

High maintenance

Workers on scaffolding need to keep safety uppermost in their minds while dealing with the risks of working at a height.

By Karen Kelm



If your job takes you to great heights, chances are you'll need a scaffold. And if you're the one in charge – and you want to avoid putting your life in danger – you'll need to know how to erect, build, alter, and eventually dismantle a scaffold according to the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation and/or the manufacturer's instructions.

Scaffolds are defined by the Regulation as “any temporary elevated work platform

and its supporting structure used for supporting workers, materials, or equipment,” so they can be found on a wide variety of construction sites. From pulp mills to movie sets, the work will likely require erecting and working on a scaffold.

The problem, says WorkSafeBC senior regional officer Michael Bertrand, is that workers are too often assigned scaffold work without the proper training and

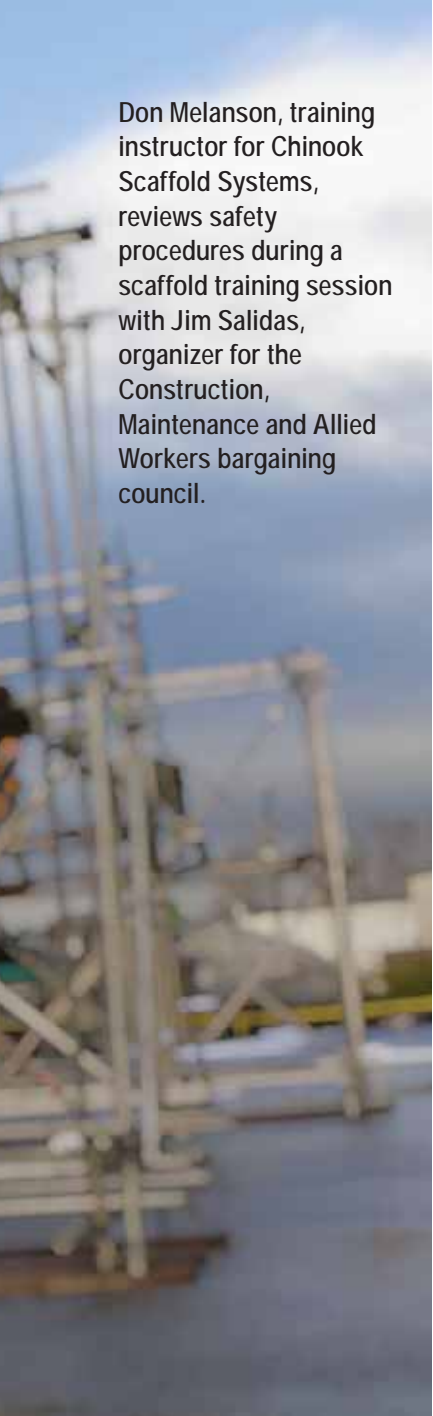
know-how they'll need to keep them safe.

First, assess the situation

In order to use or build a scaffold safely, workers need to be familiar with the process, says WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer John Tuohey. “That's where adequate training, supervision, and planning come in to play.”

According to Tuohey, anyone working with scaffolds should consider the following:

Don Melanson, training instructor for Chinook Scaffold Systems, reviews safety procedures during a scaffold training session with Jim Salidas, organizer for the Construction, Maintenance and Allied Workers bargaining council.



“The more training someone gets, the more likely they are to come home at the end of the day.”

*—Ron Knellar, business manager,
Construction Maintenance and Allied Workers Union,
Local Unit 1998/1237*

the structure and replaced with correct components in good repair.

Therefore, the scaffold should be built with lumber capable of bearing the required load, as opposed to miscellaneous lumber off-cuts, such as fascia board.

According to Bertrand, if you're working with scaffolding, you should be able to inspect it for safety and accessibility before beginning work on the structure, and report and tag any signs of damage, rotting, or split planks, thread damage or warping of the adjustable bases, and cracks, kinks, or dents in the frame. You'll need to conduct daily inspections for continuous use or after modifications to the structure, and check the structure for stability and grounding (if it's close to a power source).

And while you're working on the scaffold, Bertrand says, it's vital to wear fall protection if you're 60 metres in the air; but it's also important at one metre. The only exception to this requirement, he says, would be the use of scaffolds with guards that have been installed according to the manufacturer's specifications or WorkSafeBC regulations.

Don't become a statistic

By far, the most WorkSafeBC claims for falls from scaffolding, stages, and platforms originate in the general construction sector. Between 2005 and 2009, WorkSafeBC processed 1,608 such claims; 1,053 of the accidents occurred on

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- A manufactured scaffold must be erected according to the manufacturer's specifications using only the prescribed, compatible components.
- The scaffold must be inspected at the time of erection – and by all other workers using the structure – regardless of who may have erected it.
- Any damaged or non-compatible components must be removed from

- The choice of scaffold should take into consideration all of the tasks associated with it, to ensure adequate access, height, and capability to withstand the loads to be placed upon it, and bearing ground conditions that may require the use of sill plates.
- If a scaffold is to be built on site, i.e., a wood-framed scaffold, the intended structural materials must meet the requirements of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation. Again, planning should include the consideration of who will be using the scaffold and what it will be used for; with this information in mind, the scaffold can be built safely.
- Lumber should be inspected to ensure it is free of any deformities or imperfections that will adversely affect the structure. Planks used on the scaffold must be either engineered scaffold planks or nominal 5 x 25 cm (2 x 10 in.) material that's Grade 2 or better doubled up. The width of the platform surface must be no less than 50 cm (20 in.).
- Single-pole scaffolds are typically the system of choice in residential construction and are used by all trades throughout the construction process. The cost of building these types of scaffolds is minimal.

