

The General Insurance Association of Malaysia (PIAM) urges business owners to cultivate a strong maintenance culture to minimise the risk of fires on their premises.

This maintenance culture includes developing good housekeeping strategies, staff training on fire prevention and protection as well as developing a fire safety checklist.

According to PIAM's Executive Director, Mr Lim Chia Fook, anything and everything within the business premise regardless of whether it is an office, a factory or a shoplot, can start a fire at any second. Most of the time, it is usually ignorance and human error that are the major causes of fires.

While some fire outbreaks can be traced, the cost of the damages could still be substantial. For instance, a machinery that short-circuited in a fabricated metal products factory at the Bayan Lepas Industrial Zone resulted in RM500,000 worth of losses.

Moreover, lack of good housekeeping can further escalate the amount of losses during a fire. One recent report pointed out that firemen had a hard time putting out a fire that razed a hardware store in Petaling Jaya as goods were indiscriminately stacked everywhere.

As a guide to help business owners develop this maintenance culture, PIAM has compiled a list of good housekeeping strategies and a fire safety checklist:

Good housekeeping strategies to avoid fires

1. Draw up a contingency plan to tackle fires. This programme starts at the very onset of the layout stage.
2. Arrange machinery and equipment in such a way that special fire risk equipment is segregated and protected.
3. Strictly adhere to regular inspections and maintenance schedules.
4. Keep drip trays where oil drips are likely.
5. Keep machinery spotlessly clean and away from combustible materials. Never let it over-heat.
6. Regularly check lubrication, alignment of moving parts, load impositions, worn components, tensioning of belts, belts rubbing on machine or plant and accumulation of material around moving parts.
7. If waste has necessarily to be burnt, do it carefully.
8. Keep all combustible materials away from any kind of heat source.
9. Do not store wet or oily materials like cotton, coal, wood, etc indiscriminately. They can ignite spontaneously.
10. Examine these stocks frequently for overheating. Turn them over periodically.
11. Store them in well separated rooms which have fire fighting facilities like sprinklers and extinguishers.
12. Store chemicals and other such goods in stable racks, properly labeled and away from manufacturing facilities. Mutually reactive chemicals should be kept well away from each other.
13. Hot goods must be arranged so as to allow safe, cooling, and should not come in contact with combustible materials.
14. Finished goods should be removed to storage areas separate from production areas as soon as possible.
15. Provide a tool rack for every machine operator to keep his tools near the machine.
16. Return all equipment to its storage space immediately after use.
17. Each department must have passageways and aisles (of adequate width) marked with white or yellow paint and used strictly for vehicular and pedestrian traffic.
18. Keep all aisles clean and free from obstacles, including machines. Gangways must be straight and clear. Always have gangways between stacks and walls.
19. Piles/stacks should not protrude into aisles or obstruct the inside view of stores.

20. Proper ventilation in these areas is essential.
21. Premises must at all times be neat and clean; waster removed at regular intervals.
22. At the end of each day, routine inspection must ensure that everything is left in a safe condition.
23. Clearly marked metal bins with fitted lids should be kept for oil soaked rags and other oily waste.
24. Every item handled during the course of work must have its own allotted space to which it is returned after work.
25. A routine inspection should be done at the end of each working day to ensure safe conditions.
26. At the work place, observe "No Smoking" regulations strictly.

Importance of training

People are the greatest cause of fire. Everyone in your organisation needs to be trained to identify fire hazards and how to eliminate them.

An employee is as aware of fire prevention methods as his management trains him to be. When a fire breaks out in a factory, employees react the way management has trained them to.

If not properly trained, a person can not only be responsible for causing a fire but also through ignorance and panic, for helping it spread - costing lives and property.

Thus having trained employees and backing it up with safe procedures, systems and supervision is the key to a safe work place.

Prevention through training

1. Every employee should be given a grounding in basic fire prevention and protection.
2. They should know how to summon the fire brigade, how to handle fire extinguishers and how to escape and help others escape.
3. Fire drills involving all staff members should be held periodically.

Fire safety checklist

1. Having a written down Fire Prevention Plan for your company, and ensure that it is sincerely implemented.
2. Identify and eliminate fire risks or reduce them to the maximum possible.
3. Train and retrain your employees in fire prevention and fire fighting.
4. Install suitable fire protection equipment and make sure that your employees know how to use it in case of fire.
5. Regularly inspect your fire safety equipment so that it does not fail in an emergency. Have adequate water supply.
6. Establish an Emergency Plan in close co-ordination with the Bomba.
7. Take the utmost care while handling flammable materials. Provide special protection for major fire risks.
8. Follow good housekeeping practices, because a clean house is a safe house.
9. Protect the plant against hazards within and outside by having suitable construction.
10. Never violate fire safety laws - they are meant for your protection.