



Don't fall down on the job

Falls are a leading workplace killer, accounting for 12 percent of all fatal occupational injuries in 2003, according to the National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Falls also inflict their share of injuries – falls to a lower level accounted for 86,946 nonfatal cases in 2002, according to the 2004 edition of the National Safety Council's "Injury Facts."

Yet despite the very real risk of death indicated by such statistics, fall protection is among OSHA's most frequently violated standards. In fiscal year 2004, OSHA issued 14,362 citations for problems ranging from lack of personal fall arrest systems or guardrails to failure to protect workers from holes. One problem, according to John Whitty, program manager for ITAC Fall Protection Services in Chester, VA, is too few companies proactively focus on fall protection. "There are still far too many companies out there that deal with fall protection on a knee-jerk basis. Their time to focus on fall protection only comes when an accident, death or OSHA citation brings it to light for them," he said.

A lack of focus on fall protection is one reason fall-related fatalities are still trending high, Whitty said. That's because in failing to be proactive about fall protection, many employers are missing a big piece of the pie – training. "There are a lot of workers out there who are falling, sustaining injuries and getting killed on fully OSHA-compliant fall protection systems. They just haven't been trained properly in the design, implementation and use," he argued.

Whitty acknowledged, however, that a growing number of companies are beginning to understand the need to go beyond fall protection policies and equipment. Gabriele Fusco, fall protection product manager for North Safety Products in Toronto, can attest to that. He said equipment user training is very important to people who purchase fall protection, adding it is the No. 1 concern among companies that call North Safety Products. "They want to ensure their employees are properly trained to use the equipment," he said.

According to the National Safety Council, employers need to teach workers to:

- Recognize fall hazards and the consequences of not having protection. Then, train workers in the methods of fall protection that are potential or selected solutions to the fall hazards they will encounter. This training can be general in nature, but before work starts, it must be site specific and related to the actual work to be done, site conditions, sequence of work and the geometry of the workplace.
- Properly use the specific equipment that will be used onsite, and also the limitations of that equipment. Train them about the anchorage point locations and the basis of choice of those anchorage points, which must meet regulatory requirements.
- Assemble a fall protection system, disassemble it and store it properly. They must understand the nature of fall hazards and why constant vigilance, along with following the worksite rules, is the only sure way to combat fall hazards.

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