

Safety in the Workroom

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If you're a small workroom with only a few employees chances are you don't have to report to OSHA or buy workmen's compensation insurance. So you probably haven't given much thought to the overall safety in your workroom. Yet, as a sole proprietor, safety is crucial to the well being of yourself and your business. If you become injured your business will come to a screeching halt.

Here are some tips to make your workroom, and you, a little bit safer.

Fire Safety:

You think a fire will never happen to you, talk to someone who has had a fire. I bet they once said the same thing. I did!



If you blow a fuse every time you turn on a sewing machine and iron at the same time, or if your outlet is starting to look like an octopus, it may be time to update your electrical. Call an electrician and have him review your circuit board and make sure it can handle all your electrical needs. Add one or two outlets closer to your machines or near your iron. By updating your electrical you'll be avoiding both a fire hazard and a tripping hazard by eliminating snaking extension cords.

Check your extension cords for fraying, bare spots or visible wires. Replace these immediately. If you feel a tingling or "buzzing" while working on a machine turn it off and unplug it immediately. Check for bare spots on the cord or plug problems. Have the motor and cord looked at by your repair person.

- While you're thinking about fire safety

take a look at your smoke alarms, and if you don't have smoke alarms, get them now. If they are 10 years or older they need to be replaced and if they are newer, make sure you've put a new battery in the past year. It is also wise to have a fire extinguisher close by as well.

- This may seem like a no-brainer in today's society, but if you or your employees smoke you should never allow smoking in the workroom. Besides stinking up the client's fabrics, you could be causing a very dangerous situation by adding ash or a partially lit butt to a trash can full of fabric. If you or your employees smoke in another room or outside, make sure the butts never get thrown away in the workroom.
- If your iron doesn't have an automatic shut off, consider putting it on a surge protector you can turn off when you leave the workroom. Or plug it into a timer that is set to turn off every day at the same time.

Sticks and Cuts:

Now if you're anything like me you will stick yourself with pins on a frequent basis, and your biggest concern is whether or not you're going to get blood on the fabric. While you aren't going to die from a pin stick, it could get infected, and any open wound is an opening for bacteria.

- You should avoid stepping on pins by picking them up off the floor as often as possible. Pick up a wand magnet at your home store or make your own by gluing or taping a magnet to a long stick. Clean up your pins at the end of every day or at least once a week. Pick them up immediately if you spill the whole bowl.
- Speaking of pin bowls, magnet bowls are much better than ceramic or cardboard boxes. If you knock over a magnetic bowl most of the pins will stay in the bowl instead of falling all over the floor or table. Glue some magnets inside a ceramic or wooden bowl to create your own magnetic

bowl.

- Always wear shoes with a good sole which covers your entire foot. NO flip flops and NO Crocs in the workroom. Flip flops don't cover the tops of your feet and provide little or no cushioning for your back. Crocs are incredibly popular because they are said to be very comfortable, unfortunately the same soft material that creates that comfort will not protect your foot from pins on the floor or scissors that get dropped from the table.
- When working with your scissors or rotary cutters always close them after using. This will keep you from cutting your hand on an open blade when you reach across the table.
- Keep your blades sharp. Dull blades require more pushing and a greater chance for a blade slipping or jumping across the fabric and into your hand.
- Always turn your machine off when you're changing the needle or the bobbin. It may seem like an extra step, but even when your machine is off your feet are usually resting on the foot pedal, and all it takes is a moment of distraction to accidentally press the pedal. You don't want your fingers underneath that needle when you do that.
- Update your Tetanus shot. Tetanus is a toxin produced by bacteria which can be found in the soil and feces of humans and animals. It can enter the body through a puncture wound. The Tetanus toxin attacks the central nervous system starting with the jaw (Lock jaw), and works its way down the spine, eventually interfering with breathing. Tetanus is incurable, and often fatal, but can be prevented by getting a Tetanus shot. It should be updated every ten years. Don't think you could acquire Tetanus by sticking yourself with a pin? Follow this scenario: You walk outside in your shoes. You walk into the workroom in your shoes and bring that dirt from outdoors onto the workroom floor. You drop your pins on the now dirty floor. You pick up one of the now dirty pins

and stick it in your finger. Now the bacteria from outside has entered your system.

