8. Documentation

Risk assessments and method statements (known as RAMS within rope access industry) are considered essential and a normal part of working practice in all workplaces.
If something goes wrong someone, somewhere will take the blame and real jobs can be lost. Poor decisions and lack of risk assessments often lead to unsafe working practice. Methods for assessment of risk may differ between industries and whether it pertains to general financial decisions, environmental, ecological, or public health a risk assessment is mandatory.
More importantly a risk assessment is a valuable process that informs our thinking and contributes to the quality of what is delivered as well as the safety.
It is important to understand that all risk assessments evaluate the foreseeable risk and with experience and a greater understanding of the multitude of variables involved with different processes it is easy to create an ever growing list of *things that could go wrong.*
However it is not the purpose of a risk assessment to limit an activity that is potentially dangerous – it is the purposes of the risk assessment to mitigate the risk and make the activity more accessible. Worse case scenarios are discussed later on and an imaginative climber might find the charity abseil environment too challenging to work in as the potential for fatality seems to be round every corner but the process of inspection, discussion and evaluation is important not only for you but for your client. It reassures them, answers their questions, allows them to observe your practices and might even be a part of a funding and quoting process.

Risk assessments should be relatively simple and clear plain English documents that identifies the hazards and consequences and outlines control measures and importantly it needs to that satisfy the client's requirements. Nothing more is gained from expanding documents unnecessarily.

Insert 13 One job was on a building near to the Olympic site and we were told, quite sternly, "Do not touch the surface-to-air missiles." We didn't.

Risk Assessment Fees
It is normal practice to charge for time and fuel when carrying out risk assessments and it is a common folly of the inexperienced to offer a free risk assessment for preferential priority for the job. This serves no-one well. The client gets no reassurance that you have offered them the best advice and might not want you to do it. You lose money, damage your reputation and have no incentive to do a thorough job and the industry suffers as people scratch around for cheaper and cheaper quotes. Having a set fee may be simpler in practice but it needs to be balanced with the time you expect a risk assessment to take. Asking for payment in advance is also prudent as it might be decided that it is not possible to run the event.

Insurance

When visiting buildings and carrying out risk assessments insurance cover will be required in case you cause damage unintentionally to the building and its fixtures and fittings. Ensure you have this in place as some roof tops have expensive equipment installed like solar panels.

An example of damage that could be caused could be that you have a nail embedded in your trainer sole and you walk around a neoprene skinned roof puncturing the membrane in a few places causing leaks.

Some sites have communications networks, computers, wiring etc that could be easily damaged by a clumsy approach.

Standard insurance for climbing *does not* cover abseiling from buildings and is only provided by specialist companies. Shop around as always for a good deal but do not be tempted to withhold information relating to the remit as this will invite only problems.

Consider what is to be insured; potential damage to the fabric of the building costing thousands of pounds or even accidental death of a third party or several members of the public.

Employer's liability must also be considered as it is unlikely that an event can happen with one member of staff – even if these are volunteers and provided by the event organiser if they are under the direction of the abseil team they are responsible to that team.

Risk assessment for a risk?

Often risk assessments and method statements are required to carry out a site inspection – in other words, a 'risk assessment for a risk assessment' covering the hazards approaching the roof space and how they will be managed e.g. using a man-safe system before approaching a building edge.

It is often not sufficient to use a 'dynamic' risk assessment style and facilities teams may object to what is considered normal working practices and not grant access to the roof space.

A generic risk assessment is the most suitable for this situation and an example is included below (Table 6). It can be seen that hazards and control measures are dealt with that, if adhered to will avoid accidental harm but that the dynamic risk assessment is still given prominence to allow the inspection. It is worth noting that the slightly different use of terminology with regards to 'participants' and 'personnel'. As the generic risk assessment needs to be effective for a site inspection it is worth making clear who is who prior to entering any roof space and where the responsibilities lie – this could take the form of another document.

