

# Inside Blindside

By Trisha Richards

*Dreams offer an abundant supply of scenarios in which to embarrass ourselves. Consider completing what can only be described as a flawless presentation, awaiting the applause that is sure to come, but then notice you are without a stitch of clothing. How about that convivial conversation with the new boss, demonstrating your keen sense of company and self, just as you discover you've been zapped by a lazy zipper? Or what of the navigation skills needed to sit in an office chair, but your landing location being somewhat off the mark, you crash to the floor?*

## Some possibilities

What would your assessment be of the last example? Embarrassing? Sure. Painful? Probably. Clumsy? Maybe not.

Sandro Perruzza, executive director of corporate development at the Ontario Service Safety Alliance in Toronto, may have an explanation. An interesting feature of some older buildings in the city, for example, is that once they have settled, "the floor becomes uneven, so it creates a slope," Perruzza says.

Go on.

As a result, wheeled chairs may roll down the slope, causing a worker to miss the cushioned target.

Ah.

But don't feel too smug. Roving chairs can be (and could have been) avoided by simply placing mats underneath, Perruzza suggests. As a short-term solution, the mat provides the additional

friction needed to stop any unanticipated and unwelcome rolling.

The Keystone Kops quality of the wayward chair may seem amusing at first blush, but blush has the potential to turn to bruise (or worse) should a real fall and hard landing occur.

These are not the types of hazards that grab headlines, but their inconspicuousness and seeming innocuousness may well have allowed them to become firmly entrenched in what is regarded as among the "least dangerous" of workplaces: offices.

## Safe haven?

Be clear: dangers lurk and demand vigilance, as would be the case with any working environment. "Most people think that, in an office, they don't have any serious risks," says Chet Ramphal, a trainer/consultant with Brantford, Ontario-based Occupational Health and Safety Consultants (OHSC). "Most

people think, well, how dangerous can a photocopier be?"

But just because "most people" may hold that view doesn't mean office environments are free of hazards, Ramphal says.

Oliver Howey, executive director of the Office Workers Career Centre in Toronto, agrees. Jammed packed as today's offices are with new technologies and equipment, Howey points out the environment is far different than in years past. "Technology has added an element that people underestimate," he says.

"People think, in an office environment, you're just sitting at a desk all day," Howey says. But multi-tasking is pretty much expected nowadays, with office staff "doing two or three things, all in a short period of time. So it can become quite a challenge."

While not "in your face" like the hazards that may be found in manufacturing, mining or construction, office conditions move beyond "balancing" challenges to actual physical hazards.

The adoption of information and communications technology also needs to be considered for safety's sake, notes information from Flexibility Ltd., a not-for-profit company out of the United Kingdom that seeks to promote flexible working. For example, extra heat from the equipment must be controlled or removed, and occupational health and safety risks relating to electrical hazards, eyestrain and sitting positions need to be addressed.

Workplace design plays a pivotal role in overall business performance by supporting the new work

modes of a knowledge economy, notes survey results from Gensler, a design and consulting firm based in the United States.

"As cost control becomes an even greater business priority over the next several years, office space reductions will be a common cost-cutting strategy," Diane Hoskins, executive director of Gensler says in a statement. "However, companies risk creating inefficiencies if they simply shrink space and continue with the same workplace paradigm," Hoskins cautions.

In administrative environments, Perruzza sees a lack of planning as being at the root of many slips, trips and falls. Oftentimes, he suggests a long-term view of space needs is not carefully considered right from the get-go — when an organization moves into an office.

But getting a firm grasp on future needs can be tough, Flexibility Ltd. reports. Changes in technology processes, working methods and the competitive environment, "make it virtually impossible" for organizations to forecast property needs.

Perruzza says companies that are successful, showing some growth, can quickly outgrow a space. "During that growth mode, the money that they're making will go into buying new equipment or paying the new staff they need," he suggests.

"They won't necessarily have the funds to move into a larger facility, so they wind up putting work stations in places where work stations don't belong."

Perruzza advises that desks located in common areas or in throughways are simply accidents waiting to happen. "If you put a desk in a location where there is no outlet and run an extension cord to it, now that extension cord is a trip hazard for people walking by."

### Going down?

As winter inevitably approaches, Perruzza says, so do some slippery challenges. "You'll see that a lot of workplaces will get those rubber mats and put them in entryways," he says.

Mats, meant to absorb water and debris from footwear, are a good idea — until wear and tear creates features that, in themselves, become hazards. If edges start to curl, like dog ears, as employees walk inside, their heels can become caught, pulling the mat up and causing a fall.

Another entryway hazard is carpeting. Even if a worker's shoes are initially dry, they won't stay that way once he or she steps on and off a wet carpet. "You get on that linoleum floor, and now you'll slide," Perruzza cautions.

And just because morning rain (or snow) has stopped, one should not expect that everything, like carpeting, has also

