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Make Fall Protection a Priority

Job site falls are the No. 1 cause of work-related deaths in the construction industry. Help break any fall with the proper plans, policies and equipment.

By Matt Alderton

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What goes up must come down. On construction job sites, that means not only walls, but also the crew that's building them. Whether they're on a roof, a ladder or an open ledge, your workers are eventually going to have to return to solid ground. When they do, it's your job to make sure they land safely.

Unfortunately, many workers don't. Too often, they fall, resulting in serious injury or even death. In 2006 alone—the most recent year for which there is data—there were 809 fatal falls on construction job sites, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's the third highest total since 1992 and an increase of 5 percent over 2005.

Improper fall protection is a major problem. The solution lies not only with laborers on ladders and scaffolding, but also with their employers, who must take responsibility for making job sites as safe as possible.

Costs and Consequences

A fall can break not just your bones, but also your business, according to Marvin Sasser, safety director for Atlanta-based Hardin Construction. "I don't care if you do have workers' comp insurance," he says. "Deductibles are getting higher and premiums are getting higher, so if you have a fall, you're going to spend a fortune to pay for it."

Higher insurance premiums are just one of many costs your company will incur if a worker is injured from a work-related fall. Another is a series of steep penalties charged by the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA); the federal agency charged with enforcing federal safety standards, it requires that construction employers provide fall protection for anyone who's working at a height of six feet or higher.

"OSHA penalties can start at \$5,000 and up for a serious penalty," says Sasser, who began his career as an OSHA federal compliance officer. "For a small employer, that's a lot of money."

More difficult than financial losses, however, are human losses. "Falls are the leading killer in construction injuries," Sasser says. "You don't ever want to have to call somebody's wife explaining that they died because they fell."

Fall Protection Planning

If your workers are already tinkering on a ledge several stories high, it's usually too late to start thinking about fall protection, according to Tim Maroushek, product marketing manager for systems and anchors for Capital Safety, a Redwing, Minn.-based manufacturer of fall protection equipment. He recommends doing a job site walk through before—not after—starting a project. The goal of the walk through should be to identify fall hazards—including leading edges, roof decks, open windows and missing floorboards—and plan accordingly.

"Take a look at your job site and try to take inventory of all those areas where people are going to be working at heights," Maroushek says. "From that, determine which people need to be up there."

For workers who will be working at heights, having the right equipment is key. According to Maroushek, it's all about the "ABCDs" of fall protection:

- **Anchorage:** You must have a secure structure—a concrete column, a roof, a doorjamb—to tie off to, as well as appropriate anchorage connectors.
- **Body support:** Workers should have a full-body [harness](#) so that they can connect themselves to the designated anchorage point.
- **Connectors:** Connectors—[lanyards](#), [snap-hooks](#), [carabineers](#), self-retracting lifelines (SRLs) etc.—tie a worker's harness to the anchorage point.
- **Descent and rescue:** In case workers do fall, you must have a plan in place to retrieve them, as well as the proper equipment to do so.

Perhaps the most important piece of fall protection equipment is a guardrail. While anchors will protect somebody when work near a fall hazard, guardrails will restrict their access to that same hazard in the event that they don't need to work near it.

Elevation Education

Of course, workers can't be expected to use fall protection equipment if they don't understand how to use it. Employers must therefore institute a rigorous training program to teach employees how to use fall protection equipment.

To make training stick, Sasser suggests a multipronged approach:

- Take new hires through a company orientation that stresses safety; because many workers may be Hispanic, make your orientation bilingual.
- Don't just tell employees how to use fall protection equipment; show them with detailed one-on-one demonstrations.
- Pair young workers with experienced mentors that they can shadow and learn from.
- Convene a pre-job meeting to discuss safety issues and reiterate policies and procedures.

If you need a crash course in fall protection, Sasser recommends the following resources:

- **OSHA:** Call your local OSHA office and ask for help; they'll answer all your questions and send you plenty of information. What's more, OSHA has a free consultative service for small employers that's completely separate from its enforcement side; they'll give you a mock job site inspection and help you develop your own custom safety program.
- **Associations:** Industry associations are ready, willing and able to help. They may even have resources worth purchasing; the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), for instance, has a fall protection video, [Fall Protection Video, English-Spanish](#), and a bilingual fall protection reference, the [NAHB-OSHA Fall Protection Handbook, English-Spanish](#), designed to teach best practices in fall protection and prevention (see sidebar).
- **Insurance companies:** Because safety means savings, your insurance company may have training resources and programs that you can tap into for free as its customer.

Safety Enforcement

With the right equipment and information, there's no excuse for being reckless. You must therefore hold employees accountable for their actions.

The best policy, Sasser concludes, is one of zero tolerance. For workers who are not using proper fall protection measures, he recommends first giving them a verbal warning; second, sending them home for the day; and third, firing them.

"You have to have a policy of enforcement," Sasser says. "I don't care if the guy who's not tied off is your best worker; if you catch him and he's not doing it right, he needs to go home."

Sidebar

As more and more Hispanic workers join the ranks of the residential construction workforce, the issue of safety has taken on a greater sense of urgency. According to a recent government study, Hispanic workers in the construction industry die at higher rates than other laborers. The study, which was conducted by researchers in Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey and the Centers for Disease Control, determined that language and literacy barriers are major obstacles to improving safety for Hispanic laborers.

To help residential builders and trade construction managers improve job site safety and address communication challenges, the Home Builders Institute (HBI) and the National Association of Homebuilders (NAHB) created a self-paced learning program called [Sed de Saber](#). The custom program, sponsored by Lowe's, was created to help residential builders and trade construction managers improve job site safety and address communication challenges presented by the language barrier.

In addition, OSHA and the NAHB have joined forces to develop the bilingual (English and Spanish) [Jobsite Safety Handbook](#). The handbook is designed to identify safe work practices and related OSHA requirements, in an effort to prevent job site accidents and save lives by allowing construction managers to communicate proper safety guidelines to their bilingual crews. A copy of the booklet can be ordered online at the [NAHB's Web site](#).

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