

Toolbox Talks

Ten briefings with attendance records · about ten minutes each

Deliver these on site, pointing at the actual work. Ask the questions at the end and let people answer. A talk where nobody speaks has not landed.

Scope and limitations — read before use

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TOOLBOX TALK 1

Working at height — it is still the biggest killer

Key points

- Falls from height kill more workers than anything else. It is not always from a roof — people are killed falling from ladders, from vehicle beds and through fragile rooflights.
- The hierarchy is avoid, prevent, minimise. Can the job be done from the ground? If not, can we use a tower or a MEWP rather than a ladder?
- A ladder is for short-duration light work where nothing safer is justified. It is not a work platform. Three points of contact, secured, no overreaching.
- Guardrails protect everybody without them doing anything. A harness only protects you if you clip on, to a proper anchor, and only if we can get you down afterwards.

Ask the group

- What are we working at height on this week, and what is the safest option for it?
- Where are the fragile surfaces and openings on this site?
- If somebody fell and was hanging in a harness, what would we actually do?

Attendance

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Talk delivered by	Signature	Date

TOOLBOX TALK 2

Dust — the one you cannot see is the one that kills

Key points

- Cutting, drilling, chasing and sweeping concrete, block, brick and stone produces respirable crystalline silica. The particles that do the damage are far too small to see.
- The exposure limit is 0.1 mg/m³ over a shift. A few minutes of dry cutting can put you over it for the whole day.
- It causes silicosis, COPD and lung cancer, and it is permanent. You will not notice it happening.
- Water suppression or on-tool extraction, every time. Not sometimes. Never dry sweep — vacuum or damp it down.
- A mask is the last line, not the first. It only works if it is the right type, face-fit tested, and you are clean shaven where it seals.

Ask the group

- Which of our tools have water or extraction fitted, and are they working?
- Who here has been face-fit tested, and when?
- What do we do instead of dry sweeping at the end of the day?

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TOOLBOX TALK 3

Vibration — you get one set of hands

Key points

- Hand-arm vibration syndrome causes permanent numbness, loss of grip and painful blanching of the fingers. It does not get better.
- The daily action value is 2.5 m/s^2 , which is 100 points. The limit is 5 m/s^2 , which is 400 points.
- On a breaker you can hit the action value in about five minutes of trigger time and the legal limit in about half an hour. It is trigger time that counts, not how long you are on site.
- Blunt discs and worn bits make it far worse because you are on the tool for longer and pressing harder.
- Keep your hands warm and dry. Anti-vibration gloves keep hands warm but they do NOT reduce vibration.
- Report tingling or numbness EARLY. Early it can be stopped. Late it cannot.

Ask the group

- Which tools here are the worst for vibration?
- How do we share out the breaker work?
- Has anyone noticed tingling or numbness in their fingers, especially in the cold?

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TOOLBOX TALK 4

Noise — hearing damage is permanent

Key points

- If you have to shout to be understood two metres away, it is probably around 85 dB(A) and something needs to change.
- 80 dB(A) is where we assess and offer protection. 85 dB(A) is where protection becomes mandatory and zones are marked. 87 dB(A) is the limit that must not be exceeded.
- Hearing loss and tinnitus are permanent. There is no treatment that gives it back.
- Quieter methods first — a block splitter instead of a disc cutter, keeping other people out of the noisy area.
- Over-protection is a problem too. If you cannot hear a reversing alarm or a shout, you are in a different danger.

Ask the group

- Which tasks here are the loudest?
- Is anyone struggling to hear conversation or getting ringing in the ears after a shift?
- Where are our hearing protection zones?

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TOOLBOX TALK 5

Manual handling — what actually ends careers

Key points

- Manual handling is the biggest cause of lost working days in construction. Backs, shoulders and knees.
- There is no legal maximum weight. A 15 kg kerb at arm's length in the wet is worse than 25 kg held close on level ground.
- Avoid first — can it be delivered to the point of use, or lifted mechanically? Kerbs and manhole rings should not be manhandled at all.
- Think TILE: the task, the individual, the load, the environment.
- Knees matter. Use knee pads or a board, especially in wet concrete which will also burn you.

