

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, November 2011

Fire Safety

How Careless Chris De-Prioritized Fire Prevention...an Imaginary Scenario

Fictitious employee Careless Chris worked as a teaching assistant for a respected Principal Investigator. He was very good at some things, and not so good at others. One of the things Careless Chris did well was helping students understand the complex course material. Another strong point was his diligence in preparing the PI's materials for classes and lab sessions. He remembered all the details. He gathered data and references, purchased supplies and coordinated schedules. He enjoyed working in the unique, older building that housed the offices. It was one of the campus' more picturesque locations, with high ceilings and old-fashioned wood trim. "The place has the most amazing character," Chris often thought as he walked in the door on his way to work.

Ironically, Chris's conscientiousness in coordinating academic activities stood in stark contrast to his apathetic approach to safety. On one quiet afternoon, this unfortunate attitude would result in near-catastrophe.

The problems started when Chris ordered a large shipment of glassware, pipettes, gloves and other lab bench necessities. That delivery also included a dozen bottles of chlorine-based cleaning solution. For some reason, the materials had been brought to the office instead of the lab storage area. To add to the confusion, an order of binders, flip chart pads and other office supplies were delivered the following day. The cluster of boxes was set along both sides of the old, wood-paneled hallway. "There's plenty of room to walk through," thought Chris, "and the exit door isn't completely blocked."

Chris had an assistant log in the materials. After the assistant left, Chris stood in the hall, gazing at eight large boxes and several cardboard tubes. "I can't believe I have to worry about getting all this stuff over to the lab storage area. It shouldn't even be here."

The prospect of separating the lab materials from the office supplies and arranging for transport suddenly seemed too complicated. Chris was simply not in the mood to deal with it and frankly, he found this type of work boring. "This distracts me from doing what I do best," he thought as he headed back to the lab. The following day, Chris considered dealing with the boxes in the hall, but he had to help the PI prepare for an important seminar.

A few more days went by. Chris was actually beginning to feel more comfortable with the storage in the corridor. An assistant had opened one of the office supply boxes to retrieve some materials, so now a cascade of bubble wrap decorated the pile of boxes. On Friday, Chris postponed tackling the mess until the mess the following Monday. He traveled over the weekend, however, so on Monday he was tired and irritable and definitely not in the mood for sorting and transporting.

When Tuesday afternoon rolled around, Chris was peacefully glued to his computer, intent on planning a new experiment. At first, he dismissed the alarm bell and shouts he heard as some kind of celebration. When he smelled smoke, he suddenly put it all together. Fire!

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What about the work? His computer, the external drives with all the data? He figured he'd have time to save them since the exit door was only twenty feet away. He was filling his arms with precious electronics when he heard the pandemonium outside his door.

Chris looked out and saw a dozen people struggling to get past the now-overturned and jumbled cardboard boxes. Several bottles of the strong-smelling cleaning solution had broken, so the floor was slippery and strewn with glass shards, and the air was filled with fumes. Suddenly, the smoke that at first had been annoying became thick and choking. Chris immediately dropped his laptop and the hard drives and struggled toward the exit along with everyone else.

Fortunately, two people had managed to open the exit door and were helping everyone out. Chris was the last to exit, coughing and blinking from the smoke and fumes. As he recovered at the medical center a few hours later, he learned that an overloaded power strip had started a fire in a neighboring, unoccupied office. Materials in the area had started to smolder, causing the intense smoke. Once everyone was out of harm's way, firefighters had extinguished the fire, preventing major damage to the building. This was fortunate, since the older building did not have the fire sprinklers that would have helped to contain the fire at its point of origin.

Chris had to face some serious questions from the P.I. and the campus Fire Marshal. He quickly learned how misguided his priorities were. He now recognized the importance of paying attention to fire safety at all times. He learned that keeping corridors and exits clear, posting exit paths clearly and practicing evacuation procedures were essential. He also learned that in the smoke and confusion of a fire, people can panic and become disoriented. He learned that he should have evacuated immediately rather than trying to save his data and that overloading a power strip creates a major fire danger.

Chris was embarrassed to admit that he had not kept up with his required fire prevention training. He was relieved that the cleaning liquid that was splashed everywhere was not a highly flammable solution. And though he was happy that no one was seriously injured, he was mortified about having obstructed the exit path. When he was finally able to return to work in the refurbished office building, he resolved to give workplace safety the same attention as he gave to his academic priorities.