

Safety Matters in Charity Retailing

Information Sheet No. 6



Manual Handling

Employer surveys show that manual handling accidents and injuries are the biggest single cause of ill health and accident-related absenteeism at work. Since there is a great deal of manual handling in charity shops, it is likely that this is also the case in charity retailing.

Manual Handling means any transporting or supporting of a load by hand or by bodily force. This includes lifting, putting down, pushing, pulling, carrying or moving a load.

The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 place a number of responsibilities on employers:

- **Avoidance:** employers should restructure the way work is done in order to eliminate manual handling as far as is reasonably practicable.
- **Assessment:** where it is not possible to avoid manual handling, a risk assessment needs to be carried out. The HSE provides very clear and specific advice on how to conduct these.
- **Risk reduction:** control measures need to be established in order to reduce the risk of injury to the lowest level reasonably practicable.
- **Monitoring:** control measures need to be monitored by inspections, audits, investigations of accidents (and near misses), and via feedback from those carrying out the work.
- **Employees:** need to have their responsibilities explained to them.

The Regulations also place a duty on **employees** to co-operate by following procedures and systems and making proper use of any lifting equipment provided. They should also be encouraged to report any problems or concerns to their manager.

Assessing Risks

This process is critical to achieving a reduction in accidents or risks of injury from manual handling. The HSE guidelines describe how poor manual handling can cause harm. Their recommended assessment form contains a list of questions designed to ascertain the risks under 4 headings:

- **Task**
- **Load**
- **Environment**
- **Individual**

These questions help to identify the extent to which the potential for harm exists and what the possible solutions might be.

Task

Does it entail carrying loads away from the body? Regardless of the handling technique used, not keeping the load close to the body will increase the level of stress on the lower back. As a rough guide, holding a load at arm's length imposes about 5 times the stress experienced when holding the same load very close to the trunk.

Does it entail poor posture? Poor posture during manual handling introduces the additional risk of loss of control of the load and a sudden, unpredictable increase in physical stresses. A typical example is when the body weight is forward on the toes, the heels are off the ground and the feet are too close together.

Does it involve twisting? Stress on the lower back is increased significantly if the trunk is twisted while supporting a load.

Does it entail stooping? Stooping can also increase stress on the lower back – the trunk is thrown forward and its weight is added to the load being handled.

Does it involve reaching upwards? Reaching upwards places additional stresses on the arms and back. Control of the load becomes more difficult and, because the arms are extended, they are more prone to injury.

Are the lifting distances excessive? Lifting or lowering a load large distances are considerably more demanding physically. Lifting or lowering through a large distance is likely to necessitate a change of grip part way, further increasing the risk of injury. Lifts beginning at floor level should be avoided where possible. Where unavoidable, they should preferably finish no higher than waist height.

Are the carrying distances excessive? If a load is carried for an excessive distance, physical stresses are prolonged, leading to fatigue and increased risk of injury.

As a general rule, if a load is carried further than about 10 metres, then the physical demands of carrying the load will tend to predominate over those of lifting and lowering and individual capability will be reduced.

Does it involve pushing or pulling? The risk of injury is increased if pushing or pulling is carried out with the hands much below knuckle height or above shoulder height. Pushing or pulling a load in circumstances where the grip between foot and floor is poor – whether through the condition of the floor, footwear or both – is likely to increase the risk of injury.

Load

How heavy is it? Weight is clearly important, but is sometimes not the main consideration affecting the risk of injury.

Is it bulky or unwieldy? The shape of a load will affect the way it can be gripped, and the posture that can be adopted. Bulky loads may restrict vision or hit obstructions.

Is it unstable? If the contents shift, sudden movements will impose additional stress for which the handler is not prepared.

Is it sharp? Sharp edges or rough surfaces are obvious risks of direct injury.

Environment

Uneven, slippery or unstable floors hinder smooth movement. A variation in floor levels is likely to aggravate handling problems. Carrying stock up and down stairs increases the risk of Slips, Trips and Falls. Poor lighting, ventilation and extremes of temperature will also increase the risk of injury.

