

Trenching tactics

Taking the proper precautions will protect you from a collapse

The accident: A crew was assigned to dig a trench and install conduit for a new two-story, 390,000-square-foot building under construction. The crew's backhoe operator dug an 8-foot-deep by two-foot-wide trench, while the remainder of the crew performed cleanup tasks. Sometime later, two workers entered the trench. The trench collapsed, covering both workers. The remaining crew members uncovered the workers, who were pronounced dead at the scene from skull fractures.

The bottom line: A post-accident investigation determined the day of the accident was the first day of work for the two crew members, who had received no training prior to the accident, and provided fraudulent documentation in order to be hired. The workers were both underage and therefore should have been unable to obtain construction work. The investigation further determined the workers, who spoke no English and had job duties translated by bilingual coworkers, had not been assigned duties inside the trench, and had no reason to be working there.

Proper preparation counts

With this accident, a variety of mistakes contributed to the deaths of the workers. Lax procedures enabled the hiring of underage workers, whose inexperience was compounded by the lack of a training program. Failure to properly supervise the workers, who spoke no English and may not have under-



Illustration by Don Lomax

stood what jobsite locations posed a danger, allowed the workers to be in a place where they were at extreme risk. Take the following precautions to make sure you don't find yourself in a similar situation:

Avoid unprotected trenches.

You cannot tell if the walls of a trench are stable simply by looking at them. Although your company's competent person will inspect the trench each day for hazardous conditions that could create a cave-in, stay out of the trench unless you are assigned to be there, and then only enter the trench once an adequate protective system is in place, such as shoring, shielding or sloping.

Don't take on a task you're not trained for. Prior to performing trench work, you must complete your company's safety

program that will allow you to use hazard recognition to identify unsafe conditions. If you haven't completed the appropriate training for the job, let your crew leader know so he or she can assign you to a different task and schedule training at a later time.

Ask for clarification if you need it. If you speak no English or English is your second language, speak up if you don't understand your job assignment. Ask for additional information as needed, especially with respect to hazards you might face over the course of performing your job. If you're new to the company or to the jobsite, ask the crew leader to take you on a jobsite walkthrough and point out situations and obstacles you need to know about.

Information for this Safety Watch is from an accident report (FACE 2003-07), the Center for Disease Control's NIOSH Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation program, www.cdc.gov/niosh/face, and OSHA Standards 29 CFR 1926.21. It is meant for general information only.

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