COMMONSENSE SAFETY:

Lessons Learned

Admit it — you've all done some really dumb things on site. Maybe you were in a hurry to close in before nightfall or bad weather set in; maybe you didn't have the right equipment or were too tired to walk all the way out to your truck; maybe you honestly thought you could get by without an extra pair of hands to help you; or maybe you just thought that an accident couldn't happen to you.

Construction sites are inherently dangerous, and hazards abound at every phase of the job, from the deep trenches and heavy equipment during excavation and concrete work to the high-wire work during framing and roofing, and everything in between. It doesn't take long to learn to be careful, but it's also easy to forget, after years of repetition and routine, how easy it is to get hurt.

When it comes to day-to-day operations on the job site, safety is a matter of applying common sense to the situation at hand. Working safely is important to most of us, but so are the construction budget and schedule. We'd be kidding ourselves if we denied that every day we're all faced with choices between doing something safely and doing it quickly and inexpensively. Some decisions are easier than others. A scaffold provides a safer working platform than a ladder, but it's rarely worth setting up the staging if you only have to drive a couple of nails in a cornice molding that was left hanging.

There are other times, however, when taking a shortcut is just plain dumb, and you don't need OSHA to tell you so. We gathered the following stories from contractors who experienced or witnessed accidents on site. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that all of these mishaps could have been prevented had the people involved been more alert or more patient. If your first impulse after reading some of them is to laugh, take a minute to think about some of the things you did on site yesterday, last week or last month. Sound familiar? If so, you may need to rethink your work habits and make them safe.

Good safety practices can often be learned from someone else's mistakes

We want to thank all of our contributors for baring their souls for the common good. Some are still embarrassed by their own stupidity — er, mistakes — so we've agreed not to identify them at their request.

One Thing at a Time

Sid Hymes, a remodeling contractor in Greensboro, N.C

I was re-siding my own house and taking advantage of all the offers of help that I'd saved up over the years from well-meaning friends. That was mistake number one.

As I stood on the scaffolding hanging sheathing, I looked over and saw one of these well-meaning friends doing something stupid. I don't recall now what it was, but I remember thinking that this guy was going to get hurt if I didn't warn him. Mistake number two was to yell over to him while I was still hammering away with my heavy waffle-head. I don't remember hitting my thumb, but I do remember my wife yelling at me from the ground about all the blood. What a mess. Pressure and bandages didn't stop the bleeding, so it was off to the emergency room late on a Sunday afternoon. It turned out the thumb was broken.

The moral of the story is "One thing at a time." I should have stopped hammering on the siding while I dealt with the other problem. But I was in a hurry, so I paid the price.

Slippery When Wet

K.O., a Petaluma, Calif., contractor

I was finishing up an addition, laying down new shingles on a complex 7/12 pitch roof. I usually lay starter courses from scaffolding, but since I was already on the roof and the ladders and staging were on the other side of the house, I decided to lay the first few courses from above.

I'd laid shingles this way before without any trouble, but this day was different. It was one of those days where every five-minute job took two hours. The work space was tight because of the intersecting roof planes, plus it was late and I had to get home. And, oh yeah, the roof was wet.

I had a dozen shingles down and was reaching out to lay another one when I lost my grip and my balance. The ground was only about 9 feet down, but as I slid off the roof I grabbed the edge, which swung me around and sent my foot through a large (and very new) window sash. The owner, who was working at her desk on the other side of the window, freaked and came running outside. Other than terminal embarrassment and some soreness, I wasn't hurt. I can't say the same for the window, though — it was pulverized, glass and sash.

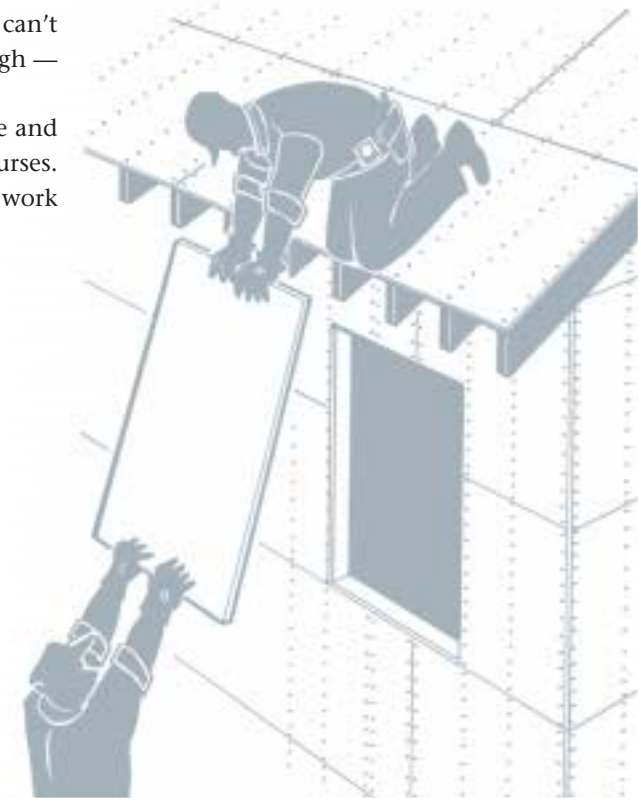
I don't get on wet roofs anymore and I don't lean down to lay starter courses. I get the right equipment and work from the bottom, up.

