provision of training and on the introduction of new technology. The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (see Daily Hazard 49) deal with the safe use of equipment and apply to all computer equipment not otherwise covered. The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations (see Daily Hazards 46 and 47) deal with physical arrangements at work including temperature, ventilation, space and heating.

Resources

VDUs: an easy guide to the Regulations. Health and Safety Executive, ISBN 0 7176 0735 6, £5.00: this is a guide for employers with a good assessment checklist.

VDU Work and the Hazards to Health. London Hazards Centre, ISBN 0 948974 11 7, £6.50 + £1 postage: this is a comprehensive guide to computer safety with an assessment checklist.

Display Screen Equipment Work: guidance on Regulations. HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 0410, £5.00: this gives the Regulations and guidance plus supplementary information

RSI Hazards Handbook. LHC, 1997. An up to date worker's guide to RSI prevention. £12 (£4.50 to union branches & local groups when ordered from LHC) + £1 postage

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