

6

Managing your work area

this chapter covers . . .

In this chapter we explain the need for an employee to 'manage' his or her work area. This involves:

- *organising your working area so that you and others can work efficiently and also comply with the organisation's rules and requirements for the workplace*
- *identifying and dealing with problems relating to your work area, either sorting them out yourself, or referring them to someone who can*
- *dealing with workplace equipment correctly, by following the manufacturer's instructions and any guidelines set down by your organisation*

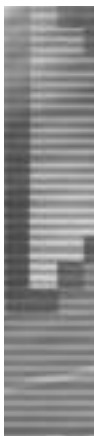
NVQ PERFORMANCE CRITERIA COVERED

unit 22 CONTRIBUTE TO THE MAINTENANCE OF A HEALTHY, SAFE AND PRODUCTIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

element 2

Monitor and maintain an effective and efficient working environment

- A organise the work area you are responsible for, so that you and others can work efficiently*
- B organise the work area you are responsible for, so that it meets your organisation's requirements and presents a positive image of yourself and your team*
- C identify conditions around you that interfere with effective working*
- D put right any conditions that you can deal with safely, competently, within the limits of your authority and with the agreement of other relevant people*
- E promptly and accurately report any other conditions to the relevant person*
- F use and maintain equipment in accordance with manufacturer's instructions and your organisation's procedures*



KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING COVERAGE

- 13 *how the conditions under which you work can affect your effectiveness and efficiency and the effectiveness and efficiency of those around you*
- 14 *how to organise your own work area so that you and others can work efficiently*
- 15 *your organisation's requirements on how you organise your working area*
- 16 *the importance of organising your work area so that it makes a positive impression on other people and examples of how to do so*
- 17 *the importance of working in a way that shows respect for other people and examples of how to do this*
- 18 *conditions you can put right yourself and conditions you would have to report*
- 19 *manufacturer's instructions and your organisation's procedures for the equipment you use as part of your job*

AN 'EFFECTIVE' AND 'EFFICIENT' WORKING ENVIRONMENT?

NVQ Element 22.2 stresses the need for an 'effective' and an 'efficient' working environment.

What exactly do these terms mean?

'Effective' means getting the result that you want. In football an effective defence prevents the opposing team scoring goals, in the dating game an effective chat-up line will win you the partner you have your eye on. An **effective working environment** will result in the achievement of the objectives of the organisation, for example – a motivated workforce, sales and profit targets achieved or exceeded.

'Efficient' is not the same as 'effective'. It means getting the result that you want with the minimum waste of effort and resources. This is, of course, an important objective in any organisation. But note that an **efficient working environment** will not always be 'effective'. A line manager, for example, may be ruthlessly efficient in saving time and money, but the workforce may be demotivated and levels of performance will fall off. The working environment will become less 'effective'.

The ideal working environment, therefore, is one that **balances effectiveness and efficiency**. The job is done well with the minimum wastage of effort and resources.

In this chapter we will discuss the role of the employee in making sure that the working environment – the immediate work area and the 'office' as a whole – is both effective and efficient. The two key factors in this are:

- being organised
- being aware of the needs of other employees and the organisation

ORGANISING THE WORK AREA

what is the 'work area'?

An employee's work area is not just the desk or workstation, it the area which surrounds it, involving desk, chair and any furniture and filing cabinets in the vicinity.

The state of the work area is the responsibility of the employee – the user. The way in which it is (or is not) organised says a great deal about the user.



it helps to be organised

A tidy desk normally means a tidy mind, just as an untidy work area often indicates a person who finds organisation rather a struggle.

An organised work area has a number of characteristics:

- it is tidy
- its is clean
- the user knows where everything is and can find it quickly
- everything is within easy reach
- the VDU is correctly set up
- the chair is correctly adjusted for the user

The test of a well-organised work area is whether the user's colleagues can also find what they want. Suppose the user is an accounts assistant who deals with sales orders. She is out at lunch and an important customer telephones and asks if a recently issued sales order can be checked as an incorrect catalogue code may have been quoted on the document. Can the sales order be found? Is it in an organised filing system or pending tray, or is it buried under a pile of unsorted papers? Worse still, is it there at all?

It is not difficult to see from this that if a work area is organised properly, it will be:

- **effective** because tasks can be completed and the job done
- **efficient** because time (and therefore money) will not be wasted

the importance of efficiency

Examples of **efficiency** in the working environment are:

- having resources that you need within easy reach and not in a filing cabinet at the other end of the office

- carrying out tasks in the time allotted – other people may be waiting for you to finish checking documents so that they can carry out a task
- not wasting resources such as photocopy paper
- taking care of resources so that they will last, eg storing computer disks correctly

Efficiency is important not only because cutting down on wastage means greater profit for the organisation, but also because it has a direct influence on the **effectiveness** of other members of a workplace team.

