

# Guidance

## Can You Mitigate Against Dropped Tools?

It's a well-known fact that dropped objects are a safety hazard experienced all too often throughout all sorts of industries. Dropped object accidents occur on oil rigs, construction sites, manufacturing environments, and anywhere else where workers are subject to performing tasks off the ground. In the UK alone dozens die and hundreds are injured every year from falling objects. However, just because dropped objects are so commonplace doesn't mean you can't mitigate against them.

Mitigating against dropped tools is not difficult - it merely requires a commitment from employees and job supervisors to do so. Unfortunately, when it comes to worker safety in relation to dropped tools, that lack of commitment is the number one reason why such actions continue to happen. Securing tools against falling is very simple in principle. It's also rather inexpensive. But when employers and their workers have no interest in investing the time, effort, and finances into working safely, accidents will happen.

## Mitigating against Dropped Tools Is the Law

We won't speak for any other place in the world, but we can say that in the UK it is required by law for companies who conduct work at height activities to take every precaution necessary to mitigate against dropped tools. Any accident resulting from a failure to do so could mean heavy fines and other forms of punitive consequences. Beyond that, employers are potentially risking injury or death to their workers and customers when they refuse to obey the law. Living with the guilt of a serious injury or death is far worse than any of the legal consequences.

Fortunately, the law is not as restrictive as some critics make it out to be. Regulations give companies and job site supervisors great latitude in the choice of methods used to secure against dropped tools. Everything from lanyards to tool bags to safety nets; as long as a company's safety strategies are adequate and the risk assessments are in place for that particular job and type of work, they are usually acceptable. Job sites, tools, and equipment must be inspected by certified individuals in order to ensure compliance.

## Education of All Workers

Perhaps the most successful component in any mitigation program is the proper training and education of all workers. It's one thing to purchase lanyards and other types of equipment, and to pass on-site inspections; it is an entirely different matter to make employees understand the importance of tool safety. Like the typical young driver who believes accidents only happen to other people, many people working at height are unwilling to believe they could injure or kill someone until the time comes when they do. Educating them in this reality is of utmost importance.

A good training program teaches workers not only how to secure their tools, but the potential consequences if they don't. Doing some simple math calculations to determine force and velocity go a long way in this endeavour. Real, factual stories are also a big help, especially if accompanied by photographs or written testimonies; anything to get the attention of workers in realizing how serious an issue tool safety is.

## The Part of Management

Mitigating against dropped tools is ultimately the responsibility of management at various levels. First and foremost, management is responsible to ensure that a job risk assessment has been done before anything else. From that assessment they are required to provide a workable safety plan that will ensure not only the prevention of dropped tools, but also the overall safety of all personal working at height. The plan is then implemented and records kept of the entire process.

# Guidance

When the inspectors come to do their routine inspections they will point out to management any areas of deficiency. It is up to the managers in question to make sure corrective action is taken. However, just like there are workers who do not understand the seriousness of dropped tools and thereby don't always follow the rules, there are some managers who do the same. Bad weather, low budgets, and being behind schedule are just three of the things that sometimes influence managers to look the other way in terms of safety.

## The Team Approach Works Well

Not every task on a job can benefit from the concept of a team approach. Fortunately, tool safety is one that can. By adopting a team approach to safety management we drive home the point that the safety of one worker equates to the safety of all. Likewise, when all workers abide by the plan set up to mitigate dropped tools, the entire crew is better off because production is higher and everyone is safer.

On the other side of the equation, when there are accidents involving dropped tools, a crew that has learned the team concept will all share the burden of responsibility together. The team approach means that any accident resulting in serious injury or death tarnishes the reputation of the entire operation, not just one individual. This shared responsibility for accidents results in a shared effort to prevent them in the future. Therefore, developing a team concept among both management and workers will increase your chances of effectively mitigating against dropped tools.

## The Barrier Principle

When designing systems to mitigate against dropped tools it helps to think in terms of the "barrier" principle. This principle is one used by quite a number of safety organizations as a means of explaining to company safety officers how they should be thinking. Simply put, the barrier principle states that the best way to prevent dropped tools is to establish in your mind a certain chain of events that could lead to a dropped object accident, and then develop as many "barriers" as you can that will break up that chain of events. If the chain is broken the tool cannot be dropped.

We can explain the barrier principle with a simplistic example of retrieving a hand tool from a tethered tool bag. The tools in a tethered tool bag should all be attached to that bag using the appropriate lanyards. Transferring a tool from the bag to a workers tool pouch provides an opportunity for the tool to be briefly insecure and then dropped. However, instituting a retrieval method that requires the worker to attach his lanyard to the tool before detaching the lanyard from the tool bag interrupts that process and virtually removes all risk of the tool being dropped.

Barriers can be objects, methods, or new ways of thinking. Often times the barriers put in place for a specific day's work involve a combination of all three. The point is, barriers require workers to stop and think about what they're doing before it's done. That forces them to follow procedure and thus reduce the risk of dropping something.

## LEADING EDGE

Tool Safety Solutions Ltd  
Unit 5  
Glenmore Business Park  
Aerodrome Road  
Gosport  
Hampshire  
United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0) 1329 550 121  
Fax +44 (0) 1329 550 470  
Email [sales@leadingedgesafety.co.uk](mailto:sales@leadingedgesafety.co.uk)  
Web [toollanyardsbagsandbelts.com](http://toollanyardsbagsandbelts.com)

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## Write It down

One last thing to note in answering the question of whether or not you can mitigate against dropped tools is the principle of writing it down. While it's true that managers should fill out risk assessment and inspection reports, your paperwork should go much farther than that. In fact, any company that conducts any working at height should develop and publish a handbook of safety policies and/or rules. The handbook can be updated from time to time in order to compensate for changing working environments. However, by putting it in writing there is no question when the time comes to implement it.

Writing down safety policies is as important to preventing dropped tools as preparing a budget to prevent overspending. Without a plan in place tool safety becomes a haphazard affair rife with potential for accidents. The company that develops a sound strategy and publishes a manual outlining it will find it much easier to implement safety controls all across the board.

Can you mitigate against dropped tools? The answer is unquestionably "yes." All you need is the commitment to do so and a team willing to stand with you in the endeavour.

Author: N. S. Beardmore January 2012

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Tool Safety Solutions Ltd  
Unit 5  
Glenmore Business Park  
Aerodrome Road  
Gosport  
Hampshire  
United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0) 1329 550 121  
Fax +44 (0) 1329 550 470  
Email [sales@leadingedgesafety.co.uk](mailto:sales@leadingedgesafety.co.uk)  
Web [toollanyardsbagsandbelts.com](http://toollanyardsbagsandbelts.com)