

ASK RUSS

For July 2016

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Text Size

What do facility operations and engineering professionals need to know about worker safety?

When I started thinking about worker safety in public assembly facilities, it became a bit overwhelming. Should I address it by facility type, by event, by job, etc.? There are more opportunities for worker safety to come into play in a public assembly facility than almost any other facility type I can think of simply considering how much is going on in the same space at the same time. The nature of the risks found in convention centers, performing arts centers, stadiums, and arenas, not to mention amphitheaters, fairs and festivals, is mind boggling.

I recently toured a convention center during the load-out of a major production and the only way I can describe it is as a symphony of movement and energy. Forklifts, drayage, waste, riggers, housekeepers and a host of other work all going on in the same place at the same time. I came away with enormous respect for all of those professionals and what they accomplish.

I am sure we can all agree that safety is our first priority. It is at the forefront of what we communicate to our guests.

We preach safety to our staff, sub-contractors, and facility users, but is it true?

One of my favorite quotes comes from Pat Riley:

“Complacency is the last hurdle any winner, any team must overcome before attaining potential greatness. Complacency is the 'Success Disease.' It takes root when you're feeling good about who you are and what you've achieved.”

This is a lesson we should consider when thinking about worker safety.

There is not a great deal of available information about the safety-related situations that occur in public assembly facilities. This is because they happen locally and in-house. Apart from observing the necessary OSHA or other code filings, most if not all of us are not interested in calling attention to our issues. The problem with that is a lack of visibility creates a lack of usable data for our industry.

In almost every other area of public assembly facility management we thrive as an industry because of

information sharing.

Some facts about worker safety in 2014 from NIOSH:

- 4,821 U.S. workers died from work-related injuries.
- About 3.7 million workers suffered nonfatal injuries in the private sector and state and local governments.
- 2.7 million workers were treated in emergency departments.
- 113,000 workers were hospitalized.

The stats above show just how many workers are impacted by safety (or lack thereof) on the job. These numbers are staggering, considering that directed research has demonstrated that workplace injury and death are preventable. The industries with the highest number of fatal injuries include: services (1,354), construction (933), transportation/warehouse/utilities (832), agriculture/forestry/fishing (584), and trade (463).

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

From 2011 to 2014, there were 54,250 nonfatal occupational injuries in the private industry from intentional injuries by other persons, which resulted in days away from work.

MOTOR VEHICLE SAFETY

Motor vehicle fatalities are the leading cause of work-related fatalities with over 22,000 deaths from 2003-2014. They represent 36% of all workplace fatalities.

FALLS

Falls are a continuing and persistent occupational problem that occurs in all industries. Based on 2014 published data, 261,930 private industry and state and local government workers missed one or more days of work due to injuries from falls on the same level or to lower levels, and 798 workers died from such falls. Falls account for 12% of the fatal occupational injuries across all industries.

Why do falls happen?

Part of the answer is that workers seem to have many misconceptions about falling, beginning with 'it can't happen to me.' It can, and it does.

“I Don't Work Very High”

While it's true that in 2012, 25% of fatal falls occurred in falls greater than 30 feet, it is also true that 25% of fatal falls occurred in falls less than 10 feet. That means that just as many people died from falls less than 10 feet as from more than 30 feet.

“I'll Catch Myself”

Some people actually believe that their reaction time is so good - that they are so quick – that if they were to fall, they would just catch themselves. Let's take a look at how fast you fall:

Distance (in feet) Time (in seconds)

6 .5

16 1

36 1.5

64 2

100 2.5

144 3

256 4

Six feet in half a second! It's probably safe to say that nobody reading this article has arms six feet long or can react in less than half a second. In one second - perhaps the amount of time it takes for your brain to consciously register that you are falling you will have already fallen 16 feet.

Fall protection and following established procedures are not an inconvenience – they are a necessity.

I read some good advice on this from Jacob Worek, writing in the Event Safety Alliance blog, in a post titled:

Are you missing your near misses?

“You should be performing a thorough investigation of all accidents that occur during the production and operations of your event. But are you taking the time to identify and investigate all near-miss incidents, as well?

By definition, a near-miss incident is an unplanned event that does not result in an injury or damage, but had the potential to do so. Such events are more common than one may think. A dropped tool that mercifully avoids striking someone, a stagehand or staff member that just manages to dodge a quick-turning forklift or a stage rail that collapses without causing a fall. Each of these cases (and hundreds more like them) presents a critical opportunity to identify weaknesses in your operation that may compromise the safety of your event.

Unfortunately, most near-miss incidents go unreported. With no immediate consequences, many workers simply shrug off the incident and get back to work.”

THE BOTTOM LINE

Public assembly facility staff and subcontractors are not immune to the issues surrounding worker safety. We must endeavor to keep safety at the forefront of our thinking in both word and deed.

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