Arson in the Workplace

Adrian Slack provides an overview of arson in the workplace and outlines a range of precautions that can be taken to counter this threat

EACH YEAR, thousands of people and buildings fall victim to arsonists. According to statistics from the Department for Communities and Local Government, the number of deliberate primary fires has been on a steady decline since its peak in 2001/02. This does not change the fact that in 2011-12, 56% of deliberate fires occurred in buildings other than dwellings, including a large number of workplaces in the country.

Arson is one of the most frequent causes of fire in commercial buildings of all kinds. The act can not only result in loss of life and injury, but can also have devastating effects, such as business interruption, loss of jobs and damage to the environment. It may even result in a negative reputation for the organisation involved.

Fire damage is a significant cost for insurers. In 2009, the Association of British Insurers reported that insurance companies were paying out £3.6 million every day for damage caused by fires. Overall, fires caused by arson tend to be more costly than accidental fires. This is due to a number of factors – the fire may have been 'helped' with flammable liquids; it may have been lit at vulnerable points in a building; it may have been set at night or at other times when few people are about, causing a delay in calling the fire service; and in certain cases, fire doors have even been wedged open or attempts made to sabotage fire protection systems.

In order to reduce arson-related incidents in the UK, the fire and rescue service and police are working in a more efficient way than ever before and are actively searching out the criminals responsible. This should result not only in saving members of the general public from harm, but also by working with local businesses in saving the UK millions and even billions of pounds in lost premises, jobs, production and insurance payouts, not to mention physical injury claims.

The owner of a building or the person responsible for health and safety in the workplace has a legal responsibility to carry out a fire risk assessment. This should include identifying the risk of arson and acting to reduce it. The scale of the threat may depend on the business involved, the people the business employs and the area in which the business is based. All fires should be carefully investigated, even if at the outset they do not appear to have been started deliberately.

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Security measures can help to deter arson attacks

Protection against arson is not just a question of installing expensive and elaborate security. Although suitable and cost-effective security measures must be taken, the designers of the building and the management of the organisation that occupies it both have a part to play in eliminating opportunities for arson during day-to-day business.

Security tips

Several important points should be taken into consideration when trying to reduce the chance of arson attacks. The employer should think long and hard about the security of the building and try to take steps to strengthen it where possible. This may include ensuring that windows and doors are in good repair, and that gaps under doors are as small as possible. Use good quality locks and padlocks. Outer fences, walls and gates need to be high and strong enough to keep out intruders, while internal and external lighting can also be a deterrent. Even simple things like letterboxes can have an impact; they should have metal containers fitted on the inside of the door or external delivery boxes should be used. Finally, closed-circuit television – active or not – will have an impact on any groups or individuals and maybe deter them from the act.

Good tidy premises inside and out and the absence of any ignitable materials deter temptation on the part of the arsonist. Waste skips need to be secured with lids that can be locked, and be aware of what is placed in them. Try not to overload the skips with tempting, easily ignitable items. Generally and where possible, all rubbish bins and skips should be at least 8m from buildings, and locking rubbish compounds on leaving makes access more difficult.

Other useful hints include:
- If there have been small fires on your own or neighbouring premises, inform the police immediately. A small fire could be a warning of something worse to come
- Keep a record of key holders and always track down any keys that are missing
- Stored materials of any kind should not be stacked next to fences or walls where they could be set alight from the outside
- Warn staff of the threat and ask them to challenge anyone who shouldn't be on the premises
- Vet new employees – check for any previous offences within the bounds of current employment law
- The movement of visitors in the building should be controlled
- Make sure firefighting equipment, such as extinguishers, are in good working order and protected against sabotage attempts
- Minimise hiding places for people to go undetected
- Ensure fire and security alarms are well maintained
- Work with your local emergency services to get advice and information. They should be able to advise you on known arson attacks within your location that you may not be aware of, thus giving you the ability to take proactive measures
- Have a suitable person to oversee your fire risk assessment and review it more than the standard once per year, or after an event. Fire risk assessments should be dynamic in their approach as fire risks can change on your site daily
- Audit and review incident reports on a regular basis
- Staff within any organisation should be trained in fire prevention and protection
- Implement identification and control measures for ignition sources in and around the workplace

It is not an exact science, nor do you need to be a fire engineer or fire prevention officer. Just remember to regularly review fire risk assessments with arson in mind. People make excuses as to why they have no time or funding to upgrade security or fire protection and prevention measures. If you are reading this and thinking the same in this tough economic climate, imagine the worst-case scenario of not being proactive about arson, and then ask yourself if it is worth the risk and the potential loss.

With good quality fire safety measures in place, supported partnership working and proactive interventions, you too can help reduce this figure ever further, and in doing so reduce the risk of becoming a victim of crime and/or going out of business. Fire prevention and protection, and good security of your businesses, will help curtail the possibility of an arson attack and keep down business costs, claims and disruption. Do not become another statistic in 2013 ∎

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