

Permit-to-Work Systems

Health & Safety Briefing No. 33

February 2015



Principles

Did you know that...

Permits-to-work are used to let employees know that essential precautions have been taken and, where necessary, physical safeguards are in place - e.g. circuits open and contactors or switches securely locked open.

A permit either suspends and temporarily replaces, or augments, existing systems of work.

The process of requesting, raising and issuing permits is a procedure within the procedure of a safe system of work.

Self-permitting is inherently less safe (even dangerous) and is not recommended despite its widespread use.

System of Work

What is a safe system of work? What indeed, is a system? In Common Law case law, there is much written about systems of work and in the case of *Speed v. Swift (Thomas) and Co. Ltd.*, Lord Greene M.R. commented:

"I do not venture to suggest a definition of what is meant by system, but it may include:

- *the physical lay-out of the job*
- *the sequence in which the work is to be carried out*
- *the provision.....of warnings and notices and*
- *the issue of special instructions."*

He went on to say:

"A system may be adequate for the whole course of the job or it may have to be modified or improved to meet circumstances which arise; such modifications or improvements appear to me to equally fall under the head of system."

In more simple terms, the process is clarified under the duty of Care by Lord McLaren in *Bett v. Dalmaney Oil Co* as early as 1905:

"The obligation (on the employer) is threefold:

- i. *the provision of a competent staff of men*
- ii. *adequate material and a proper system (of work)*
- iii. *effective supervision."*

Typically, a permit-to-work is a management procedure whereby only persons with specific management authority will sign a permit on which ostensibly the life of a worker might depend. To this end, responsibility for the permit-to-work rests with the person in charge of the operation for which the permit is required.

A good permit is one which covers the nature and extent of work to be undertaken and is:

- simple
- clear (perhaps with room for a simple circuit diagram)
- has authority
- is recognised by all
- if abused will be backed by discipline

NOTE: The CLEARANCE of a permit after the job has been done is as important as the RAISING of it.

UK legislation and implementation

These latter criteria (i, ii, iii above) are now embodied in Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, so there is no reason for anyone to feel the principles are merely a desirable standard to strive for - they are enshrined in law.

Further Information and examples of permits-to-work are to be found in:

- "Electricity at Work - safe working practices" HSE, ISBN 071760442 X, - HSE Books
- "Electrical safety at work - a guide to regulations and safe practice" Buck and Hooper, Paramount Publishing - ISBN 0 47665161
- HSE publication INDG 98, 'Permit-to-Work System' gives guidance related particularly to the chemical industry but sets out general principles, ISBN 0717613313
- HSE publication 'Guidance on permit to work systems in the petroleum industry' ISBN 0717612813

IET health and safety briefings on Safe Systems of Work and Electricity in the Workplace are also relevant:

- <http://www.theiet.org/factfiles/health/hsb32-page.cfm>
- <http://www.theiet.org/factfiles/health/hsb34a-page.cfm>

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For further information about the IET's Health and Safety Policy Advisory Group only, please contact:

Health and Safety Policy Advisory Group Secretary
Policy Department
IET,
Michael Faraday House,
Six Hills Way,
Stevenage.
SG1 2AY
01438 765690
email: policy@theiet.org
www.theiet.org/policy
www.theiet.org/factfiles/

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