Safety
Isn't Just a Six-Letter Word

Controlling safety is a constant battle for many contractors these days, with a lot of time and resources devoted to safety training. “The rising cost of workers’ compensation and other insurance has highlighted the issue,” according to one Kentucky contractor, “and government regulations have made it something we cannot afford to turn our back on. So how come we see more carelessness than ever?”

He answers his own question with the observation that personal protective devices and other safety equipment are far more advanced now than in earlier years. The problem is that workers don’t want to use them, and their commitment to safety is waning overall. Why? “Because the caliber of individual coming into the trades has dropped over the last 15 years. We can preach that hard hats belong on their head and still see the hats swinging on scaffolds. It’s hard for the guy to explain how it will protect his head, but he does it anyway. We don’t see the same work ethic any more, and that cuts across not just safety but quality and productivity.”
Whether this is a commonly held belief among his peers is hard to tell from a survey of only 17 contractors from around the country, but one thing is certain: They had all experienced accidents on their work sites. Whether this is the nature of the beast or not, as a contractor from Florida said, it is also true that every single accident was unexpected. Meaning that the idea of taking precautions in case something goes wrong is being put aside increasingly in favor of the idea that the worker isn’t planning on having an accident and doesn’t think he will. This kind of thinking belongs more in gambling than the practice of safety.

The question is, of course, whether the descent was executed as planned—as the chart on page 38 shows, the majority of accidents involved falling, so one has to assume not.

**So What’s with All These Falls?**

Taking shortcuts is one reason, with five contractors mentioning it. In Alabama, a worker didn’t have anyone standing on the bottom rung and so the ladder slid down the wall, earning him a bruised leg.

A plasterer in Arizona took shortcuts to a whole new level when he fell and broke both legs. According to his boss, “he was working on some scaffolding 30 feet up when he became thirsty. Instead of taking the access ladder that had been built up to the roof where the water was stored, he stepped from the scaffolding across an EIFS facade and, of course, fell through it. He obviously wasn’t paying attention because he had helped install the facade and should have known it wouldn’t hold his weight.”

In Colorado, “a guy on Perry scaffolding 6 feet off the ground was trying to screw drywall above his head,” relates a contractor, “and inadvertently pushed himself away from the wall, falling face first onto the concrete below. The scaffolding wasn’t secured, but that’s a catch-22. If you want to move quickly you cant keep securing these rolling scaffolds.”

This failure to secure wheels appears to be a widespread shortcut in the industry and perhaps the product needs to have a lever system for locking the wheels from the platform. The contractor also
felt that “these Perry scaffolds are slightly unstable when extended up 5 or 6 feet unless they have outriggers. The problem is that the reason people use Perries is because they are only 32 inches wide and can fit into narrow floor spaces, which, of course, don’t have room for outriggers. It’s one of those trade-offs we make that we all wish we didn’t have to.”

While on the subject of falling and shortcuts, a Georgian stood on a five-gallon bucket rather than walk downstairs to fetch a ladder from the trailer. He fell and hit his head on the floor. The medical bills for all the tests they ran on him were a lot bigger than the resulting knob on his head.

As his boss noted, “People should pay extra attention to safety. Accidents are called accidents because people don’t anticipate them.”

Which brings us to the key reason for falls and all other accidents: not paying sufficient attention to what one is doing or one’s environment.

Take the case of the ironworker in Massachusetts who reached for his wallet to pay for a coffee. The problem was, he lost his balance. That wouldn’t have been too bad except for the fact that he was 13 stories up. Even that wouldn’t have been an issue if he hadn’t unhooked himself so he could reach his wallet.

**It’s the Other Guy**

The next most common reason for accidents is other contractors (four complaints). As a contractor from Maryland noted, “The falls are usually the result of debris and materials lying on floors from earlier trades. It’s a never-ending problem.”

A Colorado contractor agreed: “We have little or no control over the errors of other subcontractors-electricians don’t listen to drywallers.”

Whether that’s true or not, it might make sense, if things can’t be sorted out higher up the management chain, for contractors to do a quick cleanup before starting their own work. The problem with that, apart from the injustice of it, is time, which brings us to the next most common reason given for accidents, which earned three mentions.