THE ORGANISATION'S RULES FOR THE WORK AREA

Just as a teenager covers his or her room walls with 'statement' posters, employees like to personalise their working environment in order to establish their identity in the workplace and provide a psychological sense of security.



Examples of this include:

- photographs of friends and family
- postcards received at work
- small posters saying things like 'you don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps'
- 'toys' – eg executive puzzles and fluffy animals
- plants
- bowls of fruit

An employee's work area will tell you a lot about that employee.

The organisation will, however, have **guidelines** which will regulate the extent to which an employee can put up posters, postcards and other items. It is unlikely that these guidelines will be written down, but they will normally be based on a test of what is 'reasonable' and be enforced either by a line manager or by the comments of colleagues objecting to what they think is unreasonable!



*a customer services desk
- subject to strict guidelines*

What is 'reasonable'? This depends on the nature of the workplace. If it is a closed office which is rarely visited by outsiders, each employee is likely to have the freedom to personalise his or her work area, as long as what is displayed is not offensive to colleagues or to management.

If the office is open plan and open to the public gaze, the organisation is likely to require that personal items should be unobtrusive. A bank customer services desk, for example will be kept very tidy and have welcoming features, such as flowers, as in the illustration on the left. The posters on the wall here are not the employees' personal choice but advertise the products of the organisation.

The working environment in this illustration gives a very positive image to the public of the financial services team that operates in the office.

DEALING WITH WORKING CONDITIONS

We have seen earlier in this book that health and safety law and regulations set down guidelines for the physical working environment. For example:

- 1 The workplace should allow at least 3.715m² of floor space and at least 11 cubic metres of space to each employee.
- 2 The temperature of the office should be not less than 16°C after the first hour of work.
- 3 The office should be effectively ventilated by fresh or purified air.
- 4 There must be adequate natural or artificial light.
- 5 The office must be cleaned regularly and frequently, and rubbish cleared away.
- 6 There should be sufficient toilet and washing facilities.

It is the responsibility of the employee to identify conditions in the working environment that interfere with effective working, for example a workplace that is:

- too cramped or badly laid out
- too hot or too cold

- too stuffy or too draughty
- too bright or too dim
- too noisy

Problems like this can reduce both the **effectiveness** (getting things done) and the **efficiency** (getting things done with the minimum of wastage) of the workplace. For example:

- an office with poor heating will reduce the ability of the employees to work: some tasks may not get done and other tasks will take much longer, costing the organisation more
- poor air quality may result in staff illness: again some tasks may not get done and the organisation is likely to have the extra cost of sick pay

Sometimes the employee can do something about problems like these, and should take action. Sometimes the employee will have to refer the problem to someone else to sort it. This is illustrated in the Case Study which follows.

Case Study

GETTING IT SORTED



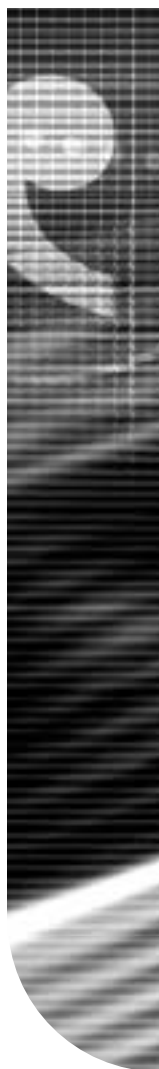
Jo is an accounts assistant at Spira PLC, an insurance company, based in Staines.

When she started work in the office she got on well with her colleagues, but she noticed that the working environment was not as ideal as her previous office at Sanitas Limited where she trained in accounts work.

situation

Jo has noted a number of problems and wonders how she should deal with them. Should she take action herself or should she refer the matters to Rashid Singh, the Line Manager? The problems are as follows:

- 1 Jo's desk is awkwardly situated by the photocopier. She is disturbed by people using the machine, and doesn't like the fumes it gives off. She notices that there is a space for a desk nearer to the workstations which deal with the sales and purchases processing.
- 2 The office is very warm to work in, particularly in the afternoon when the computers have been running for a while. The heating comes from an air conditioning system which has a thermostatic switch on the office wall. Jo often feels very sleepy after lunch and sometimes goes home with a headache. She talks to her colleagues about this and they agree with her – the office needs to be cooler and fresher, and then they will all work better.
- 3 The office has a big window which has the sun shining through it for much of the day. There are blinds, but they are stuck in the open position, and Jo, along with many of the staff, finds the light so dazzling that she cannot see her VDU properly.



