

Working at Height: Management Briefing

Working at height is defined as:

'Work in any place, including a place at or below ground level, or obtaining access to or egress from such a place, while at work, except by a staircase where, if suitable measures were not taken, a person could fall a distance likely to cause personal injury'.

The facts:

- over three million people in the UK work at height as part of their job
- over 2,670 employees suffered a specified (major) injury, as a result of a fall from height in 2016/17, this resulted in 25 fatalities
- ladders are probably the most used and misused pieces of access equipment
- the vast majority of ladder accidents occur because the ladder is not secured at the top
- work at any height can cause injury; a fall from a height of just one or two steps can cause serious injury
- unsuitable access equipment (such as chairs and tables) can cause serious accidents even in low risk premises such as offices and schools
- it is particularly important to ensure that contractors working on an organisation's premises (for example for roof maintenance or window cleaning) are properly controlled and do not work in a dangerous way.

Hierarchy of risk control:

- avoid working at height wherever possible by altering the task or the way it can be carried out
- if this is not reasonably practicable, the next step is to use equipment or other control measures to prevent falls
- always reduce the likelihood of injury by minimising the distance to fall or its consequences
- if the potential for a fall remains, reduce the likelihood of injury by minimising the distance to fall or its consequences and always consider passive protection, such as safety netting, over active measures, such as having to clip a safety harness on to a structure
- in lower risk premises take account of how storage areas and high shelving or wall displays are accessed.

Case Law

- A scaffolding company was fined £100,000 and ordered to pay £918 in costs in February 2018 after a 16-year-old apprentice joiner fell approximately four metres from a scaffold platform. The apprentice was passing roof tiles from the loading bay to a colleague on the scaffold when he caught his foot in a gap between the scaffold platform and the loading bay. He fell backwards under a single guard rail to the ground below, sustaining severe injuries. The loading bay edge protection did not include an intermediate guard-rail or toe board.
- A company was fined more than £95,000 after a worker, who was working next to a large opening in a flat roof, fell about 3.3m through the opening to the ground below. The worker suffered severe injuries and was unable to work for several months following the incident. The company had failed to take any measures to prevent people on site falling through the opening in the flat roof.

Guidelines to employers:

- plan, organise and supervise all work at height
- ensure employees are appropriately trained in safe working methods and the equipment to be used
- make sure all those involved are competent and trained
- assess the risks and ensure that appropriate work equipment is selected and used correctly
- manage the risks from fragile surfaces, such as thin roofing materials or Skylights
- inspect and maintain all equipment and workplaces intended to control the risks of working at height
- take account of weather conditions
- ensure planning includes arrangements for emergencies and rescue
- manage risks from falling objects.

Recommendations for employers:

- determine if the work involves a risk of a fall that could cause personal injury
- consider if the work can be avoided by undertaking it in a different way and if it must be undertaken, determine the reasonable control measures that need to be used
- ensure that there is a risk assessment covering the work activities
- devise a safe system of work (ideally written down)
- ensure that all workers are aware of the safe system of work and are trained in correct use of the safety equipment provided
- for high risk work, consider a permit-to-work system
- ensure that equipment is subject to statutory inspections at the required frequencies
- supervise to ensure that the work is completed in accordance with the safe system of work
- ensure that all workers are safe and clear of the work area before closing the job and putting premises and equipment back in service.

Legal duties

- The Work at Height Regulations 2005 (as amended) apply to all work at height where there is a risk of a fall liable to cause personal injury. Duties are placed on employers, the self-employed and any person who controls the work of others (e.g. facilities managers or building owners who employ contractors to work at height).
- Where the means of making the work at height safe involves fixing points, such as eye bolts, running wires, fixed rail etc., there are legal requirements under the Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998 (LOLER) or the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 (PUWER), for them to be subject to be suitably inspected. In the case where people are suspended or lifted there are specific requirements for thorough examinations at no more than six monthly intervals with inspection records being retained.

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