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All About Personal Protective Equipment

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In November 2007, the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) announced a new rule mandating employers to not only require personal protective equipment (PPE) for their employees, but also to pay for it. For builders, the result is more cost but less risk. Here's what you need to know—and do—in order to protect your employees and your business.

The Case for PPE

On a typical construction job site, there are hundreds of potential hazards. Some of them—heights or table saws, for instance—are obvious. Others like loud noises and dust may not seem like safety hazards. All of them, however, can lead to serious injuries or even fatalities among unprotected workers. For that reason, builders have both a moral and professional obligation to protect their employees, says Dr. Brian Morris, an occupational physician and associate medical director for Woburn, Mass.-based AllOne Health Resources.

“The construction industry is an interesting sector of the economy because it has the highest number of fatalities in any industry,” he says.

According to Morris, there are more than 1,000 work-related deaths in construction every year, and many of them are preventable. “[Builders] need to recognize hazards within their working environment, and they need to educate themselves about safety equipment,” he says. “It may be steel-toed boots, it may be a hard hat, it may be a respirator, it may be some kind of protective clothing or it may be hearing protection. If it's an employer-employee relationship, [builders] have a duty to provide safety equipment.”

Of course, that safety equipment doesn't only protect your employees. It also protects your business and its bottom line, according to Sean Sweeney, senior market development manager for Ansell Healthcare, a Red Bank, N.J.-based company that manufactures protective gloves for the construction industry.

“As you can imagine, the higher the injury rate within a work environment, the higher the insurance costs for the employer,” he says.

With the proper PPE in place, Sweeney continues, employers can finish projects faster and with fewer injuries, avoiding not only high workers’ compensation costs, but also potential OSHA fines and loss of productivity.

Rules and Requirements

When it comes to safety in general, and PPE in particular, OSHA regulations are vague at best, Morris says. “OSHA has what’s called a general duty clause, which basically says that the employer needs to create a safe workplace for the employee. It’s a very general clause, and you can throw a lot of things into that.”

Although sometimes overwhelming, OSHA’s detailed ruling is a strategy that’s designed to protect employees from as many dangers as possible, according to Sweeney. “PPE is equipment that’s meant to minimize exposure to a variety of hazards,” he says. “OSHA has laid out a variety of different products that are a specific focus, but it will not publish an all-inclusive list due to the fact that a new hazard could develop tomorrow.”

Among the PPE that OSHA currently requires:

- **Eye and face protection:** Workers must wear safety glasses or face shields when working near electrical hazards or whenever it’s possible for foreign objects to enter their eyes, such as when they’re welding, cutting, grinding or nailing.
- **Foot protection:** Shoes or boots should have slip- and puncture-resistant soles. Additionally, OSHA requires workers to wear footwear that protects toes, such as steel-toed boots, whenever they’re working around heavy equipment or falling objects.
- **Hand protection:** Workers must wear snug-fitting gloves made specifically for given tasks. For example, it requires heavy-duty rubber gloves for concrete work and welding gloves for welding.
- **Head protection:** Workers must wear hard hats—which should be routinely examined for dents and cracks—if they could be exposed to falling objects or bumps to the head from fixed objects.
- **Hearing protection:** Workers must use earplugs or earmuffs in high-noise work areas, where chainsaws, jackhammers or other heavy equipment is in use.

Employer Responsibility

Although it’s not always clear what equipment OSHA requires, what is clear is who must provide it. According to OSHA’s November 2007 ruling, employers—with very few exceptions—must provide PPE for employees at no cost to their workers.

“OSHA began levying fines as of May 15 [2008], when this new ruling took place,” Sweeney says. “Since then, we’ve seen fines north of \$7,000 per violation in some cases.”

In order to avoid hefty OSHA penalties—or worse, employee injury or fatality—Morris recommends engaging OSHA and its sister organization, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), in order to familiarize yourself with PPE best practices. OSHA will even perform complimentary on-site safety inspections, he says.

Ultimately, though, discretion lies with the builder, not with OSHA. “It’s really up to the

employer to identify risks,” Sweeney says, “and to identify the appropriate level of PPE to mitigate or minimize those risks.”