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Don't look down...

IMAGINE stepping from a crew transfer vessel to the foundation of an offshore wind turbine, then climbing up several sets of externally fixed ladders. The plan, transfer into the main tower, ascending another 90m (heights matching the top of the Statue of Liberty). A spectacular view awaits! Elsewhere in the offshore construction industry, rope access teams are working aloft in difficult-to-reach locations. Colleagues operating onshore, utilise scaffolding, tower scaffolds, mobile elevating work platforms (MEWPs) and ladders, day and night. That was just part of my job working within the offshore wind farm construction industry and subsequent onshore operations. Every day was (and still is) a learning day. If briefly sharing some experiences of working at height increases both operational and safety performance, then hopefully this article will be of interest and use. Simply explained, working at height is where an individual could fall a distance liable to cause personal injury. It includes any place of work above, below or at ground level, including access or egress (except by staircase) in a workplace. A well-used phrase is 'safety is common sense', but is it? A more apt phrase is 'manage and protect', words that have stayed with me over a 20-year career in offshore construction and equally valid for onshore tasks. But what does this actually mean in practice? Teamwork, communication, responsibility, accountability, skills, knowledge and experience, packaged within a formal process of continuous improvement, 'Plan – Do – Check – Act'. The most recent Health & Safety Executive (UK) statistics for 2022/23, rated by industry, stated that construction had the highest number of fatal injuries that year. Construction perpetually involves dangerous work and should therefore be treated with the utmost respect. The most common types of fatal injuries are falls from height. Statistics reinforce the need for the construction industry to promote 'doing the right thing' as working at height often involves office buildings, residential property, bridges, aloft over silos, sewer access points, excavations and even where a road has been dug up to repair underground pipelines and cables.

Dan Espley, States of Guernsey Health & Safety head of profession and Gosha committee member, discusses the risks associated with working at height in the construction industry

The HSE indicates that during working at height activities, more than 60% of deaths involve falls, with fragile roofs often implicated. Fatalities occur when people access roofs not designed to carry a load, other than that which will be experienced by weather. Roofing materials can degrade and may become brittle over time. Slates, tiles, asbestos, cement, glass or corrugated metal may look like they will support weight, yet statistics show preventable accidents still occur. Another consideration, sloping roofs

involving dropped objects, it is clear that if circumstances or processes were slightly different, results could have been devastating. Dropped objects can include equipment failure, unprotected edges, absence of toe boards, lack of tool lanyards, open sides to scaffolds and access platforms. Other causes can be loose or surplus items, poor housekeeping, or a safe means to get materials and waste returned to ground level. Occasionally fatalities do occur. Ladders, a very common tool in the

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with a pitch of more than 10 degrees give rise to a greater likelihood of items sliding or rolling off the edge. Adverse weather, including high-wind speeds, rain, snow, ice, growth of moss or algae, guano or grit can all create mobile surfaces. Workers exposed to fatigue, loss of concentration or extremes of heat and or cold can lose their grip, increasing the chance of incidents. Look out below! Not to be forgotten are those people located in the vicinity beneath tasks being conducted above. Dangers relate to objects, materials and equipment falling from height. When reviewing 'near miss' reports

construction industry; sensible, practical and often cost effective, but are designed for short duration work only, these must be used as per intended design and training. Proactive safety monitoring truly helps reduce the chance of incidents and should be welcomed as part of company work processes. Experience shows inspections often highlight previously unobserved issues, preventing injuries and or loss of production. Commercial pressure is certainly a primary factor in any construction project. Information generally requested by potential clients prior to

approving contracts, includes safety information, such as risk assessments, method statements, toolbox talks, permits to work and training records. Displaying best practice makes extremely good business sense, especially when tendering for and winning contracts, this includes attracting and retaining skilled personnel. Being mindful of the adage 'if you think safety is expensive, try an accident' focusses the mind and influences the order book. In the world of social media, presenting almost instant access to events, it is worth remembering onshore construction sites often have 'line-of-sight' with the public, visitors and potential clients. So, when good practice is observed, this says a great deal about a company, 'actions do speak louder than words'. In an ideal workplace, all accidents would be preventable. Some companies promote 'zero harm', a wonderful concept, in theory. In reality, achieving this is unlikely due to human behavioural safety (safety culture). What is important is training and self-discipline, individual(s) following correct work processes. All it takes is a momentary lapse of concentration, a time vs money short-cut, which can easily lead to delays, costs and reputational damage. Using personal protective equipment (PPE) properly, saves lives. After an incident, saying 'I told you so' is not constructive. Having in mind that accident investigations will uncover a chain of events, highlighting immediate, underlying and root causes, supports the notion 'prevention is better than cure', especially from a moral, legal, financial and reputational viewpoint. Proving reasonably practicable measures have been implemented in the first place is important, especially as current legislation requires employers and contractors to assess risks, organise and plan work activities with safety in mind. Consequences for poor management can be significant. In summary, knowledge, skills and experience remain fundamental to commercial productivity. Promoting the effective safe management of working at height, not only contributes to enabling people to go to their work sites and return home safely, it successfully protects an organisation's assets and reputation.