

Small Contractors Speak Out on Safety

Unlike the “big guys” — commercial and public works contractors — small residential contractors don’t always make safety a high-profile issue. Few have formal safety programs or policies, and training is often a mixed bag of site pragmatism and trade tradition. Still, many small contractors work safely.

To gauge their attitudes toward safety and their strategies for achieving it, we surveyed JLC readers on a broad range of safety topics. Most of those who responded listed themselves as *builders* (23%), *remodelers* (24%), or *builder/remodelers* (33%). Nearly two-thirds checked *residential* as their primary market, with 7% in the *commercial* area, and 29% doing *both*.

These contractors have anywhere from 1 to 130 employees, although 90% employ eight or less. Of these, 65% have three or fewer employees. Annual business volume ranged from under \$100,000 to over \$5 million, but almost 60% fell between \$100,000 and \$1 million.

Here’s what they had to say about safety on their sites:

What protective clothing do most crew members wear on your job sites?

Over 60% of the contractors responding to the survey said they and their tradespeople wear long pants on the job and 58% wear boots. A surprising 35% mentioned knee pads, and hard hats were checked by 10%. Safety glasses or goggles, hearing protection, and gloves were common fill-in items.

What kind of respiration protection, if any, do you or your crew wear when:

Doing general demolition: The big winner at 70% was a paper dust mask, though 25% wear no protection at all.

Removing small amounts of asbestos: Less than one-fifth of the contractors responding handle asbestos-containing material. Of these, 63% rely on replaceable filter cartridge masks, 30% on paper dust masks, and 6% use nothing.

Cutting pressure-treated wood: About a quarter use dust masks, a few use a cartridge type, but nearly three-quarters use no protection at all.

Installing fiberglass insulation: A great majority (77%) use dust masks, 10% use cartridge masks, and 13% go without.

Doing general sanding: Roughly half use nothing, and half wear paper dust masks.

Removing paint: Although only

one-third of the contractors responding do much paint removal, they were almost equally divided between dust mask, cartridge filter mask, and nothing.

Cutting and sanding drywall: This category showed nearly a two-to-one ratio favoring a paper mask over no protection.

Cutting tile backboard/concrete: A little over half use a dust mask, 30% use nothing, and 15% put on a cartridge mask.

Using contact cement: Three quarters of the contractors responding don’t use a mask for contact cement; most of the rest use a cartridge filter type.

Do you or your crew use goggles or safety glasses regularly?

Eye protection is common, but by no means universal. One safety-conscious northern California carpenter wrote in amazement, “Ninety to ninety-five percent of the tradespeople I come in contact with use no personal protection for eyes, ears, or lungs.”

Cutting lumber required safety glasses in the minds of 44%, demolition scored 52%, while using pneumatic guns and staplers came in at 36%. Other tasks thought to require eye protection included sawing overhead, ripping on a radial-arm saw, router work, firing powder-actuated tools, sawing or chipping masonry, and dealing with steel or concrete. Five percent wear goggles or safety glasses *all* the time they’re on site.

Which saws on your site have operational guards in place?

A full 87% of contractors responding reported that they use guards on their portable circular saws, with the percentage dropping to 63% for power miter boxes, 43% for radial-arm saws, and 28% for table saws.

This question also drew a lot of comments. A Nevada builder expressed the feelings of a vocal minority who dislike guards: “Saws with guards are just as dangerous — if not more so — than saws without them. A guard obscures the work, and I’m always having to reach in next to a spinning blade to move it out of the way.” Another common complaint is that plastic guards “cloud up from abrasions so you can’t see the blade at all.”

One California builder thought saws with automatic brakes (as well as guards) would help reduce the

number of fingers lost after cuts had been completed, and eliminate “saws that crawl around after they have been set down.”

Do you or your crew use hearing protection?

Most (58%) use hearing protection on site when operating loud equipment such as a jackhammer; fewer do when confined in a shop situation (38%). Almost a third never wear hearing protection on site, while 11% regularly do.

Do you bounce-nail when nailing off sheathing with pneumatic equipment?

This one split almost evenly with 52% answering yes and 48% responding no. Several contractors added an emphatic *never!*

An Ohio tradesman wrote that he had been shot in the arm by a nail from a pneumatic gun “when my boss was bounce-nailing a double top plate.” However the injury was relatively minor, and he and the other four carpenters on the crew continue to use the technique.

What electrical precautions do you take for site work?

The safeguard used most is double-insulated tools (85%). GFI protection on the power pole or at drop cords is used by 51%, while 42% use weatherproof electrical boxes and cords. Only 18% use *twist-lock* ends on their extension cords.

What precautions do you take on steep-slope roofs?

Although many contractors responded that they leave roofing to roofing subs, particularly on steeper slopes, most mentioned roof jacks and toe boards (“chicken” boards, “toe holds,” “foot cleats”) as regular equipment. Some specified cleats every eight feet, while others use only a bottom cleat below a pitch of 6/12 or 7/12, but jacks or toe boards every four feet at steeper pitches.

About 20% use ropes, typically a safety line attached to a webbed belt and secured at the ridge. A number of western readers listed rock climbing equipment, including harnesses and mechanical ascenders. Several emphasized keeping the sheathing well swept and tying off not only personnel but tools and ladders.

Do you rent OSHA-approved staging or follow OSHA guidelines in building scaffolding?

This question drew 37% yes’s and 15% no’s, while 48% admitted that they aren’t sure if their site-built scaffolding would pass an OSHA inspection or not.

What site preparations have you made for dealing with an injured worker?

