

# Siemens Elf & Safety Advice: where there's smoke, there isn't always fire!

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False alarms cost the UK economy £1 billion a year

Over 95% of automatically-generated fire alarms are false alarms

Fire and Rescue Services are distracted from genuine emergencies over the busy festive period

As the countdown to Christmas gets well and truly underway with offices and places of work getting into the festive spirit, Siemens Building Technologies is warning UK businesses about the potential consequences of false fire alarms during the busiest period of the year. False alarms from remotely-monitored fire detection and fire alarm systems cost the UK economy an estimated £1 billion in business disruption\* with 95% of automatically-generated alarms being proved to be false\*\* placing Fire and Rescue Services (F&RS) and the public at unnecessary risk.

“The vast majority of automatic fire alarm calls are proven to be false and are often caused by either false fire triggers or the inadequate maintenance of alarm systems,” commented Don Scott, fire engineering consultant Siemens Building Technologies. “Christmas is already a time of heightened risk of fire for many businesses with the F&RS stretched to capacity across the country. False alarms create further pressures when emergency services have to challenge whether alarms are genuine before attending incidents – the time lost could end up costing thousands of pounds in repairs or at worst, put lives at risk.”

Ionisation or single-sensor optical smoke detectors are a common cause of false alarm activations as they have difficulty in accurately distinguishing between airborne pollutants, such as steam, aerosols, dust, cooking fumes, insects, sparks, embers and a real fire. The incorrect siting of detectors can also be triggered if there is excessive air movement from mechanical heating or ventilation.

Multi-sensor detectors are responsive to more than one fire phenomena, i.e. smoke, heat and carbon-monoxide and are proven to be more immune to false alarm phenomena thereby giving fewer false activations. For more stringent applications; beam detectors, heat detectors and aspirating detectors are available.

A regular maintenance programme ensures the correct functioning of a fire alarm system - inadequate servicing and testing compromise safety. If an alarm system is aging or becoming unreliable replacement is advised when offset against the cost of disruption to a business. Generally, detectors should be replaced every 10-15 years, depending upon the environment in which they are installed and the manufacturers recommendations.

Dave Green, national officer, Fire Brigades Union said: “False alarms use up resources which could be better served elsewhere, and increase response times to actual emergencies. But it is better to be safe than sorry, and fire services should always be called when any alarm is raised.”

“Fire services are under more pressure than ever before, dealing with more incidents and more fires, with increasingly fewer firefighters. Since 2009, there has been a 23% decrease in the number of firefighters across the UK. This huge decrease in the number of firefighters has meant that preventative work, which would help to reduce the number of false alarms, has worryingly fallen by the wayside.”