Table 6 – Generic Risk Assessment for Urban Abseiling			
Risk	Consequence	Likelihood	Control measures
Falling from the top of building	Severe injury or death	Very Low	Clear signage and briefings. All areas where participants are not secured to have a guard rail a minimum of 1.2m in height. All personnel and participants to be secured near the edge with appropriate 'cowstails' or ropes.
Failure of equipment	Severe injury or death	Very low	All equipment used will be CEN rated for climbing or industrial rope access. All equipment will be logged and monitored for usage and wear and tear. All equipment will be independently inspected every year. All manufacturers' recommendations will be followed. All equipment shall only be used by trained and qualified personnel.
Something falling from above	Severe injury or death	Very Low	Beneath all working areas to be cleared and signage to be put in place. Only supervised participants wearing helmets will be allowed into the working area.
Damage to building infrastructure	Minor injury	Very Low	All buildings prior to site inspection to be signed off as safe and fit for purpose by building and facilities management All infrastructure to be inspected and tested for suitability prior to use

Generic Risk Assessments

These risk assessments apply to all environments and can be applied indiscriminately across the board to pad a document (see below) and whilst they do not demonstrate a thorough understanding of the intricacies of a particular activity or location they are a necessary process to demonstrate your competence on-site and industry compliance as well as this they may be essential to secure a booking. Table 6 shows a generic risk assessment for inspection visits but it is clear that it nearly applies in many situations. You should be able to produce a comprehensive raft of documents to ensure safe access onto a building and into a building. Identifying risks should not be considered detrimental to the service being offered and indeed if you can show that you are taking measures to avoid things such as damage to the internal fabric of a building from your equipment it shows a fastidious level of care and a professional approach.

Generic risk assessments can also be approached in a time sequenced manner starting with the moment you drive onsite that makes it more readable and easier to visualise for your clients. This also is slightly easier to digest than listing the risks in order of severity (for example) which would mean that words such as 'fatal', 'death' and such like would appear frequently near the beginning.

A risk assessment must be supported by a method statement which would also include information on carrying out a risk assessment as well references to industry documentation and advice and templates to assist with decision making.

> Insert 14
>
> I have found it easier when preparing documents for a complex job to imagine that *I am not the one carrying out the risk* assessment – and the person who is I don't entirely trust. What would I want them to do? What questions must they ask and what pictures must they take?

The HSE can provide a useful model for the writing of generic risk assessments as befits a formal and important document. It is not necessary to use this model but the advice in their document "5 Steps to Risk Assessment" is comprehensive and valuable as well as easily accessible on the web.

Site Specific Risk Assessments?

Site specific risk assessments are notably better and accepted more widely in industry than generic assessments that are often used by outdoor pursuits companies.
A site-specific document must list all foreseeable risks and potential risks as well as this developing an aptitude for identifying 'compound' risks is a useful skill. These are risk that are the result of many different circumstances; the ultimate 'what-ifs'. The corner of a building is not a risk until someone is blown around it and all the ropes are severed. A glove stuck in a descender is not a risk unless the releasable abseil tail is too short and the 'dead end' of the safety rope is caught around the abseilers gear loop. And most things are not a risk until the random factor of humanity is added. Because of this one element writing a site specific risk assessment is the most important skills in this sphere of work and should be done diligently and comprehensively.

A site specific RA will:

- Mention the building by name
- Possibly include floor & roof plans
- Identify key personnel and areas of responsibility
- Describe specific locations in detail
- Outline 'ordinary' limitations and control measures
- Clearly identify all hazards
- Discuss consequences of the risk
- Detail the persons affected by that risk
- Outline control measures

It is not uncommon to include a point's based matrix and this is a comforting addition but as points can be arbitrarily ascribed it doesn't necessarily make it any safer. Table 7 shows an example. Each element being scored is out of five and a score over ten would be considered a serious risk. Below explains how such a system is calculated (Table 8)

Table 7 – Points based assessment calculator	
Persons affected • 0/5 – no persons affected • 1/5 – 1 participant affected • 2/5 – 1 passer-by or spectator affected • 3/5 – Multiple, identifiable participants affected • 4/5 – Multiple, identifiable passers-by affected • 5/5 – Multiple and indiscriminate affect to participants and passers-by	Control measures in-situ • 0/5 – No control measures required • 1/5 or 2/5 – 1 or 2 present • 3/5 – Many control measures required to control risk • 4/5 – No control measures bar access prohibition and signage • 5/5 – No control measures present
Consequences of risk • 0/5 – No consequences • 1/5 – Minor soft tissue injury, scrape or bump • 2/5 – Moderate soft tissue injury requiring 1st Aid • 3/5 – Severe injury requiring hospitalisation • 4/5 – Disabling injury such as fracture or head injury • 5/5 – Death	Control measures required • 0/5 – No control measures required • 1/5 – Signage only required • 2/5 – Minor easily applicable control measures required • 3/5 – Multiple control measures required • 4/5 – Direct supervision or management required • 5/5 – All the above required
Overall Outcome Score • 0-3; none or low risk • 3-7; acceptable risk • 7-12; moderate risk • 13-16; manageable risk • 17-20; unacceptable risk	

