

HEALTH & SAFETY

Hidden in the stats: The dangers of maintenance work

By Mike Taubitz, FDRsafety

Thorough record keeping is essential to a strong safety program, but even organizations that keep good records may be missing something in their numbers: the high risk presented by maintenance activities.

About six percent of workers are involved in maintenance activities on a daily basis, where they are exposed to a wide variety of hazards. Figures from Eurostat indicate that around 10 to 15 percent of all fatal accidents are related to maintenance.

Maintenance risks

So a one-day conference called “Maintenance: Do It Safely,” sponsored by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) and the Belgian EU Presidency last month was particularly valuable. The goal was to show how safe maintenance could save lives. A report at the conference noted, “While maintenance is essential to keep equipment, machines, and the work environment safe and reliable and prevent harm, the maintenance work itself is a high-risk activity.”

The report details how safety and health risks associated with maintenance can be successfully managed. Good occupational safety and health management practices are at the heart of reliable and safe maintenance.

Awareness, skills, training, procedures, and personal protective equipment become more important during maintenance work, because normal safeguards no longer provide protection. Unplanned or unscheduled breakdowns require maintenance to get back into production. Such situations are inherently higher risk because normal safeguards must be bypassed. For example:

- machine guards may have to be removed;
- two-hand controls may not provide protection; or
- power that would normally be turned off may be required for diagnostic work and troubleshooting.

These hazards and hazardous situations cannot be identified by analyzing lost time or recordable injury cases resulting from different exposures. If your organization is primarily “focused on the numbers,” you may be overlooking some of the highest risk situations facing your workers — maintenance work. Two other factors inhibit efforts to deal with maintenance-related injuries and fatalities:

- Research has shown that these high-risk incidents have a low probability of occurring. Unless you have a database for near miss incidents, you will not have past history to analyze.
- There may be hundreds (even thousands) of unplanned maintenance tasks performed each year in small and medium enterprises. (Unplanned maintenance typically involves many more tasks than planned maintenance and may pose a greater danger because the risks have not been analyzed.)

These issues could explain why good organizations have an employee fatality when their injury statistics have been trending downward for years. Their CEOs and others may ask themselves, “What did we miss?” Maintenance cases are typically infrequent but are often very severe. Near miss reporting could provide a history — but few organizations keep those statistics.

What you can do

Make sure that your injury prevention initiatives include a process for proactively identifying high-risk maintenance work. Talk to the workers and have them identify the highest risk jobs. Use task-based risk assessment to ensure that proper protection is provided.

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