Stefan Bright

PS: What hazards are associated with window cleaning?

Stefan: The window cleaning industry is segmented into two categories: ground work and suspended work. Ground crews clean windows by accessing them using ground-based equipment, including extension poles, ladders and aerial man lifts. Suspended workers are supported on the sides and off the roofs of buildings while cleaning.

Cleaning windows is relatively simple, so professional training generally takes about 6 months. It is accessing the windows that presents numerous safety concerns. Regardless of which type of window cleaning, the most important aspect is to formulate a plan, including site assessment and hazard identification. Once you know the hazards, mitigation strategies can be implemented to protect crews. Putting the plan in writing makes it easy to use repeatedly, which can be valuable since window cleaning is a repetitive form of maintenance.

Hazards that ground workers must be aware of include slips, trips and falls because their equipment is around where pedestrians are, such as a busy sidewalk. Obstructions on the ground, such as bushes, landscaping and traffic are also common hazards. Additionally, because window-cleaning equipment extends from the ground up, overhead hazards, such as trees and electric lines, may be present.

Suspended workers face similar hazards but at a greater scale. For example, falling is the number one hazard for both categories, but a fall from a high-rise building is much more significant than a fall down a few steps. High-rise workers suspend their equipment and themselves from the roof, so close attention must be paid to rigging points and how lifelines and working lines are attached. Other concerns include electrical lines and devices that may be found on the roofs or sides of a building, and individuals working below, on or around the operation.

Both categories of window cleaners must also prepare for environmental hazards such as thunderstorms, lightning and high winds.

PS: What are some common challenges found in window cleaning regarding fall protection?

Stefan: The predominant fall hazards associated with ground work involve climbing ladders and using aerial man lifts. When using an aerial man lift in the U.S., a full-body harness must be worn and attached to the basket to ensure that the worker will not fall out.

Ladder incidents often go unreported because if someone falls from a ladder, the incident is generally not a fatality even if an injury occurs, so it is hard to compile statistics. Ladders lack built-in fall protection, and it is difficult to create fall protection solutions for ladders because when climbing a ladder, one must always have at least three points of contact. Workers must be trained on how to set up and take down the ladder because without adequate fall protection, they are at the mercy of their own abilities to hold on and work from the ladder.

When using extension poles, falling equipment is a concern. Danger signs must be posted to warn people in the area when a 20- or 30-ft extension pole is in use.

High rises, however, are the big leagues of fall hazards. Having appropriate and certifiable anchorage points on the roof is critical when working on buildings that are 10 or more stories tall. For the past 15 to 20 years, many window cleaners have been spreading the message to the building owner community that the workers they rely on to clean their windows should be provided with certified anchor points. Many companies and buildings have started to install such anchor points to create a stable place for suspended window cleaners. Some owners have installed machines and platforms that come off the roof. These must be maintained so that when cleaners come, they have safe equipment.

PS: Does the industry have any window cleaning standards?

Stefan: ANSI/IWCA I-14 Window Cleaning Safety Standard was published in 2001. It became a tool that the window cleaning community could use to recommend that building owners do their part by making buildings safer for window cleaning. The standard also helps window cleaners increase safety in their operations. I have been involved in the committee for that standard from the beginning, and it has been the guiding light for window cleaning safety over the past 13 years.

PS: Discuss your role in establishing a field manual, training and standards for window cleaning

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In 1978, when no window cleaning standards, regulations or trade associations existed, I started my own business. The company provided the first formal safety training coming from the company that hired you. Typically, workers learned from the best worker, who learned it from someone else. Yet, that does not mean it was right, especially when it comes to safety. I was in the business for 10 or 11 years and my company was doing okay, but we were doing a lot of guesswork.

In 1989, there was an industry conference in Lubbock, TX, which was attended by 60 companies across the U.S. During that conference, attendees typically agreed that something must be done to stop the guesswork and make industry procedures more concrete. At that conference, International Window Cleaning Association (IWCA) was born.

IWCA is focused on bringing window cleaners together and getting everybody to do the right thing all the time. After its formation, the organization began holding an annual trade show. I attended the first two shows, and in 1990, OSHA opened the regulation development process for walking and working surfaces, in which some window-cleaning methods were addressed. I attended and participated in that hearing, and as a result, the IWCA board of directors solicited my interest in joining them. I got on the board and they put me in charge of the safety training standards committee.

My first task was to work with the committee to create a field manual to provide a standard set of safety practices for window cleaners. The manual was finished in 1993, and because it was the first of its kind, nearly 3,000 copies were sold almost instantly.

The manual led to a safety training program that included classroom and hands-on training. One thing morphed into the next, and that program still exists today. IWCA provides this training three or four times a year, and I am still a primary instructor. The program is offered in a different location each time, and after 20 years of traveling across the country to deliver it, we know that more than 6,500 professionals have received this training. If each of those window cleaners told one other person what s/he learned, the outreach may be doubled.

ANSI/IWCA I-14 was developed because the field manual was just a trade association recommendation, and we collectively thought that with ANSI recognition our set of safety practices would really stick. The process of applying for accreditation began in 1997 before it was gained in 1999. The standard was published in 2001, and ever since, we have focused on promoting the standard.

**PS: What are IWCA’s certification levels?**

**Stefan:** After the I-14 standard was published, IWCA decided to develop a certification program based on the standard. We spent a couple years creating an in-depth window cleaner safety certification program, which was unveiled in 2003. Depending on what level one is being certified, s/he receives a textbook and a passcode to take three online quizzes. If one passes all three quizzes, s/he takes the final exam.

The training is divided into four levels:

- Route/residential certification is for the workers who only clean storefronts and homes. Hazards and other safety matters must be addressed for that type of work, so certification at that level is impressive to employers and customers who see that their window cleaner is certified.
- Commercial ground level, at which workers use larger pieces of ground-access equipment, including aerial man-lifts, bucket trucks and high-reach ladders.
- The final two levels are for high-rise specialists. One covers the use of suspended scaffolds, which are powered platforms that support two occupants. The other is for rope access, a system that uses two ropes over the side of the building from which a worker suspends along the side of the building.

**PS: How else is window-cleaning safety gaining awareness?**

**Stefan:** IWCA is always looking for avenues to spread the word. In 2010, IWCA and OSHA formed an alliance, which provided a way to raise additional awareness. Working together, IWCA and OSHA have already created some new resources. IWCA tries to be everywhere all the time whenever possible when it comes to safety for window cleaners.
**Stefan Bright** is safety director at International Window Cleaning Association and a safety consultant. As a consultant, he provides services to window cleaning and building maintenance companies, as well as to general contractors, architects and engineers. He has 36 years’ experience in the exterior building and structure maintenance industry, and his areas of expertise also include site assessment, fall protection, window cleaning safety training, incident investigation and suspended access equipment design and use. Stefan received ASSE’s Triangle Award for Heroic Dedication in 2014 for his involvement in the development of safety guidelines, safety certification programs and national safety standards for window cleaning.