

HazCom Employer's Guide

Step 6: Develop a Written Program

What You NEED To Do

First of all, you should know that the main trigger to the requirement to develop a written plan is having hazardous chemicals, as defined by the HazCom Standard, in the workplace. There aren't many exceptions to this requirement, and in fact, a 2015 enforcement directive makes clear that an employer needs to develop a plan "whether the employer generates the hazard or the hazard is generated by other employers." So, if your own operations don't involve hazardous chemicals but the operations of your onsite contractors you do, you'd still need to develop a plan that specifically addresses those chemical hazards, including procedures for training your own employees about those hazards. [Download a model HazCom program that you can edit and implement.](#)

[BACK TO START](#) | [NEXT STEP OF 12](#)

As it turns out, there are only two situations in which employers subject to OSHA's HazCom Standard, who have hazardous chemicals in the workplace, do *not* need to have a Written HazCom Plan.

The first instance pertains to work operations where employees only handle chemicals in sealed containers that are not opened under normal conditions of use, such as many storage and distribution warehouses. If you're an employer at such a facility you need to: ensure that labels on incoming containers of hazardous chemicals are not removed or defaced; maintain copies of SDSs received with shipments and obtain SDSs when requested by employees; make SDSs accessible to employees during each work shift; and provide employees with HazCom training. However, you would not need to have a Written Plan.

Even if your facility handles only sealed containers, you might still find it valuable to have a Written HazCom Plan, considering

that you need a system for storing and providing access to SDSs, maintaining shipped container labels and providing employee HazCom training. In the event of an OSHA inspection, you'd need to convince the inspector you're meeting your compliance obligations, and without anything written down, which, for example, describes your training program, you may have some difficulty with that. For this reason, it's worthwhile to go beyond the regulatory requirement and draft a Written Plan. It can help explain and provide documented evidence of your HazCom management practices.

The second example of an employer who does not need to have a Written HazCom Plan pertains to laboratory operations subject to OSHA's [Laboratory Standard](#), which covers "laboratory use" of small amounts of a limited variety of chemicals on a non-production basis. If your laboratory operations fall under that category, you'd need to have a written [Chemical Hygiene Plan \(CHP\)](#) instead, which contains information and plans more specific to a lab environment, such as maintenance of fume hoods and decontamination procedures. But remember, if your lab engages in production-related operations, including quality control, the Lab Standard would not apply and you'd need to have a Written HazCom Plan for those operations.

[Learn the Background](#)

Learn the Background

As we can already see, we need a pretty good grounding in the HazCom Standard to understand the requirements. You need to walk before you can run, and you need to ground yourself in the HazCom Standard before you sit down to start writing your plan. While this may seem like an obvious, logical place to start, surprisingly, few people actually seem to do this, which may help explain why deficiencies with the Written HazCom Plan are among the most commonly cited HazCom violations for employers.

Be sure to get a broad understanding of the Standard as a whole, and of requirements for the Written Plan in particular, which are

found in 1910.1200(e). These requirements include:

- A list of the hazardous chemicals known to be present. Another name for this is a “chemical inventory list.” This list needs to include all chemicals you’re required to have an SDS for and you have some options with how you structure it. If you have a smaller establishment, it can be simple to just list all the hazardous chemicals in your workplace. If you have a larger facility, it might make more sense to compile lists of hazardous chemicals by work area or department, and then to compile an overall, comprehensive list of hazardous chemicals for the full facility. However you go about the task, an important factor to account for is using a product identifier that matches the identifiers for those same chemicals on the SDSs in your SDS library, on your shipped container labels, and your workplace labels. This ensures there is no ambiguity about the identities of chemicals and allows them to be cross-referenced with other safety information in the workplace, helping to reduce risks and better protect employees.
- Methods the employer will use to inform employees of the hazards of non-routine tasks. This is an often-missed aspect of the HazCom Plan. Employers generally know they need to address exposures employees may have during usual work routines, but often fail to plan how to inform employees of hazards they may encounter during non-routine tasks. For example, an employee working in a chemical mixing operation may occasionally need to drain and clean a reaction vessel. During this task, they may use cleaning solvents they don’t normally use and potentially be exposed to fume concentrations far above those encountered during their normal job tasks.
- Methods of informing employees about the hazards of chemicals in unlabeled pipes in their work areas. You need to state who’s responsible for informing workers about the identities and hazards of chemicals in unlabeled pipes before work begins in those areas.
- Methods of managing HazCom, including providing access to SDSs, at multi-employer worksites. The management goes in

both directions. You need to determine how you will inform your own workforce about the hazards of chemicals brought onsite by other employers, as well as how you'll inform other employers and contractors about the hazards of your chemicals, and provide access to the SDSs and information about your workplace labeling system.

- Description of how the Written Plan will be made available to employees. You can maintain a hard copy of your plan, or store an electronic copy including but not limited to saving it on a desktop computer, an online resource, or a mobile device as long as your employees know how to access it.
- Description of labeling management practices. This should include details about your workplace labeling system. For instance, do you replicate the shipped label, or do you use a label with a product identifier and select other hazard communication information, and provide the remaining information on the shipped label using supplemental information like training, work instructions, or signs?
- Methods of storing SDSs and providing right-to-know access to them. Make sure you fill in the important details like the method of providing emergency back-up access.
- Description of your HazCom training program. We'll talk more about training in the next installment of our Intro to HazCom series. For now, remember that your training program has to inform your employees about the requirements of the HazCom standard in general, and the details of HazCom management at your workplace in particular, and the health and physical hazards present at your site.

Before you even put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, collect the information you need. Do a walk-through of your whole facility to identify chemicals, being sure not to miss chemicals in boiler rooms, maintenance areas, storage sheds, or inside reservoirs of large machines. Talk to supervisors and Purchasing Department representatives to fill in any gaps.

