

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Electrical contractors face a range of hazards in their line of work, from the threat of electrocution to diseases and falls on site. It's up to their employer to reduce risks and promote safety

By Rob Shepherd

A

nyone who thinks that the issue of health and safety at work is overplayed should consider

the fact that in the 12 months to April 2015 142 people were killed at work, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

There were also 76,000 injuries to employees reported under RIDDOR (the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations), 611,000 other injuries at work and 27.3 million working days lost due to work-related illness and injury.

Before 1974, approximately eight million employees had no legal safety protection at work. The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 provides the legal framework to promote, stimulate and encourage high standards in places of work. Employers must provide and maintain safety equipment and safe systems of work, as well as information, training, instruction and supervision, and a written safety policy.

The Construction (Design and Management) Regulations, otherwise referred to as the CDM Regulations, are the main set of requirements for managing the health, safety and welfare of construction projects.

They are intended to ensure that health and safety issues are properly considered during a project's development, so that the risk of harm to those who have to build, use and maintain structures is reduced. First introduced in 1994, they were revised in 2007, and a further revision came into force on 6 April 2015.

Where there are issues, these are often down to the failures of employers rather than the regulations themselves, says Chris Chapman, technical manager at the Building Safety Group. "We have



Keeping you safe

lots of health and safety regulation in the UK, the vast majority of which is well thought out and not excessively onerous," he says. "But we do need everyone to take it seriously in order for it to do the job it is intended for."

High alert

Fortunately, the number of deaths and injuries to electrical contractors as a direct result of their trade is remarkably low, with the HSE estimating that about three people are electrocuted each year during refurbishment work on commercial and domestic buildings.

Statistically, falls from height pose the greatest threat to people working in the construction sector.

Since 2001 an average of 50 people in Great Britain have died at work each year as a result of a fall from height,

and a further 8,702 have been seriously injured, according to HSE figures.

In 2013 Southwark Crown Court heard that two workers accessed the top level of a unit that was to be dismantled as part of construction work at a site in London. One of the workers slipped and fell over the side of the platform, hitting the wall and then landing on the concrete floor 5.9m below. He sustained multiple injuries including internal bleeding, a collapsed lung and fractures to his pelvis and right arm, and has been left unable to work.

Yet falls can be avoided by the provision of suitable access equipment, and its proper use. The Work at Height Regulations 2005 state that working at height should not be carried out unless essential, and where this is undertaken the platform must be stable and secure.

There must also be adequate space to undertake the work, with all open edges protected by guard rails and barriers.

Particle science

In the UK, HSE research shows that almost 14,000 new cases of cancer caused by work are registered each year, and about 8,000 deaths a year are caused by occupational cancer. Jobs such as cutting or grinding concrete, drilling in enclosed spaces and sanding wood can be high risk if precautions are not taken.

"It has been said before, but as an industry we have always shouted about safety and whispered about health," says the Building Safety Group's Chapman. "For instance, mesothelioma is a major killer in the electrical contracting sector and its devastating effects often don't manifest themselves until someone has retired.

"Those working in this industry are at a significantly greater risk of developing cancer and other diseases at work compared with any other industry group, if the risks posed fail to be appropriately assessed and managed."

No Time to Lose is an Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) initiative to raise awareness of the issue. "Many occupational cancers are preventable," says IOSH past president Tim Briggs.

"Everyone can play their part in tackling them, including the workforce. Employers can do their bit by identifying the cancer causing materials and taking preventative action to reduce the risk."

Controlling risk

Many events can, and should, be prevented by the adoption of an accident prevention and risk management strategy. One of the most effective ways this can be achieved is through compliance with OHSAS 18001, the internationally recognised assessment specification for occupational health and safety management systems.

Compliance with this specification demonstrates a company's commitment to providing a safer working environment and protecting its employees. ISO 45001 is set to replace OHSAS 18001 in late 2016 and will further enhance the ability of health and safety professionals to manage business risks.

Case study:

Serious business

For Kent-based NICEIC Approved Contractor Berryman Electrical, health and safety is at the very heart of its operation. Not only are the highest standards maintained for the wellbeing of its employees, the company also recognises the role it plays in winning business.

"We have always maintained a strict ethos of health and safety, which is enshrined in our policy and corporate code of conduct," says managing director Dave Berryman. "Before each job a risk assessment is carried out and operatives are instructed to follow our own and clients' health and safety requirements."

The company's policy is reviewed annually to monitor its effectiveness and reflect changing needs. Employees attend off-site training courses and exceed the level of knowledge required by the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS).

They also receive regular training on the safe use of work equipment and systems, and are supplied with the latest personal protective equipment. But, says Berryman, employees must play their part. "We need them to report incidents that could have led to injury, so that preventative measures can be put in place," he says.



Counting the cost

To date the largest fine imposed in the UK for a health and safety offence was £15 million on Transco in 2005. That unenviable record may soon change – since February this year the Health and Safety Offences and Corporate Manslaughter Offences Guidelines has meant potentially unlimited fines for firms and public sector bodies that fail to comply with health and safety law.

"We broadly welcome the new guidelines," says Neal Stone, policy and standards director at the British Safety Council, "particularly that three factors will be key in determining fines for offences: the degree of harm caused,

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the culpability of the offender and the turnover of the offending organisation."

According to Paul Reeve, director of business services at the Electrical Contractors' Association, the new guidelines underline the need for contractors of any size to have an effective approach to complying with the law.

"A key message to contractors is to have sensible and effective, but also proportionate, arrangements for ensuring health and safety, and access to competent advice," he says.

Reducing risk in the work environment significantly reduces the likelihood of accidents, and provides a framework for legal responsibilities. However, it should be considered a work in progress.

"It's encouraging that there have been improvements in injuries and ill-health caused by work-related activities," says Judith Hackitt, chairwoman of the HSE. "But behind the statistics are people, their families, friends, work colleagues, directly affected by something that has gone wrong, and which is usually entirely preventable." ☺

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