

Guidance

Operator Considerations For Tool Safety When Working At Height

In order to ensure the safety of workers at height as well as those moving beneath them, the UK government adopted new European safety regulations back in 2005. Those regulations were amended in 2007 and have since been fine-tuned in-line with British Standards and localised dispensation to what we have today. Unfortunately, when talking about at height safety the one component of the equation often forgotten is the worker himself. Yet he is an important part of the safety equation and needs to be considered just as much as safety equipment and the specific tools required.

Since a worker's continued job security and future advancement depends largely on his productivity, it stands to reason that safety may not always be his first priority if it conflicts with productivity. This is not to excuse such an attitude, but rather to suggest that it is reality. Therefore, operator considerations need to be part of the development of job site planning and safety procedure development. Planners must look at all the conditions surrounding the application and what individuals will be exposed to.

Working From MEWPS & In Tight Spaces

One of the most common difficulties experienced by working at height is trying to complete tasks in tight and confined spaces. For example, a worker who is elevated to his work area by powered access only has so much room to move around. If that basket is full of tools at the same time, it may limit his space even further. When a worker is in this type of position he can easily become frustrated and irritable. That can in turn lead to carelessness when it comes to properly securing and using hand tools. A solution to this problem can be to use a specialist tool bag attached to the MEWP rail which has the necessary tool anchor points for securing tool lanyards.

Managers may believe that a single type of generic access system is sufficient because it meets the minimum requirements and is the least expensive option. Yet if those supervisors have never worked with that particular type of system in that environment, they may be unaware that it might not be inappropriate. In other words, the cheapest system that meets minimum requirements is not always the best.

Efficiency of Tool Safety System

Another problem area for workers is the efficiency of tool safety systems or lack of. Often times this problem comes by way of employers who tend to use a "one-size-fits-all" mentality when purchasing tool lanyards, tool belts, and other tool safety equipment or try to make something in-house with gaff tape and string etc. Operator considerations dictate that managers and supervisors communicate with workers in order to determine the most efficient way to secure tools safely, with consideration around suitability for the scope of activity and the type of tool used.

Things that need to be considered include easy accessibility of tools, the ability to use said tools without hindrance, the ability to easily holster and un-holster tools, efficiency in moving tools around the work space, and so forth. A worker who has easy access to his tools is a happy worker. Furthermore, a worker whose tasks are not hindered by inappropriate lanyards and tethers is one who is likely to be more productive, safe and compliant.

An example of what we're talking about here would be a scaffolder who works on commercial buildings. He may have only three or four hand tools to work with, but properly securing even such a small number can be problematic. If those tools are secured with lanyards which are much longer than they need to be, those lanyards can get tangled with one another or, worse yet, with safety ropes. Consideration should be given to suitability i.e. how long a lanyard needs to be for this type of environment, or if they require a swivel link to reduce tangling.

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Weather Conditions

Regardless of the types of safety equipment used, weather always plays an important part in job safety. For example, rainy weather can make tools very slippery which could result in greater risk of injury to employees.

Cold weather is another safety concern that needs special consideration. It has been documented that when individuals are exposed to cold weather for long periods of time, they tend to not think as clearly or react as quickly. This is a recipe for accidents under certain conditions. Whether talking about cold weather, rain, or even extremely high temperatures during the summer months, conditions need to always be taken into consideration when sending workers to work at height with tools. Daily routines need to be modified in order to accommodate current weather conditions, impacting on the scope of activity and equipment being fit for purpose.

Pay Attention to Operator Concerns

Managers and supervisors need to make every effort to pay attention to operator individual considerations. After all, your workers are the ones doing the work at height with associated exposure. Their opinions about what works best practically are often valid, even though you may not initially think so. A consistent and open dialogue between workers and managers is the best way to ensure that all safety regulations are met while at the same time respecting the needs of individual workers.

On the other hand, managers and supervisors who ignore worker considerations are just asking for trouble. Remember that we started this guide by proposing the idea that safety may not be the first consideration of a worker if it conflicts with his other interests. Supervisors must never forget that this is human tendency. If worker concerns are not taken into consideration by managers and supervisors, they are increasing the likelihood that those workers will cut corners when they feel it's necessary to get their jobs done regardless.

One of the best ways to ensure good communication between managers and workers is to provide incentives for achieving a certain number of accident free days. Some companies use a monetary reward while others may provide workers with free lunch or some other type of benefit. These types of incentives encourage workers to go to their managers with concerns. It also encourages managers to listen to those concerns and find solutions to them. When both parties work together to ensure safety it results in a more pleasant and productive work environment.

Ultimately training is the key to behavioural changes, collective cooperation and fit for purpose tool solutions.

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