

## THE PRACTICALITIES OF NOISE IN THE REAL WORKPLACE

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### Introduction

Noise in the workplace has been a problem since the industrial revolution but sadly little was ever done to reduce the noise or protect workers. There have always been the obvious excessively noisy occupations such as in the shipbuilding, boilermaking and dropforging industries etc. The many other areas and operations known to be a hazard today were never considered to be a problem then, the reason I say this is because people made their own decision as to what was noisy and what was not and this is a legacy which has remained with us until 1987.

### Noise (Companies)

Of course we all know that the criterion of 90 dB(A) on each 8 hour working day over a number of years causes damage to employees' hearing and since 1963 a progressively greater number of company managers, directors and health and safety engineers have also come to realise what these figures mean.

But my experience over the last 13 years working as a Consultant on litigation cases and general noise survey work for Eagle Star has repeatedly shown me that whilst these managers etc., profess a knowledge of noise, practically the action they have taken to control the problem, warn or educate employees has been and continues to be, except for a minority, poor.

The greatest example of this experience was only last year when carrying out work for a large iron foundry following a number of industrial deafness claims, when I asked the Company Safety Officer why he had not implemented the basic requirements of a noise programme he produced one of the best noise policies I have seen (you don't see many) and then proceeded to tell me that the policy would not be actioned until the EEC directive had become law in 1990!!

Further, he went on to comment that visiting Factory Inspectors had viewed the policy with approval why they had not looked at the factory floor situation and requested action?

The result of this sort of attitude is going to be very expensive.

Noise (Unions & Employees)

Again since 1963 a progressively greater number of Unions and employees have also come to realise what 90 dB(A) Leq (8 hour) and what even 85 dB(A) Leq (8 hour) means.

But alas whilst many profess a knowledge the reality apart from the few is worrying with questions like:

Why doesn't the Company reduce the noise before issuing hearing protection?

I do wear my protection for two hours a day.

It's too late for me, I have lost my hearing already!

Anyway if I don't I will be able to claim for any deafness, won't I?

As Union representative my members won't sign for the protection!

This training you are giving is only to stop us claiming for deafness isn't it?

My noise is no problem (fettler) I am used to it, the real problem is the compressor at the end of the factory!

There are many more of the above.

Health and Safety Executive

The Health and Safety Executive have gone into companies with major noise problems and made no comment. Again in October this year, I sat down after having completed a survey with the problem manager/director of a company, and asked why they had done little with the problem of noise in their factory, only to be told that the Factory Inspector didn't say anything!!

Of course the above problem was not due to the HSE noise specialist but to general inspectors who are not always attuned to the particular problem of noise.

This will only get better as the level of noise training in the HSE improves.

## Insurance Companies / Brokers

Insurance companies and certain brokers have made attempts to make the insured aware of the noise problem but this in the main has been due to claims experience and not in general as a preventative measure.

In any case the number of surveyors in the field can in no way cope with the scale of the noise problem nationwide.

Greater efforts will need to be made by insurance companies in the future particularly with the approaching EEC Directive on noise so that they can effectively control the risk.

## Noise Reduction

The aim should be to reduce noise at source. We all appreciate this but the practicalities in many factories in cost, time, effort and effectiveness is rather more difficult in reality. The recommendations made in certain reports that I have seen of various institutions and companies who have a vested interest in noise, have often ignored these practicalities. The result of this often being that at best the company struggles to implement the recommendations and become disillusioned.

The answer to the above problem is for us as noise consultants, noise surveyors etc., to make greater efforts towards clarity, basic reduction techniques (not involved costly ideas please) and most important of all to effectively educate the company as to what you mean. In other words, be concise, simple, clear and practical!

#### Provision of Hearing Protection

Whilst very few companies today are ignorant of the need to issue hearing protection and usually provide protection for employees working in noise areas, this is as far as it goes for most of them. Having issued the protection they feel that they have done their bit.

What they fail to understand is that the mere provision of hearing protection is not enough. In accordance with the legal decision in *Bux v Slough Metals*, an employer must not only provide protective equipment but ensure that:

(a) employees concerned are:

- educated as to the dangers;
- informed as to how to correctly wear the protection;
- informed that the non wearing of the protection will not be condoned;
- informed that the non wearing of the hearing protection will not be allowed to become an established and acceptable practice;

(b) the employer should:

- institute a system which will ensure the wearing of the protection;
- ensure that supervisors (i.e. chargehands, foremen and managers) set an example by themselves wearing the protection when in any noise area.

#### Education and Training

The effective education and training of employees, supervisors and managers is the hinge pin of any successful noise programme.

Managers need to be trained to identify problems and implement programmes.

Supervisors need to be able to monitor the effectiveness of the programme.

Employees need to be able to understand the problem which will enable them to co-operate with the programme.

My own personal experience has been that suitable designed "in house" training courses relative to the problem at the particular factory is the most effective way of achieving the above.

Suitable courses relative to the situation in factories can be arranged by the Health and Safety Consultancy Section of Eagle Star Insurance Company Limited, Engineering Department, 54 Hagley Road, Birmingham.

# Proceedings of The Institute of Acoustics

## Registers and Records

Many companies still do not keep basic records, like the issue of hearing protection. A simple register recording the following details are vital if companies are going to be show as understanding, controlling and coping with the noise problem.

1. The name of the recipient.
2. The date the protection was first issued.
3. The make, type, size of the hearing protection.
4. The signature of the recipient.

It is also important that records relevant to the noise problem in the factory are well documented and kept indefinitely. This is vital for future reference if retrospective deafness claims are to be accurately and fairly dealt with.

## Identification of Noise Areas

It has been my experience in the companies I have visited that whilst suitable notices are affixed from time to time, these are invariably painted over, removed or are poorly positioned. It is most important that this is not allowed to happen in the future. This of course goes along with the effective training of managers and supervisors.

Noise warning notices should be affixed inside noise areas, at the entrances to and exits from any noise area and on any noisy machine or operation.

## Example by Supervisors

Again, too often my experience has been that supervisors and managers do not wear protection in noise areas themselves. All supervisors and management should set a good example by themselves wearing protection when in a noise hazard area. This is often seen not to be the case; no employee will co-operate unless this is achieved.

## Audiometry (New Employees)

It is too easy for companies to employ people who have already sustained a significant hearing loss. Again many companies do not even ask basic health questions let alone check the person's hearing ability before employment. The sure fast way of course is to carry out an audiometric test of the proposed employee's hearing. Such action will avert many problems which could mature into first time deafness claims.

#### Noise Policy

It is important that, in premises where a hazard exists, careful consideration should be given to the preparation of a Noise Control Policy or the extension of the existing Safety Policy to include noise. The action the Company has and is taking to control noise.

The requirement of employees to co-operate in the use of protective equipment provided.

The future control measures the Company will implement in regularly monitoring the noise in the factory.

#### Conclusion

All the above points are vital if companies are to cope with the practicalities of noise in the workplace, particularly with the Health and Safety Executive Consultative Document which should be available by December 1987 or January 1988. This document is intended to produce Regulations and Codes of Practice, in line with the EEC Directive on noise.

Managers, the message is wake up before the costs become too great.

Consultants, be sure to get the message right if your report is going to be effective.

Employees, co-operate if you don't want to go deaf.

Of course I realise that many do understand the need for action to be taken on the lines that I have spelt out, but the message has got to reach a far wider audience if the phenomenal projected costs of industrial deafness are to be averted.