solutions:

problem1 – the desk

Jo's desk is awkwardly situated by the photocopier. She works inefficiently because she is some distance from the accounts workstations. Her position also affects her effectiveness because of the fumes from the machine. She obviously cannot drag the desk across the office, and office layout is not a matter about which she can make decisions. So she will have to refer the problem to Rashid, her line manager. If there is space in the part of the office she has identified, Rashid can arrange to have the desk moved, but not before careful measurements have been made and the matter referred to the office staff.

problem 2 – feeling the heat

Temperature and air quality in an office are critical factors for effective working. If the working environment is too hot, as could be the case here, people become drowsy and headachy; if the office is too cold, people are uncomfortable and distracted from their work. A further aspect of the problem is that some people like higher temperatures than others. The situation in this office, as in many other offices, is that the temperature rises in the afternoon. The solution is for Jo to discuss the matter with her colleagues, in one of their regular team meetings, for example. If there is a majority in favour of turning the heating down – which can easily be done using the thermostatic control on the wall – Jo could do this at the appropriate time of day. She would, of course, have to consult first with Rashid, her line manager, but he is unlikely to object.

problem 3 – the stuck blinds

Dazzling sunshine can be very pleasant on a beach, but can reduce effectiveness and efficiency in a workplace. Jo and her colleagues find that not being able to see a VDU properly results in eyestrain. The solution here is simple. Jo shows some initiative and one lunchtime spends half-an-hour untangling the cords which operate the blinds. They can now be opened and closed normally, to the benefit of everyone. This is not a problem which Jo needs to refer to a line manager or even to all her colleagues – she just takes a decision and just gets on with it.

USING AND MAINTAINING EQUIPMENT

The working environment – particularly the office – normally has a wide variety of complex and delicate equipment which is daily use. An accounts assistant, for example may have to use:

- computer hardware – processing units, backup devices, printers
- a fax machine
- photocopier
- credit card terminal
- a shredder

We have seen earlier in this book that both the employer and the employee have duties of care under Health and Safety regulations when using this type of equipment. In this chapter we look specifically at the guidance that exists for the operation and maintenance of equipment in the workplace. This guidance can be found in



always read the instructions!

- the instructions provided with the equipment – this may take the form of a manual, a sheet, or online assistance
- separate guidelines issued by the employer

The important point here is that these guidelines and instructions must be followed;

- when setting the equipment up and before operating the equipment
- when something goes wrong
- when maintenance is needed

An employee should never adopt his or her own remedy.

Case Study

DEALING WITH THE PHOTOCOPIER



The accounts office of Spira PLC has a photocopier which is used fairly heavily for copying commercial documents such as purchase orders and invoices, and also the routine office paperwork.

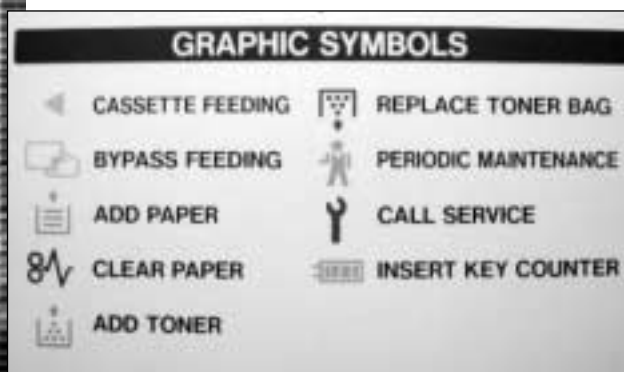
The photocopier was bought outright by the business a couple of years ago, and there is a maintenance contract with Photoserve Limited, which provides toner, annual maintenance and a call out service in case of major breakdowns.

In the office there is a printed sheet of internal regulations governing the use of the photocopier by employees. This is shown below.

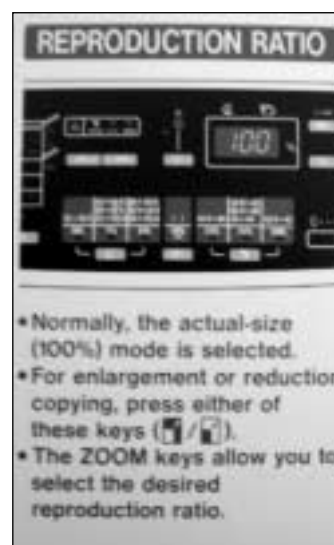
PHOTOCOPIER USE

- 1 No unauthorised copying.
- 2 No copying of copyright material (with © symbol) without reference to line manager.
- 3 Switch copier off at the end of the day, but leave on at mains.
- 4 Renew paper in cassette tray if paper out light is on.
- 5 Toner to be replaced by senior assistants only.
- 6 If you cannot clear a paper jam, please refer to senior assistant.
- 7 Refer major faults to line manager.
- 8 If the maintenance light or call light is on, refer to line manager