Ask the group

- What is the worst lift on this job, and what could we use instead?
- Do we have the lifting aids on site, and does everyone know where they are?
- Is anybody carrying an injury we should be working around?

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TOOLBOX TALK 6

Wet cement burns — and you may not feel it happening

Key points

- Wet cement is about pH 12 to 13. That is in the same territory as oven cleaner.
- It causes deep chemical burns, most often to knees, shins and feet where it gets into boots or soaks through trousers.
- The burn builds slowly and often painlessly at first. Workers have carried on all day and ended up needing skin grafts.
- It also causes dermatitis, and allergic sensitisation which is permanent — once sensitised you can never work with cement again.
- Waterproof gloves, waterproof trousers OVER the boots not tucked in, and knee protection. Never kneel in wet concrete.
- If it gets on your skin or in your boot, wash it off IMMEDIATELY with clean water. Do not wait for the break.

Ask the group

- Where is the clean water and washing kit on this job?
- Has everyone got waterproof gloves and knee protection?
- What would you do right now if cement went into your boot?

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TOOLBOX TALK 7

Buried services — assume everything is live

Key points

- Striking a cable or a gas main kills. Electricity can arc without you touching it.
- The method is always the same: plans, CAT and genny scan, mark the ground, trial holes, then hand dig near the service.
- Plans are a guide and they are often wrong. Scan as you go, not once at the start.
- Watch for marker tape, tiles, ducting and backfill that looks different from the surrounding ground.
- If you strike gas: stop, evacuate, no ignition sources, call the emergency number. If you strike electricity: keep everyone clear and call the owner.

Ask the group

- What services are we expecting on this dig?
- Who is trained to use the CAT and genny, and when was it last calibrated?
- What is the emergency number for a gas strike?

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TOOLBOX TALK 8

Excavations — a metre of soil weighs more than a tonne

Key points

- Collapses happen without warning and rescue almost never succeeds in time. Being buried to the chest is enough to stop you breathing.
- It does not need to be deep. People have been killed in trenches under 1.5 metres.
- Nobody enters an unsupported excavation. Whatever the depth, whatever the soil, however quick the job.
- Keep spoil, plant and materials back from the edge by at least the depth of the excavation. Spoil on the edge is what pushes the side in.
- Inspected by a competent person before each shift and after anything that could affect stability, and it gets written down.

Ask the group

- What is our support method on this dig?
- Where is the ladder access?
- Who is inspecting it, and where is the record kept?

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TOOLBOX TALK 9

Overhead lines and site electrics

Key points

- Contact with an overhead line kills, and you do not have to touch it — it can arc across a gap.
- It is not just excavators. Telehandlers, MEWPs, scaffold tube, ladders and raised tipper bodies have all caused deaths.
- Exclusion distance is machine height and reach plus 9 metres from wooden poles, plus 15 metres from steel pylons, unless the owner says otherwise. Goalposts and barriers mark it.
- On site tools should be 110V or battery. No taped cable repairs, ever.
- If a machine touches a line: stay in the cab, warn everybody off, try to drive clear. If you must get off, JUMP clear with feet together and hop away. Never step down while touching the machine.

Ask the group

- Where are the overhead lines on this site and are they marked?
- Have any of our machines got the reach to get near them?
- Are all our tools 110V, and has anything got a taped repair on it?

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TOOLBOX TALK 10

Asbestos — stop, do not touch, report

Key points

- Asbestos is still the biggest cause of work-related death in this country, and construction trades are the worst affected.
- Any building built or refurbished before 2000 may contain it. Ceiling tiles, panels, cement sheets, textured coatings, floor tiles, pipe lagging.
- Awareness training tells you how to spot it and avoid it. It does NOT allow you to work on it.
- If you find or suspect it: STOP, keep everyone out, do not sweep or vacuum it, report it immediately.
- Do not take contaminated clothing home. Family members have died from fibres carried home on overalls.
- Always ask for the asbestos register before starting work on an older building.

Ask the group

- Do we have the asbestos register for this building?
- Is everyone's asbestos awareness training in date?
- What exactly would you do if you put a drill through a ceiling tile and were not sure what it was?

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