Get a Grip

J.Z., a remodeling contractor in Winston-Salem, N.C.

My partner and I were sheathing a roof with OSB. It was getting late, so naturally we wanted to finish up. Rather than simply quitting and picking up the next day where we'd left off, we decided to work faster.

Since I am taller, I was on the deck sending panels up to my partner on the roof about 14 feet above me. The process had worked well throughout the afternoon and we were down to one partial panel to complete the sheathing cover. I lifted the panel up and, when I thought he had it, I let go. Because it was a shorter piece, however, he couldn't quite reach it. Wham! Right onto my head. And, no, I wasn't wearing a hardhat. We argued about who was at fault the whole time on the ride to and from the ER, where I went for stitches. But now we always double check to be sure that we're both on the same page whenever we're lifting or moving materials. I was lucky: I had a hell of a headache for a couple of days, but it could have been much more serious.



Heads Up

Chuck Green, a NARI Certified Remodeler in Ashland, Mass.

Mack is a new carpenter's helper on my crew. My uneasiness in hiring him was that at his age (mid-30s), I have found that workers new to the trades are less likely to accept basic directions as compliantly as a younger beginner will. It's hard to be just starting out at that age, and I made sure when I hired Mack that he understood he would have to accept a lot of instructions from the rest of the crew.

Not long after Mack started, we were installing reinforcing joists overhead in an old house. I supplied hardhats, but no one wanted to wear them. Ordinarily, if the work has what I consider to be sufficient overhead danger, I insist that the hats be worn; but not this time.

While Mack was positioning and nailing off one end of the 12-foot joists, he was warned by 20-year-old Tom not to rely on the tight fit to hold the joist end up while he prepared to nail it. Tom told him that the joist could easily fall on him. Mack didn't pay much attention, so about 15 minutes later, as a guy on the opposite end began to nail a joist, Mack's end did fall down. The joist smacked him right on the head, knocked him off the second step of the ladder, and sent him sprawling.

Fortunately, Mack was unhurt, just shaken up, and needed only a half-hour to rest. He wore a hardhat the rest of the day.

I think he'll be much more open to taking "beginner" instructions after this. And I was reminded that hazards lurk in even the most routine tasks.

Common Sense Safety Do's and Don'ts

Working safely is often a matter of taking simple commonsense precautions before undertaking routine tasks. The following Do's and Don'ts lay down the basics; most veteran carpenters will be able to add to this list.

For more information on what constitutes a safe job site, check with your state's departments of labor or public safety. In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor, through OSHA, has printed materials and also maintains a comprehensive, searchable Web site (*www.osha.gov*) with construction-specific safety information. A good place to begin your search is Operation Safe Site (www.opsafesite.com), which maintains numerous safety-related links.

Demolition

Don't bang on it if you can pry on it. Prying is a more controlled way to take things apart, and is less likely to throw you off balance. Pull the nails, loosen the screws or bolts, and demolish the work in small, manageable sections.

Don't assume gravity works in a straight line. Falling pieces of lumber and other materials can twist and spin as they fall, or kick out in an unexpected direction. Wear a hardhat and eye protection.

Do use leverage. A muscle pull can be just as disabling as a broken bone. Use the right tool, and let the tool do the work.

Do tell your co-workers what you're up to. Make sure everyone on site knows what part of the job is being demolished. Keep the area cordoned off and let only the demolition crew behind the ropes.

Sitework & Foundation

Don't work in unreinforced trenches that are more than waist deep. A vertical cut in most soils is inherently unstable and can collapse without warning.

Do cap all stakes, rebar, and other sharp projections. Remove snap ties carefully and as soon as possible.

