

Guidance

Tool At Height Risk Assessment

We talk about worker safety and tethering tools at height in order to maintain an accident free environment. While all such talk is useful and relevant, we also must include discussions of working at height risk assessments. Such assessments are the groundwork for all safety measures we take on site. Work that is approached without a safety and risk assessment or one that has been conducted improperly is potentially unsafe therefore leading to potential problems later on.

According to our legal obligation, any job where work at height is performed must undergo a risk assessment before any work can begin. The results of these assessments are recorded in writing along with recommendations citing how risk can be mitigated. It is then up to company management and the job supervisors to design and deploy the proper safety systems. If a risk assessment is both thorough and properly conducted, it gives those designing and deploying safety systems all the information they need.

Key Points of the Risk Assessment

When a risk assessment is being conducted there are three primary points the inspector is looking at: worker safety, the safety of the general public, and the potential for property damage. Obviously human safety comes first and will take priority over everything else. To that end the inspector will be looking not only at the tools to be used and the tethering systems, he'll also be looking at the way the worker access his work at height. Any work that can be reasonably performed from the ground should be done that way, therefore keeping worker safety in line with current legislation. In assessing the risks of falling tools, the inspector must try to visualise as many possible dropped object scenarios as possible. This requires him to be intimately familiar with the type of work being performed, the tools that will be used, and any inherent risks that come with those tools. For example, consider a window washer who works on a high-rise buildings for 8 hours per day. There are special considerations for this type of work in relation to the tools used, the length of the workday, how weather affects the job and any risk to the general public. The inspector needs to understand these things in order to understand the risks. Where specific tools are used risk assessment also takes into consideration the appropriateness of specific tools for a given job. If a tool is not appropriate for the type of work being done it is the responsibility of the risk assessment inspector to point that out. Once a job is under way an inspector continues to monitor the safety of workers; in terms of whether or not their tethering systems are being used properly and their tools are appropriate to the task.

Ongoing Assessments

Risk assessments should be an ongoing part of any working at height job regardless of the frequency. Such inspections are required by law. Work sites are constantly evolving according to the progress of the job, weather conditions, the types of individuals working on the site, and so forth. To do a single risk assessment and then continue throughout the entire course of the job unabated will not be conducive to understanding the evolving nature of work conducted at height.

Ongoing assessments require job site managers who are constantly aware of their surroundings and conditions to conduct these. It requires supervisors to pay attention to what the employees are doing and what possible new risks have developed. With a proactive assessment program it is possible to enjoy long periods of time without a single accident. Yet the job site supervisor who is careless about risk assessment is one who is more likely to have regular accidents.

When risk assessments are conducted for the first time, inspectors are trying to prognosticate potential pitfalls and develop systems to avoid them. The risk assessments conducted after a job begins are looking not only for new potential threats but also areas of deficiency relating to the initial assessment. Where these areas of deficiency are concerned it is the inspector's responsibility to inform supervisors of these deficiencies while recommending a course of remediation.

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Working without an Assessment Is Foolishness

Believe it or not, there are some companies that do not go through a formal risk assessment before beginning work. Often times the thinking is that they have done the same type of work over and over again and know all the potential pitfalls without needing an inspection. But this type of thinking is foolishness. First of all, risk assessments are required by law. They must be conducted with accompanying paperwork to prove as such. Any job conducted at height without a proper safety inspection is open for big trouble and could potentially lead to prosecution.

Government relations aside, preparing a risk assessment is to worker safety what preparing a budget is to company finances. Without a framework of goals and parameters, it is nearly impossible to correctly steer your company. You would certainly not attempt to run your business, or any particular job for that matter, without budget constraints in mind. To do otherwise would be to invite financial chaos. The same needs to be considered in terms of worker and tool safety.

Without parameters and goals in place workers and supervisors approached safety from a very haphazard point of view. Safety practices are not uniform, disciplinary action is virtually non-existent, and safety is left up to a matter of chance. On the other hand, with a proper safety assessment supervisors and managers can plan an appropriate course of action which can be plainly understood and followed by workers.

Who Should Conduct Risk Assessment Inspections

Anyone who meets minimum regulatory requirements can conduct a safety risk assessment. However, just because an individual meets minimum requirements doesn't mean that individual is the best one for the job. More often than not the best safety risk assessment inspectors are those with many years experience either as a worker or an inspector. Safety assessments are particularly difficult because of the need to project what might happen in the future. It helps to have an individual with plenty of experience because he is likely to see much more than someone with no experience.

That said, risk assessment is an ever-changing line of work that will, by default, force an inspector to learn and grow. Inspectors who have learned from experience will develop a more keen awareness of potential job site pitfalls and will be better prepared to offer a more comprehensive assessment. It goes without saying that this is one position where practical experience is worth an awful lot.

On the other hand, workers with plenty of experience are very familiar with ways they can cut corners while still keeping themselves out of trouble. So in addition to experience, the best risk assessment inspectors will also be men and women of integrity. They will understand that the purpose of conducting their inspection is to ensure safety; safety for workers and the general public which is more important than just about anything else on the job site. Finally, risk assessment inspectors should be men and women who are not willing to be influenced by anything other than the law. It wouldn't do you any good to have a job site inspector prone to bribes or other potential forms of improper influence. On more than one occasion there have been work-related accidents based on faulty equipment that never would've been allowed had a risk assessment been done by an unbiased inspector.

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