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construction sites (the next highest sector had 71). Construction falls incurred claim costs of more than \$25 million – 65 percent of the total claim costs during this period. Construction workers lost more than 100,000 workdays (nearly 70 percent of the total days lost in all sectors owing to falls from scaffolding).

Mike Moore, owner of the Prince George-based Chinook Scaffold Systems, says he rarely sees falls from scaffolding on the larger industrial sites his company oversees. But since he began in the scaffolding business 25 years ago, he's been more concerned about the absence of training in the industry overall.

"In Europe," he points out, "not only does scaffolding have an apprenticeship; they're the highest paid of all the trades."


Learn the ropes...and tubes and clamps

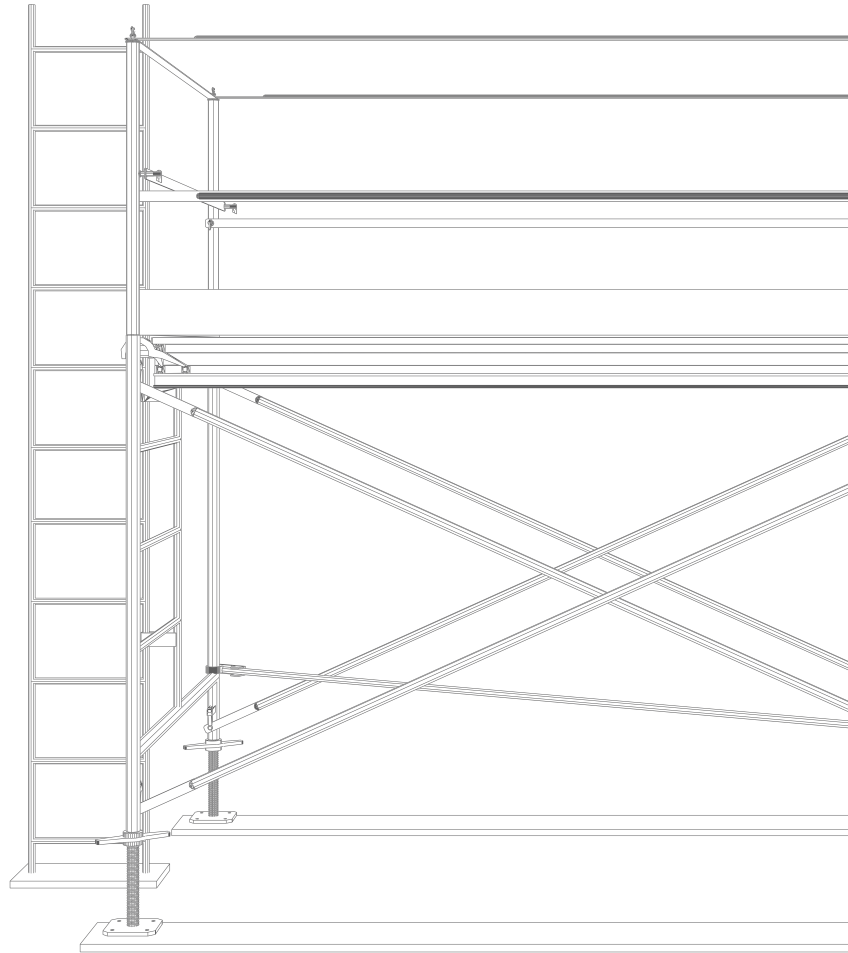
In B.C., however, Moore says it's usually up to individual scaffolding companies to provide their own training in the safe use of scaffolding. "When we put out a call for workers, we may or may not get people trained in using a scaffold," he says.

To address this problem, Moore recently asked two of his staff (one of them certified in scaffold training) to create a six-week scaffolding training course. Now when he hires carpenters for temporary construction work, he says he can rest assured they will first be trained to work safely around scaffolds.

The Chinook course, developed in 2009, is now widely available in B.C., and the Construction Maintenance and Allied Workers Union sponsors its members to take the training. "Proper training in the construction and use of structure scaffolding is long overdue," says Local Unit 1998/1237 business manager Ron Knellar.

Moore hopes that Chinook's scaffolding training program will become a province-wide requirement for accepting work as a scaffolder. "The more training someone gets, the more likely they are to come home at the end of the day," Knellar says.

For more information about scaffold safety, including scaffold safety posters and checklists, go to WorkSafeBC.com and click on Safety at Work, then Construction, then Prevention Resources, then Scaffolding. For information about Chinook's scaffold training course, see www.chinookscaffold.ca. 



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