



Overview

Many serious fires are caused by 'hot work'. Typically this is the kind of work that involves the use of open flames or the application of heat when repairs or maintenance are being carried out. Some of the worst fires happen shortly after the repair or maintenance work has been completed and the workmen have moved on to the next job or have gone home for the day.

Conduction can cause heat from where the work was being done to spread and ignite nearby combustible materials which may be, for example, in the room next door or at the ceiling in the room below. If this happens when no one is in the vicinity the fire can take hold and is likely to be discovered only when somebody notices the flames. By then it's probably too late to prevent a serious loss.

Manage the risks

Virtually all of these fires could be avoided, or at least prevented from becoming serious, by following the usual risk management hierarchy of controls:

- eliminate the risk
- reduce the likelihood
- reduce the impact if it happens

Eliminate the risk

Before opting for a 'hot work' solution the question should be asked 'can it be done another way?' For example, pipes can be joined without using soldered fittings – and the fire risk associated with hot work is eliminated altogether.

Reduce the likelihood of fire

If the job cannot be done without using heat, special precautions need to be taken. These are aimed at reducing the likelihood of fire spreading from the point where the work is being done. A risk assessment should be carried out and recorded. Consideration should be given to, for example:

- local conditions, e.g. avoid roof repairs during windy weather which may fan flames and increase the risk of fire spreading
- only use employees trained in hot work
- supervisors to make sure hot work procedures are followed
- operate a hot work permit procedure
- following the specific precautions set out on the permit.

The hot work permit

An example of hot work permit can be found on the following link [Hot work permit](#).

The permit sets out information about the job:

- who is doing it
- whether contractor or employee
- the nature of the work
- where it is to take place
- when the permit expires.

The permit incorporates the precautions check list which needs to be completed. One part of the permit is kept by the fire safety supervisor and the other part is given to the person doing the job. After the work has been completed the second part of the permit is signed off to confirm:

- that the work area and all adjacent areas were inspected during the fire watch period and were found safe and
- the work area was monitored for 2 hours following hot work and found fire safe.

Reduce the effects of fire if it happens

It needs to be recognised that, even if all of the precautions have been taken, a fire may still occur. Arrangements should be in place to reduce the consequences if this happens.

For example:

- consider when would be the best time to carry out the work. If a fire does break out it is obviously better that this does not endanger the usual occupants of the building – e.g. in a school building, can the work be done when no pupils are on the premises?
- ensuring that suitable extinguishing equipment is readily available so that if a fire does start, it can be quickly brought under control

- make sure that the people doing the work, and their supervisors, know how to summon assistance in an emergency
- ensuring that employees know how to escape to a place of safety
- monitoring the work site and nearby areas after the work has been completed

Insurance implications

It is a condition of all insurance policies that reasonable precautions have to be taken to prevent losses. Policies often include specific conditions or warranties setting out precautions which are to be taken when hot work is to be carried out. Failure to observe these requirements could mean that, in the event of a fire, the insurers will be entitled to turn down the resultant claims. These conditions may be found in both property and liability policies. This means that organisations need to make sure that the precautions are followed not only by their own employees but also by contractors.

Where contractors are used it is important to select competent contractors and make sure that their activities are adequately controlled and supervised. Selection should take into account the contractors technical competence, their health and safety record and the adequacy of their insurance covers, including the indemnity limit on their public liability cover. If contractors fail to carry out the precautions set out in their public liability policy, it is unlikely that their insurers will meet the claim. If the loss is substantial, the contractors may not be able to pay it from their own resources, potentially leaving the building owner to bear the loss.

Summary

Consider whether the work could be done without using heat.

A thorough risk assessment needs to be done and strict precautions identified.

Consider whether a hot work permit needs to be used.

Check the insurance position – own and contractors. Select competent contractors and control their activities.

Further RMP Resources and Articles

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the [RMP Resources](#) or [RMP Articles](#) pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our [LinkedIn](#) page. Additionally we have specific discussion groups for the [Education](#), [Emergency](#) and [Government](#) sectors

Get in touch

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