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34% of UK Office Workers Unaware How Fire Doors Should Be Kept When Not In Use

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According to health and safety training provider CE Safety, 34% of UK office workers are unaware of how fire doors should be kept when not in use.

Fire doors are one of the first lines of defence against fires at work, working alongside fire alarms and fire wardens to keep employees safe.

When fire doors are in correct working condition, they can keep fire and smoke at bay for over 120 minutes depending on the type of door. That's long enough to ensure the safe evacuation of everyone in the building. Fire door ratings go from FD 30, which will withstand the fire for a minimum of 30 minutes, all the way up to FD 120 which will provide at least 2 hours of protection.

However, any kind of damage to a door, caused by either tampering or normal wear and tear, could mean that it is only able to resist fire for a much shorter period. A fire door that can only hold out for 5 minutes would make evacuation much more dangerous.

The Fire Door Inspection Scheme has reported a deeply concerning statistic: based on more than 100,000 fire door inspections carried out by FDIS inspectors in 2021, 75% of fire doors in the UK did not meet the required standards.

It's a legal requirement for all non-domestic buildings such as offices and other workplaces to have a fire door, and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 says that there must be an appointed person who takes the responsibility for the building's fire doors. Anyone who takes on this role should be trained

on how to inspect fire doors to make sure they are functioning properly. Undergoing training will equip you with the knowledge and the confidence to play this important role in maintaining the safety of all who use the building.

Fire door checklist

A working fire door should be checked at least once every six months. However, fire doors that are part of a multi-storey building at least 11 metres in height and which contain multiple residences must be checked more frequently. The Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 – which apply to all buildings that contain at least two residences and a common area through which residents would evacuate – says flat entrance fire doors must be checked every 12 months, and fire doors in communal areas must be checked every 3 months.

There are a number of different parts of the fire door that need to be checked to make sure it's in good working order. The Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 provide a checklist covering each part.

CE Safety surveyed 1000 UK office workers, showing them a list of fire door faults and asking them to identify which were problems.

Perhaps the most well-recognised issue is when a fire door is propped open, which 80% of the survey respondents identified. If a fire door is left open, fire is able to spread and the door offers no protection.

57% selected cracked glass, and 43% said it would be a problem if the lock had been removed – these issues allow smoke and gas to travel through the door.

A fire door should be so tight in its frame that you can't see any light under it. 22% identified gaps around the door frame as an issue.

13% said that missing door screws would be a problem and 9% highlighted wear and tear marks on the door's hinge. Either issue would be an indication of a faulty fire door. A hinge that is visibly marked by wear and tear could fail, and missing screws also weaken the door. In the event of a fire the door will be under intense pressure from the heat, meaning that it needs to be totally secure in order to protect everyone in the building.

A small percentage at 1% said none of the above were an issue.

Any faults in a fire door could put lives at risk. If you are the designated person at your workplace who takes responsibility for fire doors, be sure to raise the issue to the building manager or owner if you see any of these problems. If you are the building manager, it's very important to arrange for the door to be mended or replaced as soon as possible.

The Fire Door Inspection Scheme found that the most common reasons for doors to fail the inspection were gaps between the door and the frame (found in 77% of faulty doors) and care and maintenance issues (found in 54% of cases). The next most common issue was smoke sealing, with 37% of fire doors proving inadequate in this area. Concerningly, 31% of doors had been installed incorrectly in the first place.

At work

CE Safety also asked the UK workers whether they had been taken around the workplace when they started their jobs and shown the exit route out of the building in a fire or emergency, including where the final exit fire door out of their building is. A fire exit door is different to a fire door, as this will be the last door before you reach the outside of the building. These are designed to open easily from the inside, rather than to hold back the spread of fire. Walking staff through the building and showing them the complete exit route is much more effective than simply describing it, as it makes it much easier to remember.

This is mandatory according to the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, and this training should also be refreshed every year. A high percentage at 35% said they had not been shown this. In London, this percentage rises to nearly half, as 47% of workers here said they had not been shown the exit route out of their workplace in case of emergency. Northern Ireland was the region where the highest percentage of workers had been shown the exit route, at 91%, followed by Scotland, where 78% had been taken around and shown this when they started their job.

