Getting to Grips with High Level Loading Safety

While the latest HSE figures showing a record low of 45 fatalities for people who fell from a height at work (06/07) are a cause for celebration, there is still much room for improvement. This is all the more apparent when you consider that 3351 people suffered serious injury in the previous year as a result from falling from a height at work. This is despite of much tougher "Work at Height" legislation introduced in April 2005 which placed more emphasis on a corporate or collective attitude to accident prevention as opposed to individual worker protection.

Working at height carries an inherent degree of risk but as with most work place accidents, the vast majority are avoidable and result from a mixture of corporate and personal failings. From a corporate perspective these are typically poor working practices, training and equipment while at a personal level they tend to be failure to adopt best practices and incorrect use of equipment. Yet while implementing best practice and equipment is relatively easy to do when dealing with a consistent working at height situation, it can become much more complex when dealing with a wide range of continually changing variables.

One such industry example is the loading of tankers which can come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes with access required in a diverse range of access/loading environments. The risk of falling from tanker tops is a subject of increasing concern to operators, users and factory inspectors and one of the leading issues within the bulk fluid transfer industries according to Loadtec Engineering Systems Ltd. As exclusive UK and Ireland distributors of Carbis, EMCO Wheaton and OPW Fluid Transfer Group, Loadtec has a proven industry reputation based on decades of experience and is regarded as a specialist in bulk fluid transfer and operator safety during in-plant road, rail and marine tanker or IBC filling.

Track Mounted Gangway

As Loadtec Managing Director Alec Keeler explains, there is no such thing as a catch-all solution. *"Where possible, switching to bottom loading is advantageous but in many cases, this is simply not possible. Therefore operators and users continue to need high level access to tankers of differing shapes and sizes but with increasingly high levels of safety and protection. This can only be met with a comprehensive series of solutions of a consistently high quality."*

While a number of companies offer high level loading equipment, Keeler is quick to point out that there is a marked difference in quality. *"Although we import equipment from Germany and the USA, it is of the highest quality and we ensure it complies with all UK legislation. It may come as a surprise to learn that not every solution you can buy is CE marked – all of ours are and for a reason. As a user of this equipment, you want it to be both fit for purpose and not expose your workers or your company to avoidable risk."*

An example of not being fit for purpose is the mobile access cart. Typically on inferior products, these are made from 1" steel tube and have to be lifted at the rear end so they can be moved on their castors. If the manhole position is above the rear axles of the truck, it is likely that the cage will not work because the extending front castors clash with the tyres on the trailer. They also may not be big enough to reach the manhole on an ISO tanker. According to Keeler, Loadtec have been called in to replace a number of these with its own systems for precisely this reason.

When it comes to avoidable risk, recent changes in Corporate Manslaughter legislation extend the risk beyond those using the equipment to the heart of the boardroom and those in charge of the company providing the equipment for use. Again, Keeler provides a real world example, this time concerning high level loading safety cages. *"Some so-called safety cages have a top and centre rail. While these provide a degree of safety, it's still possible for a person to slide out under the centre rails. Our cage has a bottom rail to prevent this and whilst you might choose to dismiss this as overkill in terms of safety provision, the reality is that someone might indeed be seriously injured if it's not there."*

In doing so he provides a sobering reminder to all of us involved within manufacturing, engineering and related industries. Many of the health and safety decisions we take every day are ultimately dealing with people's lives and not just pound signs. And by doing so, we are playing our part in ensuring that it is the HSE statistics for deaths and injuries resulting from falls from height at work that continue to fall.