

FIRE SAFETY AUDIT

In any building, the most significant hazard a facility manager confronts is fire. The safety of the building and its occupants under threat of fire requires a great deal of specialist knowledge and planning covering a wide range of topics, including the fire protection system, operational procedures, monthly and annual testing and inspection regimes, preventative maintenance, as well as myriad of other policies and processes.

The facility manager has a duty of care to ensure all practical steps are made to protect the building and its occupants in the event of a fire. This includes the regular testing, inspection and maintenance of crucial fire protection systems, such as sprinkler systems, fire dampers, alarms and the operation of fire doors.

Even though the installation and ongoing maintenance of the fire system will generally be under the care and maintenance oversight of a specialist contractor, all facility managers should have a practical understanding of how the fire sprinkler and alarm system in their building operates.

As building codes change and evolve, compliance with new codes is generally left in the hands of the expert contractor. Nonetheless, things happen inside the building that often escapes the attention of the facility manager, or are done without his cognizance that also do not fall under the terms of the fire system maintenance contract. Areas of non-compliance can creep into a system through such things as tenants who modify the internal floor layout after occupation or who change the use of a certain space (for example storeroom turned into server room, or office turned into storage space) this in turn can affect the hazard classification of that space which can necessitate a change in the level of fire protection that is necessary or can require a change to evacuation procedures.

All these – and the unfortunately common and very grave issues of tenants who may have painted over or enclosed parts of the fire protection system such as sprinkler heads and heat detectors, or removed or incapacitated smoke detectors that were once set off by burning toast, or even alarm systems where the loud speaker horns were incapacitated because somebody once got annoyed by a fire drill – do not normally fall under the purview of the fire system maintenance contractor, but they do fall under the duty of care of the facility manager.

However, as fires do not occur very often, fire safety measures tend not to be a high priority item on the checklist to-dos for facility managers. Fires are never expected, and the comfort that the fire service contractor is managing fire safety can lead to complacency. Occasionally the recommendation by the fire service contractor for expensive capital upgrades such as replacement of a hydrant or even an entire sprinkler system can be received with scepticism and capital expenditure on another item that is more visible can be easier to justify to tenants and owners.

For these reasons it makes sense, from time to time, to engage a third party that has no financial interest in the building or in its maintenance to perform a fire safety audit of the entire building.