Individual

Does the job require unusual strength? As a general rule the risk of injury should be regarded as unacceptable if the operation cannot be performed satisfactorily by most reasonably fit and healthy employees.

Does the person have a health condition, or previous injury? Reasonable adjustments should be made so as not to disadvantage a disabled person. Individual assessments for workers with health conditions should be conducted, consulting health specialists as required.

Assessment Records

The HSE guidelines contain a completed sample of the form they recommend for recording the assessment. The worked example included in this Pack as an appendix to this Information Sheet is based very closely upon the HSE form.

Official guidance recommends that a separate assessment be conducted for each of the main **tasks** involving manual handling at the workplace.

British Heart Foundation has produced generic Manual Handling assessments for the following tasks:

- *Lifting*
- *Carrying bags and other items*
- *Carrying loose garments*
- *Using step ladders; reaching; high level storage*
- *Handling, opening and sorting donated stock*
- *Using storage pens*
- *Changing light bulbs, fluorescent tubes, starter switches, etc.*
- *Stock deliveries and rag collections*

The number of assessments required at each charity shop will depend upon the risks at each site. Risks will vary according to the range and quantity of products sold.

Shops selling furniture or a large quantity of books will have increased injury risks and should do separate assessments for handling this heavy, bulky merchandise.

Risks will also vary according to the environment at each shop, such as whether goods have to be carried up and down stairs or long distances. H&S inspectors will want to see that any generic manual handling assessments have been considered at each workplace to ensure that they are appropriate to the specific circumstances of each site.

Stock collection schemes (e.g. door-to-door gift collections) will require their own manual handling assessments, as will depots and warehouses where products are sorted for distribution to shops.

The Pasque Charity warehouse, which sorts most of the donated goods sold at the shops, carried out 10 manual handling assessments owing to the complexity of its operations and the volume and variety of products it handles.

Vulnerable Workers

Additional control measures may be required to protect vulnerable workers. General risk assessments for young people under 18 and for new and expectant mothers should consider their capability for undertaking manual handling tasks and highlight any special control measures needed for them.

Risk Reduction

Consideration should be given to using **mechanical aids** to help with moving stock.

The Pasque Charity warehouse uses catering trolleys, donated by a local firm that was closing down, for the movement of books and bric-a-brac within the building. Mobile rails, sack trucks and roll cages are used for the movement of clothes and sacks.

A simple way of lowering the risk of injury is to **reduce the weight** of a load. For example, restrictions should be placed on the size of boxes used for storing and moving books.

The recommended weight limits to lift from the floor are 7 kilos for women and 10 kilos for men.

It is not uncommon for rag sacks to weigh in excess of 10 kilos and for shoe sacks to be considerably heavier. Research in 2003 at a textile-recycling depot showed that:

- the average rag sack weighed 8.5 kilos
- the heaviest weighed 12 kilos
- 60% of rag sacks weighed over 7.5 kilos
- a sack containing 12-14 pairs of shoes will weigh about 7 kilos

Oxfam has reduced the size of its shoe sacks in order to limit the quantity that can be put in them and is having the recommended maximum weight printed on the rag sacks.

Acorns Children's Hospice Trust has provided Shop Managers with hand-held scales and

instructed them to limit the weight of a sack to 7 kilos, preferably only 5 kilos.

Other solutions for controlling manual handling risks may involve the **design** of equipment and the layout of work areas.

Following assessments at its stock collection depots Oxfam decided to raise the height of the base of the sorting baskets, in order to reduce the extent to which people had to stoop to pick up sacks, boxes or loose products.

The Shaw Trust minimises the movement of stock within backrooms by positioning the storage pens (for unsorted stock) adjacent to the sorting table wherever possible.

Working at Height

The government regulations for working at height apply to work at any height where a fall is liable to result in injury (i.e. even when standing on a kickstool). Good practice to ensure compliance would include:

- assessing risks when storing items above shoulder height
- restricting the use of stepladders to competent people
- training in the safe use of step ladders and keeping a record of this training
- providing suitable stepladders, with regular maintenance checks and records of these checks

1500 people are seriously injured each year while using ladders at work.

