

Knowing what is going on around you (situational awareness)



Information sheet from Seven steps > Step 6 > Key tool and Further tools

What is situational awareness (SA)?

Situational awareness is being aware of what is happening around you in terms of where you are, where you are supposed to be, and whether anyone or anything around you is a threat to your health and safety.

Our knowledge, experience and education enables us to understand what is going on around us and helps us to determine if it is safe. This means that everyone's situational awareness is individual and potentially different. We use our situational awareness to make decisions and instruct others.

Our situational awareness is only as accurate as our own perception or reading of the situation, so what we think is happening may not accurately reflect

reality. How we read a situation can be influenced by many things such as the type of information we have been given, our own experience and distractions in the workplace.

Why should you improve it?

It is important that you know how many problems you face and how serious they are. The temporary loss or lack of situational awareness is a causal factor in many construction accidents.

Often there is so much 'going on' in your working environment, or you become so absorbed in your own thoughts, that you fail to spot those things that could pose a serious threat to your health and safety.

The following example comes from Jeff Espenship a USAF fighter pilot.

On 27th August 2006, Comair flight 5191 took off from the wrong runway. It was early morning and still dark outside as the captain (highly experienced and trained) was taxiing the aeroplane to the runway. Instead of taking the right runway, he took a wrong turn, which led the plane onto a runway that was too short for take-off. During take-off the cockpit is a designated quiet area to allow for concentration. On this occasion, the captain and co-pilot were chatting, affecting everyone's performance. Allowing this talk meant that the situational awareness of the captain and co-pilot was reduced and they failed to spot that they were on the wrong runway. Their perception of reality was different to the actual reality. Despite the co-pilot pointing out that there were no lights on the runway it was another 15 seconds before the captain realised what was happening, by which time it was too late. They failed to stop work despite recognising a hazard (there were no lights even though it was dark). If they had stopped work and brought their situational awareness in line with actual reality, 49 people would still be alive today!

Our situational awareness can be further reduced in times of high workload or when under pressure to get a job done to time. In these situations, it is essential to maintain a high level of situational awareness to stop accidents and near misses.

Why is situational awareness important to you?

Situational awareness is important to everyone – it is important that everyone is aware of their surroundings and the potential hazards they face. It is important that each individual is looking out for his or her own safety as well as looking out for their workmates.

Even the most experienced people can lack situational awareness – especially when doing tasks that have become routine. (See Step 2 of this toolkit > Further tools > *Human Failure*).



The following techniques show how you can enhance your situational awareness, giving you extra skills to prevent yourself and others on site from coming to harm.

Improve your situational awareness

Get in the habit of regularly pausing to make a quick mental assessment of your working environment. When doing so, consider the following questions:

- Is there anything around you that poses a threat to your health and safety and if so, to what extent?
- Is the threat big enough that you should stop working?
- Is there anything you can do to safely reduce that threat in order that you can carry on working safely?

Use the SLAM technique described next, and in more detail in Step 6 > Further tools > *The SLAM technique*.

If you see something unsafe or spot a hazard, don't walk by – take responsibility to deal with it.

If you feel you are in any immediate danger to your health or safety STOP work immediately and inform your supervisor.

The SLAM Technique

SLAM consists of four simple steps:

- STOP** Engage your mind before your hands. Look at the task in hand.
- LOOK** at your workplace and find the hazards to you and your team mates. Report these immediately to your supervisor.
- ASSESS** the effects that the hazards have on you, the people you work with, equipment, procedures, pressures and the environment. Ask yourself if you have the knowledge, training and tools to do the task safely. Do this with your supervisor.
- MANAGE** If you feel unsafe stop working. Tell your supervisor and workmates. Tell your supervisor what actions you think are necessary to make the situation safe.

You may wish to create your own **SLAM** prompt card for your workforce on site. Side A could contain the SLAM technique as above. Side B could include key areas of risk to be aware of on your site.

Where and when should situational awareness techniques be used?

Assessment of your working environment should occur continually, but especially in the following situations:

- When beginning work on a new project/contract.
- When you think the work environment has changed since a risk assessment or method statement was written.
- When working with new or different workmates.
- Before complacency has set in – it can be a silent killer!

For further information see www.hse.gov.uk/construction

The Leadership and Worker Involvement toolkit is aimed particularly at small and medium sized businesses and is designed to help improve your health and safety and bring additional benefits to your business performance and productivity.

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