The survey asked about people's experience of the way fire doors are kept at their place of work, and it was alarming to discover that 41% of the survey's respondents said they had seen their office fire door wedged or propped open before. While it might be convenient to prop open a fire door to make it easier to get around the office, it should always be left closed. The only situation in which it is safe to leave a fire door open is when a door release unit has been installed. This battery powered device will hold the door open, improving accessibility and ventilation. At the sound of a fire alarm, the door release unit will respond by automatically closing the door. One well-regarded company that manufactures these devices is Dorgard.

CE Safety also asked the office workers to select the option that best described the state a fire door should be kept in when not in use. It was worrying to see that over a third, at 34%, did not know.

In more detail, 8% said it should be completely open, 4% saying that it should be wedged and 3% saying that it should be propped.

1% said any of the above states were acceptable, and 5% were not sure. 66% correctly identified that a fire door should be closed, but not locked.

25-34 year olds were the age group who were the most likely to get this question wrong: only 36% of this age group gave the right answer. They were the most likely age group to suggest that fire doors should be kept open at all times, with 20% saying the door should be completely open.

Final exit fire doors are a separate type of fire defence tool. As these are designed to be the last door before fully leaving the building, the priority here is that the doors are easy to open, facilitating a smooth evacuation. A final exit fire door should never be locked while people are inside the building, as this adds a dangerous extra step to any evacuation – you should be able to leave quickly and safely, without having to unlock the door.

17% said they had seen that their internal office fire door was locked on occasion. Unlike a final exit fire door, this is not a problem. Some fire doors inside buildings will sometimes be locked, for example if they

lead to an area that members of staff need to swipe a card to enter. 7% of the survey respondents thought that an internal fire door should be locked, with 5% specifying that it should be locked but with a key in the door. Fire doors that have restricted entry, such as those that require a swipe card, fob or key code to allow staff to pass, need to have a "green manual call point" installed so the lock releases in an emergency. Exiting staff can use the call point to release the door. Checking to make sure that the manual call points are all in working order is another responsibility belonging to the fire warden.

Unlike an internal fire door, the only time a final exit fire door that leads to the outside (or to a place of safety) can be locked is when nobody is in the building, such as when locking up for the night to prevent intruders. Another difference between these two types of doors is there is no safety issue if a final exit fire door is left open.

While fires at work are rare and many will thankfully never have to rely on their fire door to protect them in an emergency, it's highly important that everyone understands the condition a fire door should be left in when not in use. After all, shutting the door (but not locking it) is a simple step that will provide everyone behind it with more time to evacuate should a fire break out.. If you see a fire door left fully open, propped open or locked at your workplace, take a minute to fix this if you can, and report it to a supervisor.

How fire doors work

Fire doors are different in several ways to normal doors. They use intumescent strips which are fitted either around the door itself or around the inside of the frame – at a certain temperature these strips swell up, creating a tight seal around the door. The seal prevents any smoke from escaping. While fire itself is the most well-known hazard and poses a high level of immediate threat, smoke actually causes more fire-related deaths. Building materials and furnishings can all produce toxic smoke full of dangerous chemicals in the event of a fire.

This type of door also requires hinges especially designed to withstand extreme heat, as well as fire-rated glass for any windows or vision panels. Every part of the fire door is optimised to make it as secure as possible in the event of a fire.

Self closers are an important part of fire doors. Often located overhead at the top of the door, this mechanism will ensure that the door closes itself after anyone uses it. It's extremely important that the self closer is functioning correctly, otherwise there will be nothing to stop the door being left ajar if someone should forget to close it.

Fire doors often guard a 'place of special fire hazard' such as a boiler room, which many large offices will have. However, they are also placed in order to provide a clear route of evacuation throughout the whole building. This route may be horizontal, leading to the outside of the building or a fireproof area, or vertical, leading to a stairwell.

When checking fire doors and other safety equipment at your workplace, you should have the knowledge to know what to look for and the confidence to know what to do about it should you find any issues. CE Safety's fire door inspection training can be delivered online, at your place of work, or at another local venue. It covers what to look out for when checking fire doors, correct fire door signage and how to manage escape routes, as well as how to make sure a fire door has been installed correctly.