

The “VALUE” of Fall Protection

Every fall protection webinar, course, slide deck, trade show session, and discussion inevitably includes statistics on how many falls occurred in a certain year, industry, state, or jurisdiction. It’s always been curious to me as to why these numbers remain relatively static. In the mid-90s, there weren’t near as many PPE options as we have now and we certainly didn’t have the same number of regulations, standards, or resources. There are only a few jobs left where fall protection isn’t feasible, and there are a ton of people dedicated to safety. So why don’t the stats come down? Why do we consistently see the same results year after year?

I’ve spent years trying to crack this nut. The best I can figure is that the “value” in fall protection isn’t there yet. Before everyone unfriends me, let me explain what I mean by value. I’m not talking about the value of preventing falls. I’m talking about the value that the worker or supervisor perceives that fall protection either does or does not, provide in getting the job done.

Let’s use cleaning a scupper drain at the edge of a flat roof with no guardrail. It’s a difficult ask to go find an anchor, install a rope and rope grab, put on a harness, trail the rope and grab, and clean it all up afterward for a job less than a minute at the edge of a flat roof. It’s a logical argument as to why fall protection doesn’t add value. The worker is skilled and conscious of safety. The roof is flat and low-risk. The work is low frequency and low duration. The likelihood of an accident on this exact job on this exact day for that exact person is infinitesimally small. The only value argument to use fall protection is a fall *could* occur and doing the job without fall protection is against the law. This is just an example, but it captures the concept. It is difficult to convince people to take preventive steps for something this unlikely. Not only is a fall not likely to happen on the one job for that one person, but it’s also not likely to happen to that one person in their entire career. Yes, I understand there are hundreds of fatal falls every year, but compare that to the number of hours working at height and the total number of people in the air, and the argument is pretty thin that a fall is going to occur to that person on that job. The problem is we cannot predict when lightning is going to strike and to whom, so the only solution is to apply fall protection 100% of the time by all those exposed. Another hard sell. I believe the value of fall protection and the culture created is the greatest hurdle we have with fall protection today.



The value of fall protection isn’t where it should be. If it were, the International Building Code would have significantly more requirements regarding equipment locations and access to maintenance areas. Universities would have basic fall protection education and solutions included in architectural and engineering curriculums and Angels Landing Hike would be significantly different (I suggest google image search). I would argue that fall protection PPE, laws, standards, and resources are all in a good place. The means and methods to protect people are present, functional, and effective. Battling the culture and believing in the value is what’s missing. Everything we need for fall protection already exists; we need 100 million people working at height and their employers to see it.

In the grand scheme of things, protecting people from falls isn’t the greatest priority. Saving lives, from whatever affliction or hazard, is the mission of governments and organizations; so, resources are placed where the greatest problems occur. Mental health, cancers, disease, lifestyle choices, and violence account for more fatalities than falls. Most statistical sources include falls from elevation as a sub-category of unintentional injury (accidents). The main offenders in the unintentional injury category, by an overwhelmingly large margin, are poisoning (including overdose) and motor vehicle traffic (<https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/animated-leading-causes.html>). There are more drownings in a year than there are falls. When priorities, budgets, and goals are made; roads, signage, drivers’ education, mental health, drug education, swim lessons, boater education, and a host of other issues are going to get more attention than fall protection. Fall protection isn’t the greatest issue. The stats prove that. Google says approximately 154 million people are working in the US. With this size of workforce, there are much larger fish to fry

than fall protection. When was the last time you saw a public service announcement on TV warning you to harness up before cleaning gutters?

Although there are bigger issues, we do have an exceptional number of resources available. Occupational health and safety laws are written for fall protection, equipment manufacturing standards exist, several manufacturers provide PPE with innovative solutions, and resources are put into fall protection at a state and national level (Safety Stand Downs, conferences, ANSI, CSA, ISO committees, etc.). Although fall protection may not be as great an issue as others, everything is in place for it. I believe the greatest issue is the “value” at the individual level that I mentioned earlier. The worker at height, supervisor, planners, and employer have to believe in the value that fall protection provides. In the same way, I have to believe that I should pull out my gear when I clean my gutters. Everyone has to understand the value of taking the time, money, and effort in the fall protection program and battle the existing culture. The employer must be OK with the extra time and headache of applying fall protection practices and front-line people must believe the same. Standing in front of the fall hazard, people have to believe in it enough to make



the effort, supported by the production people of the organization. This value is by far the greatest challenge. Fall protection PPE adds time, weight, cost, and frustration to every single job, so it’s a tough sell many times. Fall protection rarely makes a job easier. It’s even more difficult to show value when the work is outside of the workplace. Remove the occupational safety laws and the threat of citation or lawsuit and demonstrating value is even more difficult.

Being successful in protecting your people from fall hazards is done by the individuals planning, supervising, and doing the work. It’s done by estimators telling contract writers that anchors need to be included on a job or a tower contractor notifying the owner the stick needs a ladder system. It’s done by safety professionals and skilled tradespeople who demonstrate that working in a harness and tying off is not as difficult as everyone thinks. It’s done by company owners who invest in a kit for each person and find the equipment that people like and want to use. It’s done by citations and unfortunately by accidents. There are 700-1000 organizations every year that see the ugly side of a fall and understand the value the hard way. If you are part of a fall protection program, start with the work. Find the locations where fall hazard exposures exist and eliminate them. If you have to use PPE, keep “value to the worker” in mind. Invest in PPE that works for the application, and minimizes the headache added to the job, that your people like to use and want to use. Spend time and talk with the people doing the work. You will find a common theme that all of them understand the risks and are willing to use fall protection, but often don’t because the value isn’t there for them. Not having the right PPE, no anchor, PPE not available, adding time to the work, not being trained to know how PPE works, having confidence in one’s ability to not fall, and a willingness to take the risk are common barriers that devalue fall protection.

Go to www.wahmember.com for fall protection training, consulting, and program resources. To download or share a copy of this article, click here.

Kevin Denis
Work-at-Height