Go beyond identifying obvious chemical containers, too. Look for examples of unlabeled pipes that may contain chemical products. Also pay attention to the ways chemicals are used, and specific

hazards that may be created from their use. Is there dust visible? What about fumes or vapors? These are details you'll need to know to be fully aware of the chemical hazards in your facility and the routes of exposures employees may have.

As all of the above requirements show, you'll need to be very familiar with not only the requirements of the HazCom Standard, but also specific operations at your establishment pertaining to hazardous chemicals. Which brings us to our next point.

[Write it Like You Mean It](#)

Write it Like You Mean It

I hope it's becoming clear by now, but let's state it right out: Writing a HazCom Plan is serious business.

Don't make the mistake that many employers make, and simply find a template from somewhere and stop customizing the template for your workplace after filling in some of the obvious details like company name and address. There are many templates out there issued by trade associations, safety organizations and professional groups, and it's fine to take advantage of that material. But take it for what it is: help on getting started, rather than a shortcut to your destination. [A better template](#) that gives you the guidance needed to actually create a compliant written plan will give you a big advantage here.

In my experience, many employers who have a less than robust HazCom Plan are working from a perspective of trying to simply "meet obligations" or "document compliance," which is to say that they see it largely as a paper exercise. That also explains why once employers complete the Written Plan, they tend to file it away, whether on a computer desktop or on a shelf, instead of actually using it on an ongoing basis to manage chemical safety.

That's their loss. First of all, failure to have a Written Plan that accurately describes hazards and hazard communication

practices at your establishment can lead to compliance violations, and fines. Federal OSHA issued 4,806 violations for Written Plan deficiencies between December 1, 2013 and July 30, 2018, and the agency recently increased monetary penalties by 2.5% compared with 2018 levels.

Remember that the plan has to be specifically about your hazards, your management practices, and your program details at your establishment. Make sure your plan includes all of the site-specific details listed in the “Learn the Background” section of this article. Additionally, make sure you’ve spelled out who’s responsible for key aspects of your program. A 2015 enforcement directive makes clear that OSHA expects your plan to designate the individuals responsible for managing labels on shipped containers, and workplace labels, and for obtaining and managing access to SDSs.

But the biggest loss that can happen if you treat your HazCom plan as just a paper exercise is the ability to improve safety for your workforce. It takes time and effort to develop a good HazCom Plan, but the reward is a blueprint for increasing chemical awareness, reducing risks of chemical exposures and related injuries, and potentially improving employee retention.

Spend the time to write a good plan, and use it as your playbook, which is what it’s intended to be.

Make Your Employees Aware of It

The effectiveness of your Written Plan, and the ultimate benefits of having it, are achieved when your workforce is aware of the Plan’s existence, understand its content, and know where and how to access it.

When I was involved in corporate EHS, I used to find it useful to casually ask employees I passed walking through the facility if they knew where to find the HazCom plan if they ever wanted to review it. Many times they knew exactly where and how to do that, but other times they didn’t. That usually meant that it was time for at least a quick refresher on the basics of the program with

their department, and that it might also be a good idea to review the details of our HazCom training program and see if there were any reasons for the gap in awareness we were seeing.

If your workers have job assignments requiring travel between different workplaces, you may keep the written plan at the primary work location. However, in that situation it's going to be even more important to be inform all employees how to access the plan, and confirm their understanding.

We can start to see here that there is a close relationship between the requirement to have a HazCom plan and the requirement to conduct training. They reinforce each other and changes in one should lead to changes in the other.

Update When Needed

Update When Needed

When might we need to change our written HazCom plan? Basically, we'd need to update the plan whenever it no longer accurately described the chemical hazards and hazard communication practices at our facility.

For example, let's say that since the last time we updated our plan, we brought flammable chemicals on-site. That means we should update our written plan to include the new information, as well as any relevant details about storage and safe usage practices, and if we've never provided training on flammable hazards before, the HazCom standard requires us to train employees on that hazard class. The mutually reinforcing relationship between the HazCom Plan and training should come into play here. The training should include the information about flammables in the written plan, and the plan should spell out the specific kinds of training employees need to have.

You should also update the HazCom plan, and the relevant aspects of training, if you make any other significant changes to your

program, including workplace labeling, methods of providing access to SDSs, details of the written plan itself, or the identities of individuals with specific responsibilities, such as oversight of labeling and SDSs. If you have a plan with names of people who no longer work for your company listed for the latter, it's a sure sign that you're not updating your plan as often as you should, and could be risking violations and chemical-related incidents as a result.

Someone out there might now be thinking, "OK, but when do I *need* to update the plan? In other words, how long can I go without updating the plan before OSHA decides to give me a violation?" I can understand the motivation behind that question, but it's the wrong question.

It is of a matter for any given enforcement officer to decide whether the specific details she's seeing constitute a HazCom violation. But whether or not you will get a violation is not the only consideration, or even the most important one. The more important factor, since your plan is intended to be your playbook, is whether failure to update your plan will result in a loss of effectiveness of your HazCom program as a whole, and a loss in safety for your workforce. Any changes to your HazCom program that are not described in your plan probably also won't be adequately communicated to employees, and that may have a serious impact on your safety performance. Go beyond compliance, and strive for the most effective program possible.

Source:

<https://www.msdsonline.com/2019/03/08/intro-to-hazcom-part-four-writing-a-good-hazcom-plan/>

[Additional Resources](#)

Additional Resources

- [Sample HazCom Plan](#)
- [OSHA Fact Sheet](#)

- [NIH Hazard Communication Program](#)

[BACK TO START](#) | [NEXT STEP](#)