

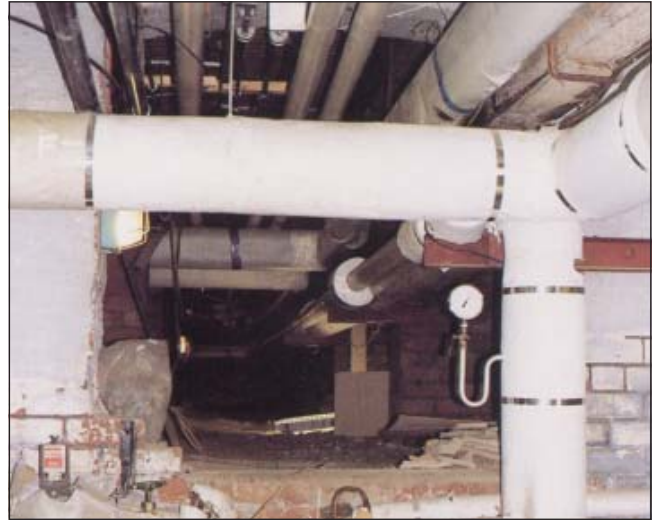


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The Problem

Well maintained fire compartments are a key element in the fire safety of buildings. But they are often breached by the introduction of mechanical, electrical, and I.T. services. Defects can stay hidden away, typically in ceiling voids and riser cupboards, until a fire occurs when the problem becomes all too apparent.

In a fire situation the smallest defect can become a route for the spread of smoke and flame, not only endangering lives but also the property and lifeblood of an organisation. It is a chilling fact that statistically if you have a fire you are likely to be bankrupt within three years due to the disruption and mayhem that follows.



Under new legislation, The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order, the onus is now on Premises Managers to arrange for competent persons to undertake fire safety assessments of their buildings.



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Your business

Firemen snuff out free checks for firms

New rules will put the safety onus on companies, says **Richard Tyler**



Line of duty: proposed reforms that will do away with free fire inspections and safety certificates have prompted a mixed reaction from companies

FIRE services have begun declining firms free fire safety assessments ahead of reforms passing through Parliament that will scrap fire safety certificates. At present, fire services should offer a free safety inspection of commercial premises ahead of the building's fire certificate expiring. But it appears that some fire services are acting ahead of the proposed change in the law, which will not take effect until next year. Thomas Cole, co-founder of software firm MSM, said he had received a letter from Devon fire service in March stating that he would have to carry out the necessary safety checks. "They have decided to stop doing the survey themselves and we have to self-certify. The onus is on us," he said.

Mr Cole said that to help with the self-assessment, MSM had received a large pack of guidance brochures from the fire service explaining the new obligations. "When our certificate came up for renewal we did persuade a fire officer to come out as there was an issue we were unclear about. "But as a result of that visit he wrote to say we would have to self-certify," said Mr Cole. Under the reforms, fire safety laws are being rationalised from more than 100 pieces of legislation into a single set of rules, which fire safety minister Phil Hope said would "reduce the burden on business". Mr Cole said that by passing the burden of carrying out the inspection to the employer "it's not exactly in keeping with [the Chancellor] Gordon

Brown's push to reduce bureaucracy". Simon Topman, managing director of Birmingham-based J Hudson and Co, which employs 62 staff and makes Acme whistles, said the proposal had taken a "common sense" approach to fire safety. "That's the first time I have been able to say that about a piece of legislation," he said. Mr Topman, who sits on the Small Business Council, an independent body that advises the Department of Trade and Industry, said the reform was a "boon to business" as it would remove fire inspectors from the equation. He described how one year an inspector informed Acme that it would need to replace a swing door on a fire escape with a sliding door because he feared someone walking up the fire escape on the outside could suddenly be trapped if the door suddenly flew open. The change was duly made, at a cost of £600, only for a different inspector attending that following review to insist that a swing door be reinstalled because it would take

too long to slide the door open in the event of a fire. Mr Topman said he had already sent one member of staff on fire safety training at the local chamber of commerce, which had cost £100. "We are as keen on it as anybody," he said. "It's all well and good that you have inspectors but if you have a fire then statistically you go bankrupt within three years. You are out of the market and your competitors have a field day. "I say you need to make your business safe and I can ensure that better and have far more incentive to get it right than any fire inspector."

The Solution

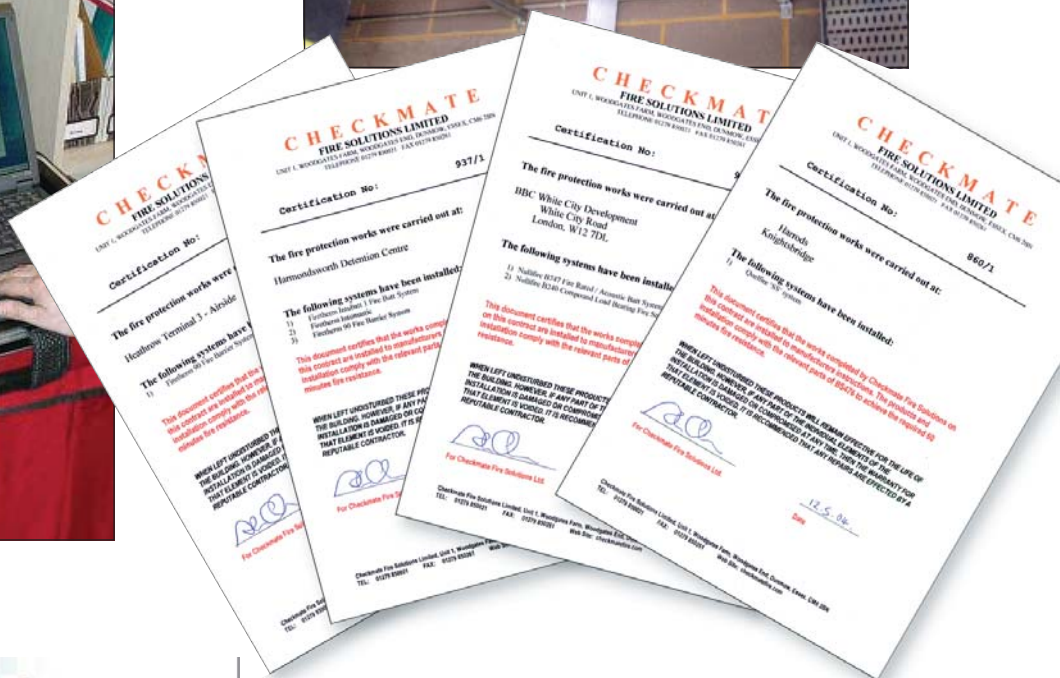
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- Top: Diagnostic testing of fire compartment
- Middle: 2 hour firestopping of service penetrations
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