Trips and falls:

A fall or trip can cause a back injury a sprained ankle or even a broken bone, laying you up for weeks or months.

- If your floor is anything other than carpet, keep fabric scraps in the garbage or stored in a container. Get out of the habit of throwing them on the floor and picking them up at the end of the day. When you step on a fabric scrap on a vinyl or wood floor it's like walking on a newly waxed floor with fuzzy slippers- both you and the fabric will go flying.
- Check your floor for trip hazards. If you have extension cords snaking all over the floor try and mount some to the ceiling. Tape them to the floor, or even nail them down with straps if possible.
- Area rugs should be either eliminated or taped down to prevent tripping on the edges.



Ergonomics:

Ergonomics is the study of how a workplace and the equipment used there can best be designed for comfort efficiency, safety and productivity. Correcting the design of your sewing machine

tables and other machines can help eliminate back, neck, shoulder and hip injuries.

- Set your tables at the proper height for you. Too low and you'll always be leaning over them. Too high and you'll have to reach further to work with your fabrics.
- Use a good chair at all your machines. The best ones are adjustable both for height and back support.
- Many workrooms are in basements with cement floors. Consider buying several anti-fatigue mats you can lay around the base of your main table to help ease the strain on your feet and back while you're standing.
- Put in plenty of bright lighting. Make sure there are lights on all your machines so you don't have to strain to see what you are sewing.
- If you suffer from wrist pain, invest in electric cutting tools to eliminate the grip needed when using scissors. Keep your scissors sharp to easily rip-cut fabrics rather than using the repetitive movement of opening and closing the scissors.
- Get assistance with lifting heavy fabrics, or build a small box on wheels if you have to move large bolts around the workroom by yourself.
- Build or buy a fabric rack to hang your linings and interlinings so you don't have to lift them on to the table every time you need them.

Eye Safety:

It's pretty tough to sew without the use of your eyes. Protect them as much as possible.

- Never sew over pins. A broken pin or needle can easily fly into the air and your eye, without warning.
- Always wear safety goggles when using your staple guns, saws and other power tools.
- If you don't have a sink near your workroom, invest in a

bottle of saline solution to be able to wash out your eyes if you get a chemical in them.

Lung Safety:

Dust is a huge problem in all workrooms. For those with asthma and allergies it can be especially problematic.

- Try to vacuum the workroom every day, or at least once a week. Carpeted floors are terrible for trapping dirt and dust and should be replaced with an easily cleaned hardwood, vinyl or tile floor.
- Look into buying air filters for the workroom and make sure you change the filters every 2 or 3 months.
- Always use spray glues and fabric protector sprays outside or in a very well ventilated area like a garage with the doors open.
- If you are retail and sell your own fabrics, consider looking into some new greener lines which are made with fewer or no chemicals. They help the environment, your clients, and most especially YOU.

Children and Pets:

- Children and pets are always curious and usually lack basic common sense. Neither of them belongs in the workroom. Children can get hurt in all the same ways you can in your workroom, or worse, because they don't recognize the danger and think the tools and pins are toys to play with.
- Pets can swallow thread, pins or needles causing life threatening problems if the thread works it's way through the intestines or the pin gets lodged in their throat.

Hopefully these tips will keep you and your employees safe and healthy for years to come. As a final tip you should put together a first aid kit which you keep in an easily accessible place. It should include Band-Aids® in all sizes, alcohol, eye drops, cotton balls, tweezers, a bottle of clean water, antiseptic spray, aspirin, Benadryl® for allergies, and an emergency chart with local emergency numbers. Be sure to refill anything you have needed to use periodically.



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