



## Preventing harm to cleaning workers

Cleaning is carried out in every workplace. The cleaning industry itself is a growing sector, as it is a service that is increasingly being put out to tender. While there are some very large cleaning contractors, the sector is dominated by small businesses, many of which employ fewer than 10 workers.

Cleaning is an essential task, and one that when done well can reduce both risks to workers' safety and health and costs to the business, for example by extending the life of workplace equipment and furnishings, and keeping floor surfaces in good condition. In some industries such as the food and catering sectors poor cleaning can cause a business to fail.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has published a report looking at preventing harm to cleaning workers. This report, which can be downloaded free of charge from the agency's website, considers the challenges to improving the safety and health of cleaners and examines actions taken to achieve this goal.

### Challenges to safe and healthy cleaning

The tendency for cleaning work to be contracted out, with tenders considered on the basis of price alone, means that there are strong cost-cutting pressures on cleaning companies. This can result in inadequate investment in training and other management activities essential for worker protection. As labour costs tend to make up the largest part of the costs of a cleaning company, there is a risk that unscrupulous employers will seek to gain an unfair advantage in tendering processes by illegal employment practices such as not paying full social insurance costs or employing illegal labour.

Action against such practices is being taken. For example, the European social partners in the industrial cleaning sector have adopted common positions on employment and undeclared work, published guidance on health and safety and a handbook — *Selecting best value* — on promoting quality in tendering.

A poor perception of cleaning and cleaning workers can discourage the effective occupational safety and health management of cleaning services, for example, failing to provide appropriate equipment and training because the employer does not view the task as important.

### Common hazards, risks and health outcomes

- Risk of slips, trips and falls, particularly during 'wet work'
- Risk of musculoskeletal disorders, for example from carrying loads or doing repetitive work
- Exposure to dangerous substances contained in cleaning agents



- Exposure to hazardous substances being cleaned, which can include biological hazards such as moulds or human biological wastes
- Psychosocial issues including work-related stress, violence and bullying
- Risks, such as electric shock, from work equipment

Common work-related health disorders recognised in cleaners include:

- injuries from slips, trips and falls,
- musculoskeletal disorders,
- work-related stress, anxiety and sleeping disorders,
- skin diseases such as contact dermatitis and eczema,
- respiratory disorders including asthma, and
- cardiovascular diseases.

### Daytime cleaning

Cleaning work is often done outside normal working hours, often in the early morning, evening or night. The workers may be on part-time and temporary contracts and can often be doing more

than one job. Such working patterns can contribute to risks to worker health and safety. While in some workplaces cleaning cannot be carried out during normal business hours, often it can be — a change that can benefit the cleaning company, the worker and the client.

A Swedish cleaning contractor implemented daytime cleaning with a client — a major banking group. The daytime cleaning was initiated after training for all workers in the cleaning company. The client benefited from a better quality of service arising from the face-to-face contact between client and cleaner, the cleaning company benefited from reduced staff turnover as staff preferred daytime work, and the workers gained improved job satisfaction and safer and healthier working conditions.

### Risk assessment

Cleaning work is seldom seen as a core activity in businesses. This can result in a lack of awareness of the hazards and risks associated with the process and, so, a failure to adequately carry out a risk assessment and implement preventive measures.

Risk assessment is the key to good safety and health at work, and effective prevention can be achieved following a five-step approach:

- identifying hazards and those at risk,
- evaluating and prioritising risks,
- deciding on preventive action,
- taking action,
- monitoring and reviewing to ensure that the preventive measures are working<sup>(1)</sup>.

Where cleaning work is contracted out, there can be additional difficulties as the client and the cleaning company need to liaise to ensure that risks are identified, eliminated or controlled.

<sup>(1)</sup> Factsheet 81, 'Risk assessment — the key to healthy workplaces' (<http://osha.europa.eu/publications/factsheets>).



"Be careful – Dangerous substances", Artists: Igor Banaszewski, Monika Wojtaszek. Courtesy of the Occupational Safety Poster Competition organised by the Central Institute for Labour Protection – National Research Institute, Poland

### Conclusions

The messages in the report can be summarised as follows:

- select your cleaning service by value, not price;
- switch to daytime cleaning;
- value the cleaners and the work they do — if it is done wrong, it can cost the business;
- see cleaning as an essential task which can expose the workers to particular hazards and risks;
- assess the risks to cleaning workers and implement preventive measures;
- share health and safety information with all relevant parties, which may include the client company, the cleaning business, the building owner, and the workers themselves.

### More information

Further information and the reports *Preventing harm to cleaning workers* and *Employment risks and health in cleaning workers* can be obtained from the agency's website (<http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TEWE09006ENC/view>).

Publications by the social partners in the cleaning industry, including a guide to best value and a manual on health and safety in the office cleaning sector, can be found through the website of the European Commission's Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities DG (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/>).

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