



Workplace Safety

Workplace Safety Stories: This Hard Hat Saved My Life

Chris Warren | Mar 01, 2017

What You Need to Know

In accidents small and larger, personal protective equipment can save lives.

Make sure your workers are outfitted for the job they are doing.

Training and gear go hand in hand.

When there's an emergency or a disaster, personal protective equipment is there to help.

Dave Fenton knew it was time to leave his job as a cook when he walked past a construction site in western Canada and found himself looking up enviously at the crane operator. "I thought to myself, the guy must have a great view of the mountains," he says.

Fenton soon made the career switch to construction, but an accident nearly transformed his dream job into a nightmare. While working as a crane rigger, Fenton was struck in the head by an 80-pound aluminum joist, which fell from the equivalent of nine floors up. Though the joist broke his neck and shoulder and punctured his lung, Fenton was wearing a hard hat that deflected the weight of the joist from the center of his head. Just 110 days after the accident, he was back at work. "The hard hat saved my life, there's no question in my mind," he says.

The Dangers Are Real and Accidents Do Happen

Unfortunately, not all accidents have such happy endings. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) prominently features *cautionary tales* of young workers who were either injured or killed on the job. In one instance, a 20-year-old carpenter installing roof trusses on a new apartment building fell from the second story and landed on a concrete walkway. The result: a skull fracture and serious brain injuries, which OSHA points out could have been prevented with the deployment of the proper personal protective equipment (PPE), including an anchor, full-body harness and lifeline.

Accidents do happen on construction sites. But their likelihood and whether or not workers are hurt or killed depends in large part on preparation. Are workers wearing the right PPE for the jobs they're doing? Are they trained to use it properly and is the equipment routinely inspected? And is the company

following all of the relevant OSHA regulations? “Accidents are preventable if you do a hazard assessment and you implement the right PPE for the job and workers pay attention to what they’re doing,” says Shelly Baize, a safety specialist at MSC Industrial Supply.

Start with Equipment (and Get the Smartest Gear)

A good starting point for safety managers is to make sure they understand and follow regulations regarding the use of PPE. For example, OSHA **requires** employers to ensure that anyone working in an area where there is a risk of injury from falling objects wears a hard hat; if there’s a possibility of electric shock, OSHA mandates workers have a helmet capable of reducing that shock. Because falls cause the most injuries and deaths among construction workers, OSHA requires the use of a “**fall arrest system**” whenever people are doing their jobs 6 feet off the ground or higher.

PPE isn’t just limited to hard hats and harnesses, of course. Workers handling chemicals or doing welding need the right gloves, glasses and face shields. The use of steel-toe boots goes a long way toward avoiding injuries on construction sites.

Train and Retrain

Baize insists that outfitting workers with the right PPE must be accompanied by rigorous and regular training. Baize says it’s a good practice for safety managers to revisit training whenever workers are about to start a new job and whenever there’s a new hire. And don’t forget, any training that takes place must be documented.

“You can’t just throw a harness at someone and say, ‘go have fun.’ The training has to be documented and workers have to sign off on it,” she says. “Those records need to be maintained so if OSHA comes in and takes a look, they’ll know you’re providing the right training.”

Do you have a story about how protective equipment saved you or a co-worker?

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