



Safety Scene

Back to Basics: Saw Safety

by Molly E. Butz

Reviewing the basics of safe saw use

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 81,000 saw-related injuries were reported in 2009. Hopefully, that statistic is shocking and distressing all at the same time. But even if it isn't, it brings to the forefront a serious matter: thorough saw safety and guarding.

From table and radial arm saws to portable circular and industry-specific component saws, it's no big secret that these potentially dangerous machines are a necessary part of component manufacturing. Fortunately, when experienced, properly trained operators are at the helm of a well-maintained, guarded machine, the likelihood of an incident is reduced to practically zero. This is why many component manufacturers implement "no training equals no operation" policies to minimize the potential for injury.

The critical rules of saw safety that should be frequently reinforced include:

- Wearing proper personal protective equipment (PPE) including safety glasses, hearing protection and dust masks (when necessary).
- Avoiding loose clothing, jewelry or anything else that could get caught in the equipment.
- Tying long hair back away from the front of the body.
- Keeping the work area clear of scraps, sawdust and other debris.
- Leaving ALL machine guarding in place at all times.
- Keeping the blade or blades sharp at all times.
- And just in case we need to mention it: NO SMOKING!

Additionally, one of the most important points to make during your training doesn't involve PPE, housekeeping or guarding. You simply need to convey how crucial it is to respect the saw. "A person's concentration needs to be on the saw 100%," says Jess Lohse, President, Rocky Mountain Truss Co. "In my experience, accidents happen when people become careless." Patience, Lohse notes, is also key when operating saws. "Whether it is another set-up or just measuring a new piece, it is best to wait for all moving parts (specifically the blades) to stop before doing anything."

Maintenance is also a significant factor in safe saw operation. All of your equipment, including saws, should be frequently checked for loose parts, fractures, bends or other conditions that could affect its performance. Particular care should be taken when inspecting the saw blade(s), belt(s) and additional components used to make adjustments to the saw systems. Employees should be trained and encouraged to immediately report damaged equipment as soon as it is discovered.

Here's a quick refresher on the critical items for specific saws:

Circular Saws

- Check to see that the blade has no cracks or chipped and broken teeth, and the retracting blade guard is functioning smoothly.
- Don't forget the saw must be grounded or double insulated to prevent electric shock.

Table Saw

- Check to make sure that the blade guard is in place and working properly.
- To avoid kickbacks, do not stand directly behind, or allow other to stand directly behind, the piece of lumber being cut.

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- Do not use your hand to feed the lumber through; always use a push stick.
- Never use your hands to clean off the table; always use a brush.

Component Saw

- All adjustments to the saw must be made before operation. This includes saw positioning and guard adjustments.
- Keep any blades that are not being used clear of the cut path and ensure the feed path is free of obstruction.
- Never reach into or stand inside a moving component saw.
- Never stand on a moving waste conveyor.

Radial Arm Saw

- Make sure the saw stop blade is set to prevent the front edge of the blade from coming past the front edge of the table.
- Check the automatic return. The saw should easily return the safe position behind the fence when it is released.
- Replace wooden fences as necessary and do not operate the saw with a worn fence.

Because two or more of the aforementioned types of saws are used in most component manufacturing facilities, your employees may have difficulty understanding the purpose for each saw. "Some saws are meant to make a task easier, while other saws cut faster than alternative means. Not all saws are meant to perform cuts faster and easier," Lohse points out. As part of your saw safety training, take the time to explain what kinds of cuts will be made with each saw, and the reason one saw is chosen over another.

If it is determined that one of your saws needs maintenance attention, de-energize the machine and be sure to follow all of your company's specific lockout/tagout (LOTO) procedures. Appropriate LOTO procedures should be followed ANY time an employee is going to remove or bypass machine guards or other safety devices, place any part of their body in or near a machine's point of operation, or place any part of their body in a danger zone associated with machine operations.

Let's face it, saws have numerous, sharp teeth that move as fast as 10,000 RPMs... that's dangerous. But you can stay incident-free by staying focused, keeping current on training and adhering to a consistent and timely maintenance schedule. And always keep safety first! **SBC**

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