**The Need for Speed**

“It’s the sheer pressure of working in the construction industry these days, with trades on top of each other, that’s partly behind accidents,” insists an Indiana man. “Everything has to be done today. Construction managers tell the owner they can complete a project by a certain time, and when they check with the folks in the field, they say it is physically impossible. But the construction managers can’t backpeddle with the owner, so everybody in the field is under pressure to complete the project on time.

“In the old days, we’d have six months to complete a project safe and sound, and today it has to be done in three months. It changed for the worse 10 years ago with the introduction of construction management. It appeared to be a good idea, but not when these managers have no experience in the field and just want to shuffle paper.”

A Colorado contractor noticed the speed-up over the last year: “Everybody wants to go so darned fast that they don’t have time to do a good job and do it safely. There’s so much work and not enough people to do it. When we arrive on a job, we’re already two weeks late. That’s a lot of stress to be under, which results in more mistakes and accidents.”

But a Californian disagreed: “We occasionally have people slip and drive either a screw or the tip of the screw gun through their hand while using a screw fastener. It’s not a question of going so fast that they don’t pay attention to what they’re doing. They’ll claim that they’re under tremendous pressure for production, but it’s no more than they’ve had in the last two decades or more I’ve been in the business.”

**Lifting, Metal and Water**

Poor lifting techniques were the cause of the next most common accident: back injuries. A Kentucky contractor pointed out that “The number-one issue we have is back strains from workers trying to pick up a load with their back. We try to teach our people to use their legs to lift and to ask for help when they need it. The medical people tell us that failing to place one’s legs under a load increases the strain on the back tenfold.”

Metal lacerations are an issue for some contractors. A Californian spoke for the others when he said, “We see a lot of palms sliced open when workers slide the sharp edges of metal framing across their hands. We’re shifting to Kevlar gloves. There was some resistance to the idea until we cut off the fingertips of the gloves so the men could still pick up screws.”

Dehydration was mentioned by a
Floridian, with “some men hospitalized one real hot summer because they didn’t have enough fluid.” He didn’t seem to realize that just drinking water isn’t enough, and that electrolytes, salt and potassium, need to be replenished in hot weather. That doesn’t just mean Gatorade, which can be pricey when consumed in large quantities, as salt and potassium are available in tablet form, too.

When Things Are Not What They Seem

Three contractors mentioned problems with workers whose accidents were not so easily explained.

A Colorado contractor stated that “If that same incident were to happen again, I’d immediately send for a drug and alcohol test. People who frame and hang drywall are over-extending themselves all the time, but they develop a sense of balance. This guy did not appear to have that sense.”

He went on to say, “Another time, an electrician didn’t tie off some conduit, so when one of my guys bumped it, it fell onto another guy’s shoulder, injuring him slightly. He made a real big issue out of it and it wasn’t until we were in court that we discovered he was making a living out of scamming workman’s camp insurance—this was his sixth scam.”

What to Do About It?

All contractors were doing something to address safety. Some had a safety director who is constantly on the guys to fol-
low company rules and safety procedures. They also provided good safety equipment and training, and some even provided mechanical lifting devices to reduce strains. One company pretty well wiped out eye injuries by forcing its 500 employees to wear safety glasses.

“The recent trend to using safety harnesses,” noted a Maryland contractor, “has really reduced the number of falls. But these harnesses have to be used correctly and continuously. Drywall contractors have been slow to take advantage of them because the guys need the freedom to swing their arms and do their work. It hasn’t been easy, but there is no question that harnesses have worked.”

In Illinois, one contractor says most falls occurred on scaffolding without guardrails. “We’ve resolved it by using scissor lifts and mechanized scaffolds that already have guardrails built into them. There’s a European scaffold system that has a narrow frame and nothing in front to trip over when working on a wall. It also has built-in ladders from level to level, instead of having to use extension ladders.”

Perhaps, if the common denominator in all accidents is lack of awareness in workers of their environment, something could also be done to increase their awareness. This may seem like an impossible task, but the simple expedient of familiarizing workers with the site they are on, walking around and pointing out potential hazards, will raise their awareness to some degree. If they are also then made to spend a few minutes at the beginning of each day walking or running around the site, touching the different objects and their own tools, they will come out of any morning fog or hangover and be connected with their actual environment, instead of whatever has internalized their attention.

It’s a technique that’s been used for years by the military, by schools and supervisors in many different situations, and just might do the trick on improving safety even further on the jobsite.

About the Author

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