ARSON
RISK MANAGEMENT
MADE TO MEASURE
INTRODUCTION

Arson or wilful fire raising has increased dramatically during the past decade to a point where it is currently the single most frequent cause of fire damage in the UK.

Current statistics compiled by the Fire Prevention Association show that each year approximately 40% of all major fires in industrial, commercial and public buildings are started deliberately.

Arson, from whatever quarter or motive, can be prevented, or at least its effects controlled, if thought is given in advance to the potential threats and appropriate remedies implemented.

Good practices and security against the major threat of arson which in many cases can be achieved at little or no cost, can potentially save millions of pounds.

A plan against arson should be part of a fully integrated management system which covers all aspects of risk. Such plans should be arrived at by firstly carrying out a risk assessment, the objective being that business operations and profitability should be maintained whatever the threat against them.

RISK ASSESSMENT

The extent to which any property is at risk from arson can be gauged by carrying out a risk assessment which will centre around a number of factors including:

— The nature of the area in general, focusing on any known incidents of arson attack.

— All premises are possible targets for arson attack, but those situated in isolated locations, troublesome inner city areas, or near football grounds and similar places where crowds gather, are particularly vulnerable. Special care is required if it is known that arson attacks have been taking place in the area.

— Care is even more important if there have been previous arson attacks in the premises concerned.

— Any unexplained fires, however small, should be carefully investigated as large arson fires are often preceded by smaller fires.

— The general level of security of the premises.
— The security of the premises should also be considered in relation to any local, political, social or racial issues. Businesses or concerns involved in, or which may be perceived to be involved in “animal rights” issues are obvious targets. However irrational it may appear, even businesses only indirectly involved with such activities have become targets e.g. those carrying out ancillary tasks like printing or publishing on behalf of directly involved companies.

— Denial of fuel for would be arsonists.

— The current state of labour relations should be considered, especially at times of redundancy, takeover or following dismissals.

— Combustible material in the open, be it stock, timber pallets or waste is potential fuel and sometimes an invitation to children.

— The attitude of neighbours should be considered. Environmentally unfriendly businesses such as those causing noise or unpleasant smells can often cause antagonism resulting in friction.

— Only by conducting such an assessment will the risk be fully identified, leading to the implementation of appropriate control measures.

— A previous history of break-ins should be taken seriously in relation to the risk assessment. Arson is frequently used to cover the tracks of thieves or used in their frustration if nothing attractive is found to steal.
RISK CONTROL MEASURES

1. Security Measures
The level and quality of the premises security measures will have a major influence on the resistance to arson attack. A number of areas need to be considered.

A. Perimeter security is the primary and first line defence against attack from outside. The aim should be to restrict entry to authorised personnel only and to prevent or hinder incendiarism by thirdparties. Any perimeter fencing or other barriers should be assessed for effectiveness and the installation of security lighting considered.

The fabric of the building needs to be examined for weakness in doors, windows or other openings, together with letter boxes, gaps under the doors etc. Access control systems can play a valuable part in preventing unauthorised persons from entering during working hours.

B. Detection of intruders once they have breached the perimeter security is the next priority. Automatic alarm systems can detect intruders whether their intent is theft or arson and therefore any premises considered at risk to arson attack should be so protected. Alarm systems should be connected to remote alarm company central monitoring stations which will notify the police.

CCTV installations and security guarding can play an important role in detecting fire, whether from arson or otherwise, in addition to general security duties.

C. A vigilant workforce can also be a valuable tool against intruders and they should be encouraged to challenge strangers found wandering about the premises. This should of course be done politely, which should create a favourable impression with visitors but deter intruders. “Tail-gating” through access control systems is a common method employed to obtain unauthorised entry.

Depending on the risk assessment, the staff themselves may be perceived as the risk and controls may need to be put in place to prevent arson from within. Access control to vulnerable areas suchas infrequently occupied buildings e.g. warehouses or telecommunications rooms, may be necessary.
2. Fire Prevention and Extinguishing Equipment

Management should be considering the provision of adequate fire detection and fire fighting equipment.

irrespective of the arson risk. However additional factors need to be taken into consideration to counter the possibility of malicious fire raising.

A. Arsonists will usually set fires in several places at once, often using accelerants, which can lead to rapid fire spread. Automatic fire detection systems can operate very quickly but by the time the fire brigade arrive they may already be faced with a large fire. The provision of compartment walls within the premises presents barriers to fire spread, but it should be ensured that fire and smoke doors in these walls, or leading to staircases and other floor openings, are closed out of hours and as much as possible whilst the premises are occupied.

B. Fire detection and fire fighting systems will be vulnerable to sabotage by potential arsonists. Access to control equipment, especially valves and pumps on sprinkler systems should be restricted.

It is possible to fit electronic switches on critical valves to monitor their condition.

It should be remembered that sprinkler systems have an excellent track record in controlling fires caused by incendiary devices, whether set by terrorists or other activists, and it is vital therefore that they are kept in full working order.

As with intruder alarm systems, sprinkler and other fire detection and extinguishing systems should be connected by remote signalling to an alarm company central station.
3. General Precautions

Any measures taken for the general fire safety of the site will also assist in the prevention of fires being started deliberately. The fire safety culture of the site should be established in line with the perceived arson risk and correspondingly set at a higher level than normal where an enhanced risk exists.

A. Responsibility for fire safety should rest with a senior official of the organisation. Such duties are usually combined with general health and safety and security.

B. Formal procedures should be established to ensure that whatever fire, security or operational precautions are instituted, are actually carried out. Such measures could include the following:

— At the end of the working period ensuring that the premises are tidy and that combustible refuse has been cleared to a safe secure area.

— Flammable liquids should be locked away.

— No unauthorised persons left on the premises.

— Effective close down procedures to ensure that all doors and windows are properly secured and alarms set.

— Particular care should be exercised to ensure that all external storage, idle pallets etc. is kept to a minimum and confined to areas away from the buildings and the site boundary. As a general rule, a minimum distance of 10 metres between such materials and the building should be maintained.

— Surrounding vegetation in close proximity to the buildings should be cut back and removed as required.

C. Staff co-operation is necessary if the correct degree of awareness is to be achieved. Arson will not only present a danger to life but can also threaten job security. As part of their induction and general training they should be made aware of the arson risk and encouragement to reporting anything suspicious, not only from outside the premises but also on site, such as unusual accumulations of combustible material or windows left open.