



HS Broadcast – Ladders

There is no getting away from the fact that all ladders, including step-ladders, are dangerous objects, and yet there is a tendency for us all to take them for granted and not treat them with the respect they deserve, whether at home or at work. It is for that reason that when I am drafting risk assessments relating to working at height that I go into a great deal of detail. Over the years ladders at work have consistently been a source of many prosecutions.

Mortality statistics for England and Wales alone show that around 50 deaths per year are associated with falls from ladders. For this reason if you have a ladder in your workplace then you must take great care and ensure that you have robust risk assessments. If at all possible don't have a ladder in the workplace, but I understand that this is not always possible, we therefore must minimise the risk as far as is reasonably practicable.

Many problems emanate from the use of defective equipment. For this reason I always recommend a ladder register. This is a simple log of all ladders in the business, with each ladder numbered and a periodic but regular inspection undertaken and documented by a competent person.

Ladders also tend to be misused, for example, not having the ladder placed on level ground, not tying or supporting it or overreaching. It is for these reasons HSE guidance requires that they are only used for low-risk, short duration work and where safe working practices can be

followed, such as maintaining three points of contact.

A problem I often come across is convincing employers and employees that ladders really are not safe objects to use and they must be treated with the utmost of respect.

In April 2015 the HSE published details of two prosecutions connected with the unsafe use of ladders. In one, against Solutions SK Ltd, the company was criticised for not having a risk assessment or adequately planning for work at height. The court case resulted from an accident during alarm installation work when a worker fell sustaining a broken heel. The second example concerned a maintenance and advertising company, Titchfield Limited. The firm found itself in court after a worker broke his arm and pelvis after falling whilst repairing a scrolling billboard.

In both cases the employer was not able to prove that the work had been properly planned or that a ladder was the most suitable form of access for the work.

Under the Work at Height Regulations 2005 ladders may only be used where the risk assessment shows that the use of "*more suitable work equipment*", e.g. a scaffold tower or mobile elevating work platform, is not justified.

The only acceptable justifications are:

1) that the work, when undertaken by ladder, is low risk; and



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(2) it is either short duration (less than 30 minutes) or there are existing features on the site which prevent the use of alternatives.

If you use ladders, including stepladders, a risk assessment must be undertaken by a competent person on behalf of the employer of the tasks and following Health & Safety Law; if you have five or more employees then this risk assessment must be documented. All risk assessments must be communicated to employees and available for viewing by an Inspector.

When looking at cases that go to court often the reason for the court case is that a ladder was not suitable for the job. When the worker needs to use both hands (such as during alarm installation work for example), a straight ladder won't suffice because three points of contact must be maintained.

As part of your risk assessments you need to ensure that the ladder is stable. It may be that a stand-off device is required to avoid resting on guttering, etc. You should ensure that checks are made prior to any use, and finally please make sure that workers are instructed in these requirements.

I have mentioned the words "competent person" a couple times; there are a number of definitions for competent person but I like the simple one my Health and Safety Tutor told me many years ago - a competent person is a person who has done the job and is still doing it!