

Personal Fall Protection – Some ‘Top Tips’

Gravity is no respecter of persons; all too often, a failure or shortcoming results in death or serious injury.

Experience shows that falls from height usually occur as a result of poor management control, rather than because of equipment failure. Common factors include:

- Failure to recognise a problem;
- Failure to provide a safe system of work;
- Failure to ensure that a safe system of work is followed;
- Inadequate information, instruction, training or supervision provided;
- Failure to use appropriate equipment; and
- Failure to provide safe plant and/or equipment.

The use of personal equipment for protection against falls should be a ‘last resort’ and is low in the hierarchy of protective measures (sometimes referred to as the ‘fall protection hierarchy’). Frequently, the hazard of working at height can not be eliminated, e.g. designed out ‘at source’, or the work undertaken in a different manner, e.g. by a method that is higher in the hierarchy; work should be carried out at the highest possible level.

In broad terms, the hierarchy of protective measures is as follows:

- Prevent the fall;
- Minimise the distance and consequences (i.e. injury) of the fall;
- Minimise the consequences resulting from the fall; and
- Use methods and/or equipment (e.g. a ladder) not utilising fall protection.

There may also be other issues to consider, depending upon the nature and location of the work, the competence and experience of operatives and possible local or regional legislative requirements.

It is useful to remember that there are two essential elements in the protection of persons against falls from a height - the first element is the primary support and the second is the fall protection system

Managers should select staff that have an appropriate combination of experience, knowledge and practical skills in working at height (as well as trade skills). It is recommended that competence be assessed at different levels, e.g. operative, supervisor and manager.

All staff working at height will need to be physically and mentally suitable for such work and will need to have at least elementary background knowledge of personal fall protection equipment.

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Plan the job properly

Employer

A hazard identification and risk assessment must be undertaken.

The selection of a personal fall protection system should follow a hierarchy of protective measures:

- avoid;
- prevent;
- mitigate.

Where the risk of falls cannot be eliminated, the works should be carried out at the highest possible level in the hierarchy of protective measures.

Wherever possible, a personal fall protection system that prevents a fall should be used in preference to a fall arrest system.

Collective protective measures must take precedence over personal protective measures.

Where a fall arrest system is used, it is essential to ensure that adequate free space is provided to avoid the user hitting the ground or other obstacle in the fall path.

The installation, use and/or dismantling of protective measures should not expose personnel to a greater risk than not using the system.

Employee

User information and method statements should be read and thoroughly understood by all personnel. This may take the form of briefings and/or toolbox talks.

No person at work should pass across or near (or work on, from or near) a fragile surface where it is reasonably practicable to carry out the work safely without them doing so.

Those who work at height should be familiar with any appropriate rescue techniques and emergency procedures.

Those planning and managing work should consult with employees, or their representatives.

Work must be properly planned, appropriately supervised and carried out in a manner that minimises risk (this includes planning for emergencies and rescue) and is in accordance with legislative requirements.

It is essential that there is a specific rescue plan (or incident management system) and resource in place for each worksite, and that it is understood by all personnel before any work at height is commenced.

Rescue methods that do not require a rescuer to be exposed to risk are preferable, e.g. a non-contact rescue is preferred to one where the rescuer must descend to the rescuee.

A competent person should supervise all works.

An efficient communications system should be established between all individuals working at a height and, where necessary, between them and third parties.

Work at height should be carried out only when the weather conditions do not jeopardise the health or safety of persons involved in the work.

Select the most appropriate equipment

Measures should be in place to ensure that, before use, any equipment designed, supplied and/or installed by others is 'fit for purpose', e.g. well maintained.

Equipment should be selected that conforms to standards relevant to the intended use (with all components used in a fall

Equipment should only be used in accordance with the manufacturer's user instructions

Ensure that products markings are legible and, therefore, traceable.



protection system requiring adequate static and dynamic strength and appropriate factors of safety), e.g. CE-marking

Components in any system should be compatible.

Specific rescue equipment should, as appropriate, always be present at the worksite.

When selecting work equipment for use in work at height, account should be taken, in the case of work equipment for access and egress, of the distance to be negotiated and the duration and frequency of use. (This consideration needs to be measured against the hierarchy of protective measures, e.g. regular works may justify a higher-level control solution than spasmodic works).

Training

It is essential that those who work at height are competent, i.e. have appropriate knowledge, skills and experience.

Users should be assessed for competence. Competency should be assessed and recorded against appropriate industry criteria.

Users should follow their training and any additional information provided, e.g. at a site specific or company induction.

It is essential that employers maintain their employees' level of ability, e.g. refresher course(s)

Personnel conducting training and inspection (at all levels) should be competent to do so. Competency should be assessed and recorded against appropriate industry criteria.

Using the equipment

Instructions and where appropriate, training, for correct use of equipment should be supplied to ensure that personnel understand the correct method of equipment use.

Anchorage and anchor devices should have adequate

Those undertaking work at a height need to be appropriately dressed and equipped for the work situation and conditions.

It is essential that any tools and equipment used in work at a height do not endanger the users' health and safety.

margin of strength and stability. They should be unquestionably reliable. The general principle is that for any load they are likely to be subjected to, metallic components should have a factor of safety of at least two and webbing (and similar) components should have a factor of safety of at least three.

Anchorage and anchor devices should be used which reduce the fall distance, the consequence of the fall and swing falls.

Exclusion zones should be established, where required, and measures taken to prevent falling objects.

Equipment should be subjected to pre-use checks, detailed inspections and (where needed) interim inspections by a competent person, and withdrawn from service if any defect is found. Appropriate records should be kept, and available.

It is important that there is a quarantine procedure for ensuring that defective or suspect equipment is withdrawn from service and does not get back into service without the inspection and approval of a competent person.

Equipment should be kept clean and should be stored

Connection of a user to a personal fall protection system should be made in an area where there is no risk of a fall from a height.

Users should guard against personal fall protection systems passing over sharp or rough edges, unless a means of protection of the line has been planned or provided.

A competent person, before use, should assess anchorages. Where permanent anchorages are used, these should be appropriately inspected and verified by a competent person and the anchorage system marked with the "date next inspection due".

Equipment should be used in accordance with instructions and training. Exclusion zones should be established, where required, and measures taken to prevent falling objects. Points of attachment should be secure and fastened.

Check that the clearance is sufficient.

Equipment should not be altered or repaired, unless this has been authorised by the manufacturer.

Always undertake pre-use checks. Damaged equipment should not be used; and quarantined.

Appropriate records should be kept, e.g. inspections, safe systems of work, etc.

Inspection and maintenance

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Supervise effectively

properly. Equipment should never be stored wet.

Equipment should be maintained in a safe and functional state. Be aware of manufacturers' advice on obsolescence.

Ensure that inexperienced workers, in particular, are supervised.

Do not condone unsafe acts and/or behaviours; intervene when you see bad practice.

Encourage the reporting of near hits, so that preventative action can be taken.

Ensure that incidents are investigated and lessons learnt promulgated.

Report incidents and near hits, so that preventative action can be taken; and lessons learnt promulgated.