A secure handhold should be available to anyone working on a ladder or stepladder. If a charity shop is buying a new stepladder or using one frequently, it would be advisable to purchase a light industrial standard one. These have a safety rail and wider, non-slip treads than domestic ladders.

The Pasque Charity has provided shops with a leaflet on how to use stepladders correctly (e.g. pointing the steps towards where the load is to be picked up or put down so as to prevent twisting the body).

Monitoring

Monitoring the effectiveness of measures aimed at reducing manual handling could involve scrutinising absence records held by H.R. departments and not just the information recorded in accident books.

Training

Training on correct lifting/handling techniques is an important means of reducing risks of back injuries.

A typical training session for key staff such as Shop Managers, depot staff and stock collectors would last for 3-4 hours. This would cover the structure of the spine, the common injuries caused through manual handling, and would allow time for participants to practice lifting and moving different types of loads.

It is advisable that whoever conducts manual handling training for charity retail staff is familiar with the types of loads and lifting that are commonly experienced in the sector.

The training should involve carrying sacks (not just cartons), and also lifting from a car boot, which can put great strain on the back if the object is heavy. It would also be helpful to include advice on carrying objects (particularly loose clothing) up and down stairs because of the danger of Slips, Trips and Falls.

Acorns Children's Hospice Trust reports that its staff found the best manual handling training sessions were those run by people who had familiarised themselves with charity shops. They demonstrated how to perform common charity retail manual handling tasks using typical loads such as sacks.

PDSA uses its regional trainers to run Manual Handling training courses. Several Hospice charities use the services of their physiotherapists to train retail staff.

The Red Cross and St. John Ambulance are 2 charities that provide such training. For details of what they can provide, visit their websites or contact their local County Office at:

www.redcross.org.uk/firstaid
www.sja.org.uk
(Tel: 08700 104950)

It may be possible for individuals to be booked onto courses that are open to anyone to attend. Setting up a course specifically for your own organisation is likely to be a more cost-effective option. The maximum participants per course are 8 for The Red Cross and 12 for St. John Ambulance.

Shop and Depot Managers should ensure that volunteers receive sufficient and appropriate instruction in handling and lifting techniques.

Volunteers at The Princess Alice Hospice shops are given an H&S leaflet on their induction. This includes guidance on safe handling techniques as well as other safe working practices.

PDSA Shop Managers instruct all their volunteers in manual handling and provide each of them with a copy of the booklet published by Scriptographic Publications Ltd. The booklet has a tear-off form at the back, which the volunteers are asked to sign and hand to the Shop Manager to confirm that they have read the booklet.

Posters

Posters for shop backrooms illustrating manual handling techniques can be a useful supplement to training.

British Heart Foundation has issued an illustrated A4 poster to shops demonstrating the basic lifting techniques.

(One of the three H&S posters that can be downloaded from the Association's website is an illustrated A3 poster on manual handling.)

Records

A copy of the manual handling assessments should be kept on the premises. These are documents that Environmental Health Officers will want to see on their inspections. Copies of any individual assessment and/or special arrangements for vulnerable workers should also be recorded and filed on site.

These assessments should be reviewed where there is reason to suspect that they are no longer valid or where there has been a significant change to working practices. They should also be reviewed after a major incident.

The HSE advises organisations to keep information on the instruction and training provided to managers, staff and volunteers to show that employees have received manual handling training.

Further Reading

Getting to grips with manual handling. A short guide for employers.
HSE leaflet INDG 143REV2

Manual Handling in the textile industry.
HSE leaflet IACL 103

Manual Handling. Solutions you can handle.
HSE publication ISBN 0 7176 0693 7

Manual Handling. Manual Handling Operations Regulations. HSE publication ISBN 0 7176 2823 X

Preventing slips and trips at work.
HSE leaflet INDG 225REV1