

# Fire safety is a burning issue

By [Lauren Salt](#)

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Often, little attention is paid to fire safety, as it requires more than merely drafting an evacuation plan but also capital investment. Some types of buildings are more susceptible to fire risk, depending on their contents, capacity and access. However, this does not mean that employers and/or building owners or managers can take a lax approach to fire safety.



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With the recent factory fire in Durban, employers are reminded of how quickly a burning building can translate into tragedy and destruction. The fire broke out at a wax production facility south of Durban in late March 2017 and continued to rage for three days. Firefighters allegedly stated that the fire hydrants on-site had not been serviced and were inoperable or ineffective. The question arises as to whose job it was to service the fire-safety equipment.

## OHSA obligations

The Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1994 (OHSA) places a positive obligation on employers to provide a healthy and safe environment for employees. Specifically in relation to fire-safety equipment, the Environmental Regulations for Workplaces, 1987, which are annexed to OHSA, state:

‘having regard to the size, construction and location of the workplace, and the amount and type of flammable articles used, handled or stored on the premises, an employer shall provide on the premises an adequate supply of suitable fire-fighting equipment at strategic locations or as may be recommended by the fire chief of the local authority concerned, and such equipment shall be maintained in good working order.’

## National Building Regulations

In addition to OHSA, the National Building Regulations and Building Standards Act, 1977 provides various standards to which owners and occupants must adhere. Specifically, SANS 10400 provides ‘any building shall be so designed, constructed and equipped that in case of fire:

- a. the protection of occupants or users, including persons with disabilities, therein is ensured and that provision is made for the safe evacuation of such occupants or users;
- b. the spread and intensity of such fire within such building and the spread of fire to any other building will be minimised;
- c. sufficient stability will be retained to ensure that such building will not endanger any other building: Provided that in the case of any multi-storey building no major failure of the structural system shall occur;
- d. the generation and spread of smoke will be minimized or controlled to the greatest extent reasonably practicable; and
- e. adequate means of access, and equipment for detecting, fighting, controlling and extinguishing such fire, is provided.'

## **SANS 1475**

Even if this is adhered to, the obligations on the occupants or owners do not end there. Further and specifically in relation to fire extinguishers, SANS 1475 provides that extinguishers must be properly serviced and maintained, indicating specific maintenance intervals for the various types of equipment. Approaching a fire with an incorrect or ill-maintained fire extinguisher can have dangerous and disastrous consequences.

Businesses should satisfy themselves that they comply with the relevant provisions and standards of OHSA and the National Building Regulations Act. Specifically, they should ensure that they have adequate fire detection systems in place and the correct type and quantity of extinguishers, which must be maintained on a regular basis.

Employers and property owners should think twice before ignoring or flouting fire-safety regulations, not only because of the consequences relating to loss of life or property in the event of an incident, but also because of the statutory ramifications of a hefty fine or imprisonment. A throwaway attitude may lead to runaway consequences.

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