Guidance

Using Hand Tools At Height Safely

Many of us are familiar with the phrase “safety first.” Unfortunately, up until a few years ago the phrase was not common among many of the thousands of people who work at height in the UK and the companies that employed them. Not that these individuals and businesses were purposely trying to be unsafe, but it was something they simply did not think about until a work site accident injured or killed someone. Nowadays working safely at height is much more common, thanks to the standardization of safety guidelines and legislation.

Going one step further, using hand tools at height safely is just as important as securing workers themselves. According to the UK government’s most recent statistics, thousands of people are injured every year as the result of dropped objects. Hundreds even died from their injuries. Therefore it is imperative for companies that undertake working at height activities and their employees to be cognizant of how to use hand tools safely while working at height.

UK law mandates that all companies working at height take every precaution possible to prevent dropped tools. This may include, but is not limited to, safety nets, foot plates, lanyards, enclosed platforms, and secured tool bags and boxes. Thankfully, there are enough options available to make it relatively easy for anyone to secure any type of tool without being hindered in its use. It’s simply a matter of knowing what’s appropriate for each hand tool.

Risk Assessments

The first step in making sure hand tools are used safely at height is to assess the risks of a given job site. Not only is this common sense, it’s also the law. Once you understand the risks associated with the area where you’ll be working, you’re much better able to develop a plan and a safety system appropriate to that site. Part of your assessment should be dealing with the types of tools workers will be using and the inherent risks involved with each of them.

For example, if a particular carpentry job will require the worker to use a hammer at height 20% of the time he is on the job, that’s significant. The hammer needs to be secured to prevent it from falling yet still be readily available and easy to use. The system must be both safe and efficient in order to protect from accidents while still allowing a worker to function properly. These are the kinds of things to consider where using hand tools safely where working at height is concerned.

Worker Awareness

Worker awareness is another important part of the equation that should not be overlooked. For their own safety, those who work at height should always be aware of their surroundings and any pending conditions that might change the surroundings quickly. For example, workers should be aware if foul weather is forecast during their workday. With that knowledge they can keep an eye on conditions and anticipate when a storm might blow up. This helps them to be better prepared in securing not only their tools, but themselves as well.

Worker awareness also extends to the mundane tasks of using and transferring tools; it’s not just confined to initially hooking them up to a safety harness or tool belt. Workers need to be aware at all times where their tools are, where lanyards are in relation to other pieces of equipment, and whether or

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
Web toollanyardsbagsandbelts.com

not tools are being used properly. Workers who are aware of what's going on around them are more prone to working safely than those who pay no attention.

Worker Comfort

One of the things that often gets overlooked when talking about using hand tools at height safely is worker comfort. Though we would like to think conscientious workers will always operate safely regardless of how uncomfortable it might be that's not reality. In fact, statistics show that tired and uncomfortable workers tend to be more careless at the end of the day and will take more risks at that time. In order to reduce the likelihood of such behaviour, safety systems and work conditions should be designed to help workers be as comfortable and efficient as possible.

One of the most important things that can be done to ensure worker comfort is to properly determine the length of lanyards connecting tools to tool belts - before sending the worker to the job. This can be done at ground level simply by observing the worker use the tools as he would at height. Through ground level tests you can determine how long or short lanyards should be, where on a tool belt or harness they should be connected, whether or not to use a holster, and so forth. If done properly, this will save your workers great aggravation during their workday.

Tool Inspections

Tool inspections are just as essential to safe working as the lanyards and other security systems used to hold them. For example, the strongest lanyard and karabiner is of little value if the ring they attach to is rusted and worn. If just a little bit of stress can cause that ring to break free as the worker is using the tool, it instantly becomes unsafe. Therefore, tools should always be inspected before beginning work for the day.

In addition, a six monthly formal inspection should take place to include all tools and safety equipment; this is a legal requirement for companies to fulfil. The inspector should certify everything that passes inspection as well as listing everything that fails. Job site supervisors should then correct any deficiencies as noted by the inspector's report. This will always include making sure tools are appropriate to the job for which they are being used. Inappropriate tools lead to mistakes which can then lead to accidents.

Using tools at height safely requires a joint effort among workers, supervisors, company owners, and inspectors. When everyone involved does his or her job the way it should be done, safety risks are reduced to a manageable level. Yet if just one person does not perform, it could open the door for all sorts of undesirable consequences. In order to be safe in the workplace be sure that everyone contributing to the project does his or her job correctly.

Author: N. S. Beardmore October 2011

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
Web toollanyardsbagsandbelts.com