Fire safety experts issue advice to help safeguard employees from electrical hazards
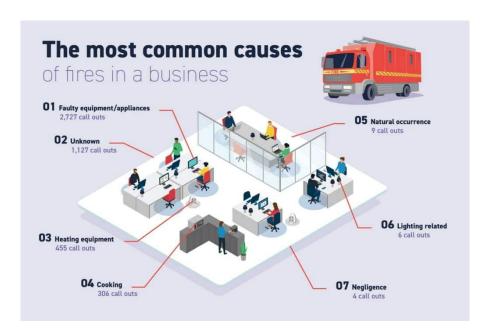
1 year ago

A study by Direct365, which collected data under the Freedom of Information Act has revealed that a total of 4,634 fire and rescue callouts have been made to businesses over a three year period. Therefore, of all the fires caused by electrical equipment in the UK, 14% of them occur in a business.

While workplace electrical fires do not occur as frequently as in the home, this is likely due to the Health and Safety at Work act that states that all workplace electrical installations and equipment must be safe to use. Therefore, the easiest way to ensure this is by carrying out regular PAT and fixed wire testing.

World Day of Safety & Health at Work is designed to raise awareness of and promote the prevention of occupational accidents and diseases globally. Workers globally have the right to a safe working environment through a system of defined rights, responsibilities and duties. This includes complying with Health and Safety at Work regulations to ensure that employees are protected from any potential hazards.

Faulty equipment and appliances account for the majority (59%) of electrical fire related incidents in businesses. This is unsurprising considering the typical business will have a host of IT equipment, kitchen appliances and machinery that can often be unmanned for hours at a time.

Additionally, 455 callouts were made to businesses for fires related to heating equipment over the past three years, with these callouts spiking over the winter months.

Although amounting to just 7% of fires in businesses, it is worth noting that although many businesses do not have substantial kitchen facilities, 306 callouts were a result of cooking. This includes use of

appliances such as microwaves, kettles and coffee machines.

Safeguarding our workplaces from electrical hazards

It is apparent from the data provided by Fire and Safety departments across the UK that more must be done to stop electrical fires from occurring.

While it is advised that regular testing of electrics is taken to ensure maximum safety, Karl Bantleman, Head of Digital at Direct365 has provided advice to further protect businesses from potential electrical hazards:

1. Delegate responsibility to key members of staff to check electrics are switched off

Three quarters of all employers now offer hybrid working to their staff[1], meaning that offices are generally less busy on certain days of the week.Therefore, with no guarantee that someone will always be in the office each day of the week, it is crucial that all necessary electrics are turned off at the end of each day.

By delegating responsibility to a group of employees to ensure that this task is complete at the end of each day they are working from the office, this will reduce the likelihood of electrics remaining on for a prolonged period.

2. Ensure that extension cables are not overcrowded

While plug sockets are usually safety compliant, extension cables are often not. If using an extension cable, never overcrowd it. Extension cables plugged into other extension cables are likely to cause overheating. If you require one, make sure to use a fused 'inline' cable, rather than an extension cube and if you spot any damage to cables or general wear and tear, replace it immediately.

Additionally, check that your plugs have the BSI Kitemark™, as this will show that they meet the highest requirements in terms of safety and performance and are unlikely to overheat.

3. Ensure portable heaters are a safe distance away from anything

As well as being costly to power, portable heaters are the cause of over 800 fires in commercial buildings each year[2]. Typically fires start when flammable items are placed too close to the heater.

When using a portable heater, make sure that it is kept at least three feet away from all flammable items. Never leave the heater unattended and unplug from the power source when not in use.

If you're in the market for portable heaters to provide additional warmth in your office, an oil filled electric heater, with an automatic shut-off is the safest.

4. Unplug all electrical appliances during extended breaks

Although we tend to keep electrical appliances plugged in most of the time, we are usually able to recognise and report any potential hazards in the workplace before they become dangerous.

However, whether your business is closed for just the bank holidays or an extended period over Christmas, it is crucial that as many smaller electrical appliances as possible are switched off and unplugged and if

your business is closed for over a week, larger appliances such as fridges, dishwashers and printers should also be turned off.

Karl Bantleman at Direct365 commented: "Data from Fire and Rescue services throughout the UK has identified the scale of electrical related fires and common underlying dangers that could be present within our homes and business premises.

Ensuring that electrics are functioning safely in the workplace isn't just for efficiency, it's a key factor in safeguarding a risk-free environment. Our Fire and Rescue teams do a great job in attending to callouts. However, the regular servicing and maintenance of electrics could reduce the callouts related to electrical fires, as more faults will be identified before it is too late."

Head to Direct365 to find more information about the electrical compliance services on offer.