

Beyond compliance: taking a 360° approach to fall protection

Today's employers are increasingly conscious of their safety responsibilities and the need to manage risks effectively. Eurostat statistics around worker injury and fatalities, which generally follow a downward trend, go some way to proving that. Falls from height, however, still remain the leading cause of workplace fatalities. So, if it's your aim to achieve a 'zero injuries' workplace (as it should be), what issues need consideration to keep those working at height safe? Jon Rowan, MSA Safety's Product Line Manager, offers advice on how to go beyond compliance and take a 360° approach to fall protection safety.

Fatal injuries are decreasing

There's no doubt that worker safety across Europe is becoming a more important focus in industry. Many employers are taking an increasingly holistic approach to health, safety and wellbeing, recognising that a wide range of factors can affect employee performance and decision-making. This approach, underpinned by diligent safety processes and sophisticated safety equipment, can help to mitigate risk in the workplace.

But, while fatalities in the workplace due to falls from height across the EU's 28 member states have decreased in recent times, just one fatality is one too many and falls from height remain the single biggest cause of workplace fatalities. After all, a fall from height is an extremely serious thing. A fall of 3.05 m (10 ft.) takes just 0.8 seconds and the velocity reached on impact with the ground is 7.74m/s (17.3 mph). In the UK, falls from height accounted for 25% of fatal injuries over the five-year period 2014/15 to 2018/19 – an average of 36 fatalities a year (Source: RIDDOR). So, how can you minimise risk? What should you consider and where should you start?

Avoid if at all possible

Quite simply, the best way to prevent a fall is to eliminate – as far as possible – the need to work at height in the first place. This means carrying out as much work as possible from the ground, using extendable tools, installing cables at ground level, lowering a lighting mast to ground level, or assembling edge protection at ground level (to name just a few examples).

If working at height is unavoidable then help to prevent falls using either an existing place of work that is already safe or the right type of equipment. This equipment needs to be suitable, strong enough for the job, properly maintained and checked regularly. If the risk remains then minimise the distance and/or consequence of a fall via collective protection such as safety nets and soft landing systems (i.e. air bags installed close to the level of work).

Training is fundamental to success

Training is central to helping workers understand the risks of working at height, the role they play in ensuring safe working practices, and how the chosen fall protection system works, including any limitations. At MSA we recommend a classroom session with a small group of people followed by practical training. Participants will be taught the necessary theory and be given ample opportunity for hands-on practice. This will instil a certain sense of confidence – confidence to not only use the equipment but understand the associated risks of working at height and raise any potential issues.

Understanding the risks on site

Begin with a detailed risk assessment of your particular working environment. Each industry sector carries its own inherent risks but there are complex variables depending on individual situations. In construction, for instance, hazards range from the vertical distance of a fall to fragile roofs, roof lights, voids, sloping roofs, deteriorating materials, unprotected edges, and unstable or poorly maintained access equipment. Adverse weather conditions, falling objects and electric shocks are also risk factors.

In the electrical sector, hazards include burns, fires, leaks, spills, electrical shocks and arc flash, while telecoms sector workers need to stay safe while working on a range of structures from towers to monopoles. Other inherently dangerous work environments include oil and gas rigs where basic everyday tasks such as maintenance and deck operations account for 70% of the major injuries on rigs in the North Sea oil fields. The aviation industry is also another industry where working at height is part of everyday life, whether it be in the manufacture and repair or maintenance and inspection of aircraft.

Specify the right fall protection equipment

Identifying which fall protection solutions will best meet your needs is essential. Using a collective protection system that prevents the worker from being exposed to a hazard is always preferable. If this isn't viable then look at personal protection systems to restrain the user or minimise the distance and consequences of a fall. This typically includes a fixed fall arrest system.

Whatever the means the vast majority of work at height involves wearing a fall protection harness. There are many, many harnesses on the market across Europe today but they don't all offer the same level of protection. So, make sure you know what you want your harness to do. Is it intended for work restraint or fall arrest?

All harnesses for sale in Europe should comply with EN361:2002 but there are other issues to consider too. For example, any equipment used for working at height where there is an arc flash risk should be tested to ASTM F887/2005 – a unique standard combining drop tests and the ability to withstand arc flash. Harnesses that have waist and leg padding, and easy-to-adjust buckles so that they don't slip while being worn, are also preferable.

At MSA we believe that every harness should offer form, fit and function. Comfort may not seem like a priority but as the UK's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) points out, 'uncomfortable equipment is unlikely to be worn properly'. And, of course, in the worst-case scenario, it may not be worn at all.

If you're in any doubt about which solutions best meet your needs or if you're unsure whether you are choosing products that will be compatible, consult with an independent specialist like MSA. Remember, individuals' lives are at stake so it's important to make the right choice. And once you've chosen a solution, make sure you adhere to manufacturer guidelines, read all the labels and carry out all necessary pre-use inspections.

Now enjoy the rewards

The benefits of adopting a rigorous 360° approach to fall protection are quickly realised in a business. Employees who are properly trained to use fall protection equipment and address the potential risks of working at height are more likely to be engaged, diligent, and, ultimately, loyal to you as an employer. It can go a long way to eradicating any trace of historic complacency and ignorance and replacing with a strong, safety-first culture. So, don't let your workers become another health and safety statistic. Insist on the best fall protection systems, advice, training and support and help ensure that your workers return home safely today and every day.

For more information on MSA Safety's fall protection solutions, visit www.MSAsafety.com