

# Safety

## are we making progress?

Safety awareness has been high on the agenda in Western Europe for many years now, but despite ever-increasing legislation, regulation and inspections, falls from height accident figures are barely improving.

Are we paying lip service to the safety mantra rather than truly making the world a safer place?

Leigh Sparrow makes the case for mandatory wearing of harnesses on boom lifts.

At the Crane Safety Conference in London last June, Martin Ainscough aired his company's "dirty linen" in public, openly discussing the number of accidents that the company generates in a year and giving a personal, blow-by-blow account of a fatal accident that took the life of one of his operators.

Having personally experienced a similar situation, I can tell you categorically that an experience such as this convinces you faster, and more deeply than anything else that safety must come first. Emotions range from concern, to fear, to anger, as you typically discover how the accident could have been so easily avoided.

With this in mind, you might be surprised to learn that I do not welcome every safety directive, proposal or ruling with open arms. Far from it. I am firmly of the opinion that too many "safety professionals" spend too much time thinking up new rules that have no practical basis - the net result risks not only bring health

and safety rules into disrepute, but also result in the restraining of safe practices.

For example, in the UK and Ireland, and indeed the rest of Europe, the wearing of safety harnesses and lanyards when in boom lifts, a requirement in the US, is not only voluntary, but the recommendations are so mixed that each site has its own rules, which often bear little connection to reality.

### Worth the risk?

In the UK, the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) has a clear response. As with many issues, the HSE resorts to the risk assessment requirement, saying that you must conduct a risk assessment before using a machine, and if this indicates that a safety harness is required, then you must wear one. If the assessment indicates that there is no, or little, risk, then you do not. In some ways this "adult" way of working, i.e. leaving it to the users to work it out for themselves is admirable. The trouble is though that everyone will assess the risks differently.

Some users may not even bother, while some safety officers may go completely over the top to cover all eventualities.

This particular situation is one where the authorities can, and should, make it clear by laying down a simple, practical ruling just as was the case with motor cycle crash helmets and car safety belts, the mandatory requirement of which by the way I was opposed to at the time.

The fact is that when working in a boom lift, particularly if travelling at height in a self-propelled unit, a depression or kerb can turn the boom into a catapult, flicking the operators out of the cage.

The machine itself usually remains upright, thanks to the generous, built-in safety margins. I know of a number of fatal incidents in the UK and Ireland where precisely this has happened.

### A stark reminder

A few weeks ago, two men lost their lives in The Netherlands when a 24-metre trailer-mounted platform descended rapidly due to an unknown failure within the lift cylinder. The boom base came to a rapid rest on a building, causing the long boom to whiplash. Two cleaners were thrown out of the cage to their deaths. Even a simple belt and lanyard might have saved their lives.

So why then, when the regulation-adverse US moved to make belts and harnesses compulsory many years ago, were no such measures adopted in the UK?

I blame the safety professionals. When this subject surfaced a few years ago there was a move to make full-body harnesses mandatory on all powered access platforms. A total nonsense! If you do that then people working on a scaffold or sitting on a roof garden, or even climbing the stairs at home, would be required to wear one. In large platforms, such as big scissor lifts or

most climbers, having everyone tied to the guardrails or floor would be ludicrous. This would not have promoted safety and would have brought the whole measure into disrepute.

The focus was also on fall-arrest rather than restraint. This required lanyard anchor points to be tested by means of a two-metre drop test with 140 kilograms weight. Not only would few cages withstand such shock loading, but also many machines, such as small trailer lifts, would be pulled over on top of the falling man.

As a result the industry sensibly rebelled and the proposal was dropped. If common sense had been applied and a rule adopted that required a belt or harness with a 1- to 1.5-metre restraint lanyard anchored to the platform floor on all boom lifts, several lives would have been saved by now

On behalf of the Vertikal Press, I call on the industry to adopt and lobby for belts or harnesses with short lanyards to be made mandatory for all boom lifts within the EU. Few things are more sickening or distressing than seeing two dead operators alongside a lift, which is in perfect condition and fully stable!



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