Table 8 - Points based matrix calculator						
Hazard	Risk	Persons affected	Control measures in-situ	Consequences of risk	Control measures required	Outcome & overall Score
Heavy hatch lid on roof	Damage to persons if lid dropped when operated	1 lid user – participant of abseil only	Signage and releasable catch. Only abseil participants granted access to roof	Limb soft tissue and head injury	Helmets to be worn. Releasable catch to be backed up with a hatch tie-back.	No significant issue. Continue with control measures
Risk Score		1/5	2/5	3/5	2/5	8/20
Stones on roof and no captive walling	Stone falling onto passers by	Multiple passers-by and spectators	Access to roof prohibited and signage clearly visible	Death or serious head injury or serious soft tissue injury	Matting for all areas where participants can access. Direct supervision required	Significant risk. Ensure direct supervision on roof area
Risk Score		5/5	4/5	5/5	2/5	16/20

It can be seen that it is easy to achieve a relatively high score with a relatively low risk but at the same time high risks can be mitigated effectively.

It must be pointed out that the HSE acknowledge that the outdoor training schemes do not necessarily include formal training in the formulating of risk assessments but that the principles of risk are embedded with the training scheme.

Dynamic Risk Assessments

Mountaineering instructors work in ever changing environments due to weather and many other factors, we make decisions about safety on the fly and this is called a *dynamic risk assessment*. Gut instincts based on experience is one way of describing it but it is essentially a series of very rapid judgement calls that are identifiable but not necessarily at the time.

Facilities teams will accept dynamic risk assessments as some industrial workforces also have to work in changing environments. This ensures that on man-made structures control is maintained by the abseil provider rather than working to set rules laid out by someone less familiar with safe working practices.

Insert 15

Whilst coasteering in a well-used place known as the Blue Lagoon a member of my team decided return to where we started from by climbing back across the cliff. For reasons I didn't articulate I insisted he get off the cliff and it was actually necessary for him to be physically pulled away. Seconds later a volley of boulders, some the size of microwaves fell down where he would have been.
On reflection I had encountered this situation many times in the mountains on steep and unstable ground in heavy rain and the signs where there but I had not hitherto acknowledged it.

Developing pro-forma dynamic risk assessments or, in effect providing evidence that dynamic risk assessments are utilised and adhered to by members of the abseil team is a useful tool to include with your paperwork. However the HSE point out that,

> "any attempt at trying to assess every conceivable set of circumstances is likely to result in a document that is of very little practical use. This is why it is important for the instructor to be competent for the activity and the environment."

Method Statements and Operating Procedures

Risk assessments often inform a *method statement* which is a workplace safety document outlining what is safe and expected use of personnel and equipment on the site in question.
Method statements describe how activities are carried out on-site. This includes parking vehicles, carrying and moving equipment and setting up. Statements on technical specifications of equipment and rescue systems should be included as without this statement it might otherwise be difficult to obtain permission to access the roof.
Standard Operating Procedures or Activity Specific Operating Procedures (SOPs & ASOPs) are more applicable to the specifics of the job such as belaying and setting up and are the appropriate document for clearly outlining do's and don'ts. Examples might include:

- When belaying a recognised belay device must be used.
- Gri-gris are not to be used for abseiling.

It is imperative that all members of staff are au-fait with the operating procedures and do not do something which contravenes them as to do so, even if considered normal practice in the hills then the liability would shift to them directly. However if the person who wrote the operating procedure was not conscientious in ensuring that their staff read the appropriate documentation and were not diligent in managing then this would change the liability again.

To abseil or to not
It seems unlikely but often abseil events are arranged without permission being sought from the people who manage access onto the roof. Consider the amount of 'shareholders' in the building; the owner, leaseholders, management teams, maintenance & security. It might be that the MD of the main leaseholder decides to organise the event but the responsibility for access to the roof is a security issue due to it overlooking Buckingham Palace (for example). It might not be until you turn up with a list of questions that anyone considers checking. Sometimes it is inevitable that permission

will not be granted to work an event from a roof and this can be for a multitude of reasons but it is not in anyone's interest to attempt to ride roughshod over another organisation or manager.

Insert 16 One company refused to let us use any of the building / structure as anchor points for the abseil however suitable. The event did not happen.

Building owners sometimes get involved in risk assessments and should always be made aware of potential abseil events. Jobs may be cancelled last minute if facilities teams do not inform the legal owners. This can prove expensive for charities and is a huge shame if it happens so we always discuss this with facilities teams during meetings.