Don't get caught between a rock and a hard place. Be alert for swinging concrete chutes, and stay well away from the bucket end of the backhoe. You may trust the operator, but you can't trust the hydraulic hoses.

Do get help when lifting heavy objects. Wall forms, power trowels, even overflowing wheelbarrows are more safely handled by two people.

Framing & Roofing

Don't work faster; work more efficiently. Keep the work area clear of debris, plan the work in advance, and perform operations in the proper sequence.

Do make sure temporary bracing is adequate. It only takes a second to drive an extra nail in a brace — or for a gust of wind to blow a poorly-braced wall or truss back down onto the deck.

Don't work off balance. If you can't reach comfortably to make a cut or drive a nail, erect a staging or set up a stable ladder.

Do inspect all work surfaces. Even a thin film of water can slick up a slab, staging plank, or roof surface.

Siding & Trim

Do think twice and cut once. Chop and sliding miter saws have built-in blade guards, but you still have to be careful to keep your hands and fingers out of the way.

Don't work off ladders if you can use scaffolding instead, even for interior trim work. This ensures stable footing and leaves your hands free to hold tools and fasteners instead of holding on.

Demolition Derby

H.F., a Winterville, N.C. building contractor

One of our carpenters was on a short stepladder, taking down a carport roof by reaching out and swinging a large hammer. When he got to the last board, he tried to finish with a flourish, taking an extra hard swing that pulled him off balance. When he hit the board, it spun back into ladder, knocking it over and sending him headfirst onto the concrete. As a result of this mishap, he will have arthritis and we will have higher workers comp rates.

I'm pretty sure that this guy won't make this mistake again. Next time, he'll think ahead about the possible consequences of an action he's about to take.

Cartoon Carpenter

Michael Davis, Framing Square Construction, Albuquerque, N.M.

My all-time favorite dumb framer story is about a guy who was running floor deck on one of our jobs. I would never have believed that this accident really happened if I hadn't heard the same version from everyone on the crew.

This framer had laid a sheet of plywood in place with the end extending about 2 feet over the rim. He tacked it down, snapped a line, and grabbed his worm drive. Then he stepped out onto the overhang and, literally, cut himself off — just like in the cartoons. He fell 10 feet to the ground; luckily, he wasn't hurt.

I asked my guys, "What happened? Didn't anyone see him?" "Yeah, we all watched him," they said, "but nobody thought he'd really be dumb enough to do it."

I chewed some serious butt and fired the cartoon carpenter. He was very upset. I tried to explain that I was doing him a favor by letting him go, but I'm not sure he got the message.

Wandering Eye

C., a San Francisco subcontractor.

A number of years ago, we were remodeling a house on a hill with a clear view of a running path. Summers in Marin County can be quite warm and the runners, including female, dress for the occasion.

On this particular day, there was no shortage of women runners. One of our younger guys was having a very difficult time concentrating on his work. He'd been told to pay attention, but it hadn't done much good. A while later, to no one's real surprise, we heard a yell — he had cut into his palm with a worm drive while watching the runners. It took about 15 stitches to close up his hand, but luckily there was no permanent damage. In fact, he was back working the next day — but not with cutting tools and not with a view of the path.

Thumbs Down

Sal Alfano, Editor, JLC

I wasn't on the site where this accident occurred, but the carpenter it happened to worked for the same company I did. He was working off the middle rung of a stepladder, cutting some strapping with his circular saw. In between cuts, he would rest the saw on the top step of the ladder, which was at about chest height. He would measure and mark a piece of strapping, then reach for the saw to make the cut.

No one knows for sure what made the saw start to slide off the top step — it could have been caused by a slight weight shift that rocked the ladder, or my friend's elbow might have bumped the top step. As the saw started to fall to the concrete floor, my friend instinctively reached for it with his free hand and caught it by the handle. Unfortunately, his fingers also engaged the trigger. In one sweeping motion of his arm, he caught the saw, turned it on, and dragged it across his left hand, cutting off his thumb cleanly at the base knuckle.

In the hurry to get him to a hospital, no one gave a thought to looking for the severed finger, and by the time it was found hours later, it was too late to reattach it. Because he was left-handed, he and his doctors considered a lot of options, including a prosthetic thumb for his left hand. In the end, though, he learned to work and live with only nine fingers. But every time he writes his name, sits down to his table at dinner, or picks up a ball to play catch with his children, he's reminded of that single moment of inattention.

Ladders are inherently unstable and tools are easier to replace than body parts. Make sure your work area is clear of debris and that you're able to work in a comfortable position. And make sure that you can rest your tools on a surface where they will stay put.