

Maintenance Employees: The Overlooked Exposure



Most companies in the CBIA Workers Comp Program have a maintenance employee working at their facility. The individual is usually hired and assigned specific maintenance responsibilities but may simply be a knowledgeable employee unofficially performing maintenance tasks.

Often times, risk management and safety programs are concentrated on main operations and production applications. However, maintenance employees are often exposed to higher-hazard risks on a daily basis. Therefore, it's important when reviewing safety practices and policies that you do not overlook the maintenance employees.

What are some of the risks maintenance employees face?

Maintenance employees are often considered “Jacks of all trades” who are responsible for conducting a variety of operations. The following are considered typical risks any maintenance employee could face.

- Machine maintenance and repair
- Lock out/Tag out
- Machine safeguarding
- Snow and ice removal
- Use of ladders and or lifts
- Electrical exposures
- Welding and cutting
- Confined space entry
- Removal and replenishing of hazardous materials
- Lifting exposures associated with moving parts, products, materials, etc
- Equipment safety (saws, drills, lawn mowers, weed whackers, etc)
- Roof maintenance and repair

How do you protect maintenance employees?

As with any position in your company, a job description should be in place for maintenance personnel. Identify what his or her responsibilities will be and recognize those tasks that should be completed by certified contractors. And remember, just because a maintenance employee is handy, doesn't mean he or she should be providing non job-related maintenance services for other employees while on company time.

In addition to having job descriptions in place, the following items should be reviewed with all maintenance staff on at least an annual basis.

Machine maintenance and repair

Set formal guidelines to identify what machine maintenance should be done, when, and by whom. Ensure maintenance staff understands the importance of locking out any machine when conducting repairs or service, especially when any safeguards are temporarily bypassed. Formal lock out/tag out procedures should be in place for every piece of machinery a maintenance employee will work on.

Use of ladders and other lifts

Typically, there exist minimal “working from height” exposures at machine shops. However, almost all CBIA members have step and/or extension ladders and in some cases scissor lifts at their facilities. These are used by maintenance personnel to replace light bulbs, address HVAC conditions, repair leaking roofs, etc. If your maintenance personnel need to work on ladders or other mechanical lifts, they must be trained on proper use. Establish a formal inspection program to review the condition of ladders and lifts to help prevent unwanted falls due to faulty equipment.

Hazardous material handling and disposal

If your company processes *any* hazardous materials (which could be as simple as machine oils), your company should have a formal hazard communication program in place. This includes Right-to-Know, handling, disposal, and storage of hazardous materials and requirements associated with Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS). Often times, maintenance personnel will be assigned the responsibility of hazardous material and waste management. In these cases it is vital that all maintenance staff be trained in appropriate handling. Additionally, all maintenance staff should understand the proper Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) required for each individual process.

Welding and Cutting

Many companies have welding or cutting capabilities. It's important for operators to understand the associated hazards. All compressed cylinders should be secured at all times. There should be minimal combustibles in areas where welding is occurring. Appropriate face shields must be worn, adequate ventilation provided, and a fire extinguisher should always be kept handy. With regard to cutting (including grinding, buffing, etc.), ensure appropriate eye protection is worn, guards are in place, and adequate ventilation is provided.

Lifting exposures

Maintenance personnel are often asked to move parts, products, and materials making them prone to back injuries. It's important to plan a job before actually assigning tasks. Provide the right equipment and resources to get the job done right. Ensure there are enough bodies to move the materials. Assign one individual to lead and confirm that all employees understand correct lifting techniques.

Use of power tools and maintenance related equipment

These items are most commonly overlooked. You need to ensure that all maintenance personnel are trained on the proper use of any tool he or she might use including lawn mowers or drill presses. You must ensure that all equipment is in good working condition and that no safe guards are bypassed or missing.

Have a subcontractor perform higher hazard duties

When possible, the following tasks should be performed by outside contractors, with certificates of insurance on file.

- Snow and ice removal
- Landscaping
- Electrical work
- Confined space entry
- Roof maintenance and repair

By having an outside contractor perform these tasks, your company would be passing the liability or risk onto others. When this type of work needs to be completed internally, ensure maintenance personnel understand the specific risks associated with each process and that appropriate tools, equipment, and personal protection equipment are provided.

Conclusion

Maintenance employees often have high risk jobs. Therefore, it's important to have safety practices and policies in place to minimize workplace accidents and incidents.

If additional assistance or resources are needed, please contact Rob Bolduc, Loss Control Consultant with FutureComp at robert.bolduc@usi.biz.