More than three-quarters of those responding keep a first aid kit on the job site, and one-quarter train a crew member to use it. Just less than one-quarter post emergency numbers, and only one respondent has a crew member that is certified for CPR.

Does your company give instructions on safe tool use to new crew members?

A large majority of contractors (72%) cover this safety basic.

Does your company post or hand out written safety guidelines?

The no’s totaled 86%.

Does your company hold safety meetings or first aid instruction? If so, how often?

Just 8% of the contractors regularly address safety instruction on site, although 42% make occasional attempts. The remaining half of the group checked the *not at all* box.

One Idaho contractor wrote that although “my employees and I only occasionally discuss safety oriented matters and techniques..., we are always aware of the inherent danger of the work. We have 25 years combined experience without a serious job-related injury.”

Have any of your job sites ever been inspected by OSHA?

Although few (13%) have seen an OSHA inspector on their jobs, the acronym came up in many different comments. Several builders complained they couldn’t be competitive if they adhered to OSHA regulations.

List any injuries that have occurred on your job sites in the last three years that required medical attention or resulted in a loss of work.

The number of injuries reported added up to a little more than four per contractor. Here are the types of injuries they reported and the percentage of the total accidents they represent:

- Cuts and punctures: 42%
- Object in eye: 18%
- Sprains and muscle pulls: 18%
- Deep splinter: 10%
- Back injury: 7%

Reported by Paul Spring

- Broken bones: 2%
- Loss of fingers: Less than 1%
- Concussion: Less than 1%
- Loss of eye: None

Has your company had a workers comp claim in the last 18 months? If so, how many and what injuries were involved?

Only 28% of the contractors responding had filed claims, and most of these had just one accident. Of these claims 28% were for twisted ankles, sprains, and bruises from falls; 20% for objects in the eye; 14% for cuts and punctures; 12% for head injuries; and 9% for injured backs. The remainder ran the gamut from broken bones to electrical shock.

In your opinion, what are the three leading causes of injury on the job site in order of their seriousness?

1. *Dangerous tool use*: 42% included this answer; 25% listed it as their first choice. An Ohio remodeler recalled losing a fingertip to a saw he was using dangerously when he first started out. He stresses training for his crew so they know which moves are risky.

An Oklahoma builder/remodeler limits access to some tools. "We're very careful about who uses the table saw and radial-arm saw, and support material with off-feed rollers. We also use a panel saw for sheet material to cut down on dangerous moves at the table saw."

2. *Bad lifting practices*: 32% included this answer; 18% listed it as their first choice.

3. *Cluttered job site*: 27% included this answer; 13% listed it as their first choice. A San Francisco builder/remodeler echoed the comments of many when he wrote: "A clean job site not only increases safety but it helps with productivity."

4. *Carelessness at heights*: 25% included this answer; 10% listed it as their first choice. One contractor wrote that staying focused when on a plate or roof is more important than safety devices. His advice: "Think clearly, take coffee breaks, and pay attention!"

5. *Long hours/emphasis on speed*: 20% included this answer; 12% listed it first. One midwestern remodeler said simply, "Production must always take a back seat to safety."

6. *Weather*: 19% included this answer; 6% listed it as their first choice.

7. *Not enough training*: 17% included this answer; 9% listed it as the first choice. Several contractors complained the labor pool available to them is unskilled, which leads to injuries. One contractor in the \$500,000 to \$1 million range took a more cynical view: "Oftentimes people ignore their training. They think it always happens to the other guy, and complain about procedures that are in place to protect them."

8. *Lack of safety glasses*: 15% included this answer; 6% listed it as their first choice.

9. *Unsafe scaffolding*: 9% included

this answer; 2% listed it as their first choice.

10. *Drugs or alcohol*: 7% included this answer; 3% listed it as their first choice. Although substance abuse doesn't seem to be a big problem for most of the contractors responding, one builder attributed three serious accidents (two that involved head injuries) to alcohol abuse on the job.

11. *Lack of saw guards*: 6% included this answer; 3% listed it first. Most of the written comments on saw guards were negative ones. One Michigan builder wrote, "The answer to working safely is not more work-hindering 'safety' devices, it's more awareness and better training."

Many also used the *Other* category to write in their own causes. Some of these included dull or damaged tools, lack of sleep, lack of sense, not enough supervision, and the most common write-in item: carelessness caused by boredom and characterized as "daydreaming."

Comments

Most of the comments centered around two general themes. The first was the size of the company or crew and how they worked. "We have a small operation where verbal cautions are easy and few surprises occur," wrote a northeastern remodeler. A North Carolina builder/remodeler agreed: "We're a very small company and safety is just a part of what we do. Whenever we take a risk, it is calculated."

And from the perspective of a Montana tradesman: "Although we don't make a lot of obvious efforts in the safety area, we have a good record because the boss never pushes for production and we always talk things through before embarking on a hazardous path. We are also respected for our ability and judgment and have a say in how things are run."

The other theme that came through strongly is that safety is more than procedures or equipment; it's an attitude. One remodeler asserted: "Most if not all accidents are foreseeable and preventable." A fireman turned contractor underscored this theme: "The task is only as safe as the person performing it."

Some were specific about the attitudes that cause accidents. A California cabinetmaker wrote that "the biggest danger in any shop is complacency about the work." An Oregon remodeler offered two other examples: "The biggest safety concern is the macho attitude. Second is the notion that unsafe exposure is a required part of the profession."

Finally, a California remodeler contributed his key to staying safety-conscious: "The two most important things I teach my guys are to think about completing the phrase 'What would happen if...,' and to pay attention to their instincts and warning bells." ■

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