

SAFETY ACCESS AND RESCUE

Getting height safety right the first time

The ultimate goal of any height safety or fall protection system is deceptively simple: to protect lives by overcoming the effect of gravity. Unfortunately, this is where the simplicity starts and ends.



For most people in industry, from a week-one apprentice through to senior supervisors and OHS professionals, working safely at height can be bewilderingly complex. To make things even more difficult, within the greater working community, there would easily be as many myths and misunderstandings about height safety as there is factual information. This often leads to great emphasis and effort being aimed in the wrong direction, missing the 'elephant in the room' and putting worker's lives at risk. So where do we start to get to the core of what is important?

Hazards & Risks

The overarching responsibility placed on employers and employees in the modern Australian workplace is to provide a 'safe place of work'. Simply put, when about to engage in 'planned work' one is required to identify the various hazards associated with the work (a fall from height usually, but not always, is identifiable clearly as a hazard). Each hazard will in turn have one or more risks associated with it. When the risks are identified we are then required to

either eliminate or 'manage' the risk using the 'hierarchy of control' (given in AS ISO 31000 Risk Management). The last, that is least desirable, option given in the hierarchy is 'PPE' which of course includes harnesses lanyards etc. So far so good... but when we arrive at the hierarchy of control of PPE-based fall-protection options, confusion often seems to reign supreme.

What are our options?

The four key terms, in order of desirability, given to us in AS 1891 are 'Restraint', 'Work Positioning', 'Partial Fall Arrest' and 'Fall Arrest'; and these reflect general practice worldwide (at least in countries that have OHS systems). The actual meaning of these terms, and more importantly how one implements them in the field, are very often misconstrued. The term 'Fall Arrest' for example has taken on a generic connotation over the years as another term for working at height in general. Over the years we have had many a call from individuals who have sworn black and blue that "WorkCover tells me I have to have a fall arrest system..." This is not strictly the case at all. The various State and Territory Regulatory Authorities would require either elimination or management of any fall from height hazard but this may or may not mean a PPE based fall arrest system (the last option in the hierarchy).

To fall or not to fall...

The bottom line is that any type of fall is potentially dangerous but far too many workers (and supervisors) are oblivious to this. One does not need to hit the ground to be injured and an injury that would, in other circumstances, be distressing but not life threatening may take on a whole new meaning for an operator (and those tasked with rescuing him) hanging 80m off the ground from a high-rise core for example. Restraint (where a fall is basically not possible, or does not exceed 300mm) and work positioning (where the harness is loaded actively, the worker may operate 'hands free' and the fall distance doesn't exceed 600mm) systems are critically

underutilised and misunderstood generally in the greater workforce. Rope access likewise (or work in full suspension in accordance with the Australian Rope Access Association's Code of Practice and AS 4488.1 & .2) is a combination of restraint and work positioning techniques. It is still, however, widely misunderstood as something 'only mountain climbers do' or is solely used for window cleaning. Neither is the case.

Where to from here?

It is a truism that in order to get the right answers one has to ask the right questions. All too often a sound approach to dealing with a work-based fall protection situation is missed right from the outset. In our experience—running commercial training courses—it has been and still is very common for clients to be 1. Already performing the task (or have just won the tender), 2. Then purchase equipment, and 3. Finally undertake training (only to find they were blatantly in breach of the OHS Regulation by allowing workers who were untrained to use fall protection PPE and probably have purchased inappropriate gear anyway).

Information and understanding are key to solving any problem and height safety is no exception. Keep in mind that modern equipment and systems have reached a point of development where height-related fatalities and serious injuries are inexcusable. Also keep in mind that what may appear very dangerous (such as rope access) is in fact statistically extremely safe yet a humble 1.8m absorber lanyard setup with insufficient fall clearance is a recipe for disaster. The one thing we can always be assured of is that gravity never takes a day off...

For further information about this article or any related area, please contact Safety Access & Rescue on 02 4784 2224. Safety Access & Rescue has been providing height safety services, including equipment and nationally recognised training, to industry for over 10 years.