Safety Talk Handout – Hazardous Materials & Equipment Signage

The New Signs - Background

You may have seen these new signs being posted around different buildings, but why did this project start? An incident occurred at the University of Manitoba (U of M), costing them $50M, and has caused many Universities to review how they are identifying the hazards present in their labs and workshops. The goal is for the U of R is to standardize our signage and create a clear and meaningful method of identifying hazardous areas across campus. While this initiative began with the purpose of assisting first responders, it has other benefits as well.

What Do The Signs Mean to Facilities Management Staff?

The signs can give them a few pieces of information to use when responding to a work order in your lab.

This statement: “AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY Personal Protective Equipment Required.”

Means: FM staff should not enter this room unless they have spoken to someone who is knowledgeable and responsible for the area.

This section: Gives them the contact information for those people (likely yourself, and whoever you have listed as a 2nd contact person).

Why: Every lab is different, so we can’t simply give blanket rules and procedures for FM staff when entering labs. Therefore, the people responsible for the area are required to give them enough information for them to do the job safely.

What Do I Need To Tell Them?

As the lab manager, it is your responsibility to make sure all visitors to your lab are safe. To do this, you must think like a "non-lab person" who is not comfortable with a lab environment. For example, if a plumber needs to work under a sink, you may not realize that the plumber's first instinct will be to come into the area with a coffee, place a tool belt on the dirty lab bench, and handle lab items without gloves. So before you grant access to your lab, you should:

- Ask questions about their duties in your lab, and where they need to work,
- Clear away materials from under the sink and clean the surfaces in that area,
- Properly clean/disinfect the surrounding work area,
- Provide any required PPE (if they don’t already have it)
- Try to schedule the work to be completed at a time when no one is working on hazardous materials.
The FM staff member requiring access to your lab might ask questions like:

- What surfaces are safe to touch?
- Where can I lay my tools so that they will not be contaminated?
- Have all hazardous materials been removed from the area where I need to work?
- Has the area around the sink, and the cabinet underneath the sink, been cleaned/disinfected/decontaminated?
- Should I wear any specific PPE while working in the area?
- Which electrical outlets can I use? (We tell FM to never unplug anything in a lab, if they need access to an outlet, they should ask the lab personnel which outlet to use, and allow the lab personnel to unplug any items that might be in the way.
- Likewise, if any equipment, boxes, etc are in their way, they should ask lab personnel if it is safe for them to touch and move it, or ask that it be moved out of their way by lab personnel.

Some Labs Are Safe To Enter

You may have noticed a box in the middle of the sign that talks about the hazards in the lab, but what does that information mean? This section of the sign is mainly designed for the fire fighters, who are primarily concerned with flammables, and gas cylinders (because they are typically only responding when there is a fire, and both of these items can have drastic implications for how they fight the fire). The reason we don’t list all the other hazards is because fire fighters always wear high levels of PPE so things like acids and toxic materials are of little concern to them. Let’s look at two examples:

In this example, you’ll notice this danger symbol is present. This is what is used to indicate that other chemicals are present in the area.

In this case, the danger symbol is absent.

Generally speaking, we call these “dry labs” because they do not use chemicals or biohazardous materials in these areas. That means surfaces don’t need to be decontaminated, and FM likely won’t need any PPE.

If your lab sign is incorrect, please notify HSE immediately.

Be patient, this program is new to everyone and we are all learning how to make the UofR a safe and healthy place for everyone.

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Questions or for more information

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