



TenStep Supplemental Paper

9 March 2005

Disastrous Office Environments!

Indoor air pollution in the workplace is a serious threat to employees' health. A recent study by the World Health Organization revealed that almost 30% of new and remodeled buildings worldwide have air-quality problems. The Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) problem, which leads to Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) and Building-Related Illness (BRI), is a serious environmental problem in the US.

SBS and BRI are attributed to bad ventilation or circulation and pollutants or chemical contaminants inhaled by occupants. The cause of SBS cannot be pinpointed, but BRI can be clinically diagnosed and linked to the source. Though 95% of IAQ problems are not life threatening, they can seriously influence employee morale, and ultimately, the bottom line.

In 1989, when employees of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at its headquarters in Washington, D.C., complained that something in the building was making them sick, the organization approached the problem methodically and scientifically. However, the epidemic of symptoms had a devastating effect on the employees' morale and productivity, and finally they had to evacuate the building.

Industrial hygienists worldwide have formulated certain guidelines to effectively resolve the situation before it escalates and gets out of control:

- Listen to employees' complaints
- Begin investigating as early as possible
- Demonstrate concern by taking immediate remedial steps
- Communicate to employees openly and continuously
- Document the findings to help develop internal procedures for the future

According to William J. Fisk and H. Rosenfeld, researchers at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, California, the financial benefits of improving office environments can exceed the costs of making such changes by 8 to 17 times!

Usually, discomfort is a result of poor airflow, lighting and heating. Poor internal air quality can lead to heart disease, lung cancer, respiratory diseases, asthma and allergies. Keeping the office building clean and well maintained can resolve 50% of identifiable problems. Since employees spend 90% of their workday in the workplace breathing air that can make them sick, organizations will have to think of 'internal air quality' as an important issue to keep up productivity and health of the employees.