

WORKING AT HEIGHT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Falls from height are the single biggest cause of workplace deaths and one of the main causes of major injury within the workplace. Steve Dawson, working at height expert at Arco Professional Safety Services, explains the importance of training for working at height and having the right equipment

The most tragic consequences of not providing the right training and protective equipment to your work force, can be serious injury or even the death of an employee. In 2020/21, 35 fatal injuries were due to Falls from a height, accounting for 25% of all worker deaths over the year. Add to this the 17 deaths caused from 'Struck by moving' (including flying/falling objects) statistics - which can often be related to Working at Height - and there continues to be a serious need for education and training.

Employers are bound by law under the Work at Height Regulations 2005 and are required to eliminate or reduce the risks when working at height. Anyone in control of any work at height must ensure that the work is properly planned, and carried out by people who have sufficient skills, knowledge and experience. This must include appropriate training at all levels, from project managers to end users of critical safety equipment e.g. PPE & Rescue equipment.

In the first instance, employers should assess the risk and consider alternative methods for getting the job done without the need for working at height. However, if that is not practical, then it is their legal duty to make sure the requirements of the Regulations are met and their employees are kept safe.

As one of the most common high-risk business environments, it is essential that people receive the proper training before commencing work at height. Training solutions can either be tailored to a particular need or provided through a number of off-the-shelf courses. Highly experienced trainers will work with you on or off-site to provide training at all levels of your business.

Why is training so important?

Most would agree that incidents on site start at the risk assessment and planning phase. The end user of PPE doesn't stand much chance of staying safe if work planners do not have sufficient knowledge and experience to appropriately mitigate the risk in the first instance. Appropriate training at this level is vital and should help mitigate risk but can also result in a more efficient safe system of work.

If personal fall protection is required, it can only protect the worker if they are competent in its use, aware of why they must use it, and therefore properly trained.

Experienced instructors can simulate realistic working environments and provide advice on the correct equipment to use, and how to use it, together with practical training which can be taken back to real life situations.

New and existing industry/trade bodies are acutely aware of the importance of standardised, quality training delivery for Working at Height. The recent release of the Rooftop Safety Training Standard by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) is just one of many examples of industry bodies driving much needed and positive change in their respective sector. There is also an abundance of equipment now available from manufacturers which provides employers with cost effective, practical options to keep workers safe. Training is paramount to ensure end-users understand the advantages and limitations of this equipment when used in their work environment.

Continuing importance of training

Between April and June last year, 32 million working days were lost to COVID-19 related absences. Redundancies, movement restrictions and fluctuating guidelines have made it difficult for organisations to provide their workers with training.

As restrictions are lifted and the country moves towards a return to 'normal', many businesses are trying to catch up but are struggling to keep up with training requirements.

Reduced training and a reduction in task-based activity will undoubtedly result in skills fade. The possible consequences in high-risk industries such as working at height, are plain. To maintain skill levels in industry, business leaders are looking at new ways of achieving this.

Alongside contingency plans and 'back to work' responses, health and safety training must be boosted to ensure that a restructured workforce can cope with high-risk environments and inevitable skill gaps that can occur.

It's vital that this training provides workers with the right balance of knowledge and practical skills to be able to deliver their work safely. It is all too tempting for companies to provide their workers with theory only training when social distancing and movement restrictions are in place; however, the shortfall in practical skills could have severe consequences.

This is not to say that there is no place for training in the virtual world, there is a balance to be struck where it is safe to do so. The workforce needs the confidence to manage their daily tasks safely but also not to be exposed to the increasing risk of contracting COVID-19 by receiving training in the normal classroom setting. Arco Professional Safety Services has launched several video conference courses and are developing Virtual Reality tools to help organisations keep its workforce safe whilst also maintaining the recommended social distances measures on our practical training courses during COVID-19.

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