The manufacturer's instructions for the photocopier are set out in a booklet, but this is rarely used because most of the common instructions are printed on the top panel of the photocopier. Some of these are illustrated below and to the right.



this is what the various warning lights mean

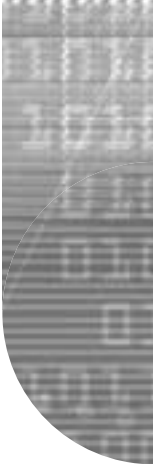


this tells you how to reduce or to enlarge copies

The staff of Spira PLC therefore have to know about the company procedures for dealing with the photocopier and also the operating instructions on the machine itself. Some of these relate to each other, as you will see if you carry out Student Activity 4.2 on page xx.

Chapter Summary

- It is important that an employee organises his or her work area so that work can be carried out efficiently and effectively by all employees who use that work area.
- Employees naturally like to bring in personal items into the workplace. When doing so, they should take notice of the organisation's guidelines and also their colleagues' views on what is acceptable. The aim should be to give a positive image both to colleagues and to outsiders who are visiting.
- Employees should be able to identify problems with the working environment – such as noise, heat and lighting conditions – which might interfere with effective and efficient working. They should be able to decide whether to deal with the problems themselves, in consultation with colleagues, or whether to refer them to an appropriate person.
- Equipment in the work area will normally be provided with the manufacturer's instructions for the use and maintenance of that equipment. The organisation may also provide written guidelines for the use of the equipment. It is the responsibility of every employee to be aware of the instructions and guidelines and to take notice of them when using the equipment and encountering problems.

Key Terms		
	work area	the desk and chair at which an employee works, plus the area and furniture which surrounds it
	effective work area	a work area which enables tasks to be completed and targets met
	work area guidelines	the organisation's policy for allowing personal items into the work area – it will vary according to how public the working area is
	work area conditions	the physical aspects – heat, air, noise, light – of the working environment which affect employees' performance
	use and maintenance	the operation of workplace equipment (use) and the need to keep the equipment in good working order (maintenance)

Student Activities

Note



It is appreciated that not all students will be in employment. The questions that follow ask you to comment on workplace situations. If you are not in employment you should try put yourself in the place of someone who is. If you are unsure about this, you could ask friends who have jobs, or you could even watch TV programmes which feature office life.

- 4.1** Explain the difference between an 'effective' working environment and an 'efficient' working environment.
- 4.2** (a) Write down three characteristics of a well-organised work area.
 (b) Describe three annoying incidents (real or imaginary) which would result from a badly-organised work area.
 How would the incidents in (b) affect the effectiveness and efficiency of the working environment?
- 4.3** Make a list of personal items which you would like to have in your own work space (real or imaginary). Do you think you are likely to be allowed these items:
 (a) in an office which is normally closed to the public and has few visitors?
 (b) in an open-plan office which has a reception desk for the public (eg bank, insurance office, estate agent)?
 Explain – with reasons – why some of your chosen items may be objected to, and who would object to them in (a) and in (b).

4.4 How would you deal with the following situations which relate to conditions in the working environment which are affecting your rate of work? Would you take the decision yourself? Consult with your colleagues? Refer the matter to your line manager?

- (a) The office is too hot, and you have an electric fan at home. You want to bring it in to put on your desk.
- (b) The office is too cold in the mornings – the office thermometer reads 15°C. You have an oil heater at home which you would like to bring in to put under your desk to warm you up.
- (c) The office is too stuffy in summer, but if you open the window everybody hears the noise from the building site on the other side of the road.
- (d) The fluorescent light above your desk is flickering and really annoying you.

4.5 Read the photocopier Case Study on pages 55 and 56. and explain what action you would take in the circumstances listed below. Refer in each case to the internal notice 'Photocopier Use' and to the illustrations of the manufacturer's instructions on the top of the photocopier.

- (a) The photocopier runs out of paper.
- (b) The photocopier paper jams and the jam light  comes on.
- (c) The toner out light  comes on.
- (d) A colleague asks you to photocopy a funny cartoon from today's newspaper.
- (e) Your line manager asks you to photocopy some of the stock market share prices from today's newspaper.
- (f) A colleague asks you to photocopy a couple of chapters from a training manual which the office has bought. You notice that '© Enigma Training 2003' is printed on the front cover.
- (g) Your line manager asks you to photocopy a couple of internally-produced reports. They contain some charts which are 150% larger than the normal page size you are copying.
- (h) You are photocopying some invoices and the display panel suddenly starts flashing a light, which looks like a maintenance engineer.