- The client and responsibilities including insurance.
- Managers and other staff.
- Insurance for RAMS and visits.

Fairly infrequently it is the abseiler provider that has to cancel the gig. The event organisers are quite entitled to look to another company to run it and it is not uncommon to discover that you have been brought in for that very reason.
If another company has decreed that a venue is unsafe it does not necessarily mean that it is.
Consider some of the more inflexible variables that need to be safely managed;

- The cost – if a company has specific working practices it often prices them out of the venue; an over-reliance on scaffolding for example.
- Staffing – many organisations are perfectly professional one man shows and it is not in their interest to take on too big a job.
- Experience – many people quite simply lack the experience to formulate suitable approaches to complicated venues.

In these circumstances it is important to serve the best interests of the industry and support those decisions whilst offering alternatives.
All the other reasons to not take on an abseil are discussed below but it is important to remember that it is not possible to foresee the foreseeable

Supporting Documentation
So far we have looked at:

- Risk Assessments
- Method Statements
- Operating Procedures

For completeness the importance of a 'kitchen-sink' approach to paperwork is encouraged and we will discuss all relevant documents here.
It is important to note that a document does not, necessarily have greater merit if it is long and full of fancy words but at the same time cutting corners is not useful to anyone. There is no right way of doing this and a quick straw poll of MIs will only give several different approaches and even conflicting advice. Good paperwork is not a replacement for good skills and using detailed session planners can detract from the necessity of using adequately qualified and experienced staff and also too much information is less likely to be read and therefore adhered to.
It is also important to consider who is responsible for providing what documentation and where, then should the paperwork 'reside'. The best forms in the world are no use stuffed into the bottom of the wrong rucksack. Originals of the above documents should be stored safely at HQ with copies being carried by the abseil leader and possibly a set also issued to the client. The abseil leader may also choose to carry a blank dynamic risk assessment pro-forma and various checklists (see chapter 11) and importantly they should be able to access any important medical information.

Photo 76 A massive person next to a miniature person

Client forms

The client will have some of an idea of what they want and this differs widely. It is depends upon who is influencing the event team and if it is the facilities management then often it becomes an onerous task to produce all the documentation that they require. At its simplest a client might just need to see an insurance certificate and this is more likely if there is lots of downloadable supporting documentation online however the list below is a fairer representation of what might be requested.

- RAMS' & OP's
- Health & Safety statements
- Equipment purchase and usage logs
- Equipment testing logs
- Staff qualifications including 1st Aid
- Staff induction and training files
- Staff Criminal Record Bureau disclosures.
- Accident and Incident files including near misses.
- AALA licence
- Child protection policy

It is important to remember that often the client is unaware of what is the best course of action is and it maybe that they would benefit from some impartial advice as long as that advice is honest and fair and does not dismiss their concerns but addresses them.

Participant forms

Medical form and consent form. These can be different documents or one and the same. Ensure to include a disclaimer for behaviour and negligence on behalf of the client if they are over eighteen or parental consent if they are under. Photographic Consent (model release) forms. Important if you want to use any pictures you take on your marketing information.
It might also be useful to include with any forms issued a code of conduct for participants and some simple information about the even and abseiling itself.
These forms can be supplied by the abseil company but are more often than not provided by the event organiser as it will likely have to comply with the in-house documentation requirements of the company hosting the event. This must mean a close collaboration between all parties to ensure that all elements are covered on the forms.

9. Site visits and pre-event inspection

It is not possible to run an abseil event without an inspection and it is instructive to consider why. In theory someone with the right equipment could just clip a rope to a building and abseil off safely but it is unlikely that anyone with the wherewithal to do so would want to.
It is the addition of novices and passers-by that make an event potentially dangerous.
Also the poor quality of the build and the fixtures and fittings should not be under-estimated. Most buildings are not designed for abseiling down and there are numerous ways the unwary could come to harm.

Photographs

Photographs always help in risk assessments, always take plenty and ensure they are a high resolution, photos of the following are required especially if there is an intention to allow other instructors to work on the job should the leader be absent.
Photos are usually required of the following for a site specific risk assessment and method statement:

- The building from the ground to the roof - abseil elevation.
- The access to the roof space, ladders or hatches.
- The anchor points if any exist from many angles.
- The building edge
- The view from the top down to landing zone

Sometimes Google maps in satellite view allows you to get a bird's eye view of larger buildings – take a *printscreen* copy of this on a computer as this image can prove useful to mark locations of abseil points. Scaffolding teams find these aerial plans very useful for site visits.