

# HOW TO INVESTIGATE AN ACCIDENT

When investigating an accident you should be concerned with trying to identify the route cause of the accident, not just the obvious cause: For example:

Accident:                   Teacher falls down a set of stairs

Obvious Case:             The treads on the stairs are worn

Root Cause:               There is no maintenance system in place  
                              There is no system for inspection of the premises  
                              There is a lack of a management system programme

An accident investigation that does not seek to identify the route cause is not a complete investigation.

An accident investigation should be carried out by individuals that are competent to do so. The following guidance is designed to aid the investigative process.

## STAGES IN AN INVESTIGATION

OBTAIN FACTS  
DETERMINE THE CAUSES  
DETERMINE THE CHANGES NEEDED  
RECORD THE FINDINGS  
COMMUNICATE THE FINDINGS  
REVIEW ACTION  
OBTAIN THE FACTS

Establishing what is relevant and what is not can be time consuming. However this information can be obtained by:

Inspecting the immediate scene and equipment  
Interviewing the person directly involved with the accident  
Interviewing witnesses to the accident  
Reviewing procedures and training

**Inspecting the immediate scene and equipment:**

The accident scene should be inspected as soon as possible after the accident. Particular attention should be given to the following to see if any of them had a bearing on the accident potential:

- Positions of people
- Any personal protective equipment
- Tools and equipment
- Orderliness/tidiness
- Procedures

Wherever appropriate, photographs and/or sketches should be taken of the scene. This is of particular importance where there is a likelihood of the scene being disturbed - e.g. to make the area safe.

**Interviewing:**

Ideally this should be done in familiar surroundings so as not to make the person being interviewed feel uncomfortable. If the person is not too seriously injured then the accident site is ideal as the person can explain what happened. Remember this should be an interview to determine the facts not an interrogation. Witnesses should be interviewed one at a time

**Reviewing procedures and training:**

The work procedures set out in appropriate guidance and any risk assessments should be examined to see if they existed and were adequate, if they were understood and followed.

It is also important to establish:

- Any training received relevant to the accident
- Any past incidents/accidents
- Any risk assessments in relation to that particular activity

to see if any weaknesses have been previously identified

**Determine the causes:**

After all the facts have been ascertained the causes can be examined.

**Obvious causes:** The obvious causes are easy to find. They are brought about by an unsafe act or condition. Unsafe acts usually stem from poor safety attitudes and indicate a lack of proper training or information.

**Root Causes:** These are personal or job factors that are brought about by failures in organisation and the management's safety programme. This can include factors such as;

- Lack of supervision or discipline
- Lack of training
- Lack of management awareness

### **Determine what changes are needed**

The purpose the investigation is to prevent a reoccurrence. To do this some practical measures must be recommended and carried out that will demonstrate a commitment to reduce this identified risk. The remedial action may be short and /or long term and may involve changes to the physical environment - e.g. putting in place new guarding on machinery - and/or procedural changes - ensuring an adequate training programme.

### **Record findings**

The findings of every accident investigation must be recorded in a systematic way to enable the report to be read by the appropriate people who are responsible for reviewing and implementing necessary changes. It also provides a historical record of the accident that may be useful in the future. In many cases it may be appropriate to record the findings on existing forms - e.g. EDAF1. However, where more detailed reports are required, then details of the accident investigation should be recorded separately and attached to any completed accident form.

### **Communicate findings**

Good communication is a very important part of the safety effort. Information of an accident and remedial actions should be passed to all relevant staff who may encounter similar incidents.

### **Review action**

Where action has been implemented as a means of reducing the risk of an accident reoccurring, those actions must be periodically reviewed to ensure that they remain appropriate.