



Height Safety Equipment, a brief history

Over the past five decades the Height Safety industry has undergone a progressive change working to provide solutions to situations where personnel are required to work in areas which were once deemed as safe working practice. There has been a constant series of developments, from the use of waist belts with short rope lanyards and chain lanyards as recent as the 1980s, to the vast array of different shock absorbing devices and full body harnesses now available on the market. It is only a handful of key manufacturers that have consistently provided the innovations that have led the Height Safety Industry to where it is today.

The developments were driven by the desire of employers to ensure that personnel achieve the given human right to return home safely, whilst also ensuring that the work they are required to do is still completed. With industry leaders working to improve the working environment in which their employees are required to operate, whilst still managing to remain competitive, there has been a complex and continuous evolution of working practices, which has driven the development of thousands of innovations over the past 20 plus years.

Health and Safety bodies have worked alongside industry leaders to ensure that workable Regulations are put into force, that the working practices necessary to conform to these regulations are possible, and where they are not possible, Height Safety equipment manufacturers have been involved to develop innovative solutions to the increasing number of current and new working at height situations produced by development in construction methods and industry practices.

From using waist belts and static lanyards for many years, the industry saw the first Full Body Fall Arrest Harnesses entering the European market in the 1970s, but these were not widely accepted until later in the 1980s as the standard for personnel working at height. The innovation of 'tear-web' saw the birth of the shock absorbing lanyard, which vastly improved the safety of the worker by reducing dramatically the loads impacting the body, and also the anchorage point. Used in conjunction with a full body harness this became, very quickly, an industry standard.

The first Self Retracting Lifeline was developed in Sala, Sweden in the 1940s for use in the mining industry, and this design has remained relatively unchanged ever since. Now available in many different guises, with different materials being used for casings and cables, for use in different environments and situations, these devices have seen a dramatic rise in acceptance for use in many applications where lanyards were once the standard option.

The biggest change to the UK industry of late has been the introduction of the Working at Height Regulations in 2005. Bringing together the most important points from many industry regulations ranging back to the 1980s and 1990s, and used hand in hand with the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, these Regulations have driven employers to become increasingly vigilant and professional in their approach to the provision of Height Safety protection.

This WAHR:2005 have also forced a vast shift in the awareness of employers and employees alike in the area of rescue provision. All workers who have the potential for a fall must also be provided with the means of being rescued.

Suspension Related Syncope has been a major issue behind this, and has led to the development of 'Suspension Relief Straps' by a small number of leading manufacturers, with the sole intention of providing a longer period in which the fallen person can be suspended before rescue is completed. This simple and low-cost addition to every worker's harness provides a major increase in the safety of workers and rescuers alike, as the increased time leaves the rescuer able to perform the rescue without the need to rush, reducing the potential for error.

Working at height has never been safer than it is today, but innovations in construction methods, materials and changes in the industries that feed the world in which we live will continue to offer up new challenges, which Health and Safety professionals, employers, governments and equipment manufacturers shall work together to overcome. As the industries change, and awareness is increasing within the health and safety divisions and management of the companies employing any company working at height, the quality and longevity of products is increasingly becoming more evident.

The shift in the 1990s to 'low-cost' Safety for Compliance equipment is being increasingly replaced by the correct view of Safety for Safety, with user competency training becoming a must, whatever level they work at within an organisation. The market for height safety is finally catching up to the idea that a person's life is worth more than the cost of the equipment used to protect him, and it is this realisation that is changing the face of our industry.

This philosophy is best documented by an author from the 19th century, John Ruskin, who wrote:

"It is unwise to pay too much, but it is unwise to pay too little. When you pay too much you lose a little money. When you pay too little you sometimes lose everything, because the thing you bought was incapable of doing the thing you bought it to do. The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot. It cannot be done. If you deal with the lowest bidder, it is well to add something for the risk you run. And if you do that, you have enough to pay for something better."

Put into the context of Height Safety Equipment, this speaks for itself.