Unrecognized Hazards

Reading through the various news feeds, it is common to find a report of an electrical accident somewhere in the world. We can often glean some information that can help us be safer, something that can be applied to our jobs or at home. One such report was from California in February 2018, when a group of workers moving a scaffold hit a power line. Multiple workers were injured, and at least one required cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) before reviving. News stories like this rarely tell us enough to draw any conclusions about the incident, but this event can remind us about a few important points.

First, the electrical shock hazard probably wasn’t recognized. The workers didn’t notice the power line or didn’t think the scaffold was high enough to hit the line. Whatever the reason, the workers may have been unaware of the seriousness of the situation. Second, CPR was required to save at least one of the workers. That’s an excellent reminder to us. In any group of workers, it would be a great investment to make sure all or several in the group have CPR training. You never know when you’ll need it, especially when there may be an unrecognized hazard, as in that scenario.

We face many unrecognized hazards in our daily lives. One statistic of note was recently published; in the United States, there were roughly 6,000 pedestrian fatalities in 2016, a 46% increase from the previous year. People simply walking along a street or crossing at an intersection were in danger. Perhaps they were distracted by their phone while texting or talking. They did not recognize the serious hazard of the vehicles close to them. It’s difficult to keep our attention on the perils around us, and it’s easy to be distracted from those dangers.

How can we help our workers recognize more of the hazards around them? From a workplace safety standpoint, one answer could be a mixture of training, regular reminders, and building a culture of safety in the workplace. The importance of training is obvious. Teaching about overhead lines, for example, can provide the basic knowledge needed to recognize this electrical hazard. Keeping the knowledge firmly in the mind of the workers is the next goal. Tailgate discussions before each new job, refresher training on a regular basis, and clear signs around hazardous areas or equipment are some ways to remind workers of risks. On highway construction sites, there are often “overhead line above” signs, in yellow or red, warning of the hazard. That’s a great example of a clear reminder, and it can be helpful when outside contractors or drivers are entering an area with special hazards.

The safety culture of the company can make a difference. If workers are looking out for each other and willing to speak up with concerns, many hazards can be recognized early and avoided. There are many resources available to guide us on developing a positive safety culture. Search for those resources, and learn about this topic to improve your workplace.

I would like to highlight a paper on a related topic published in the March/April 2018 issue of IEEE Transactions on Industry Applications, “Standby Person for Electrical Tasks and Rescue Guidelines for Electrical Incident Victims,” by S. Jamil, T. Gammion, D. Wallis, and M. D. Fontaine. This paper summarizes standard requirements for a standby person’s qualifications and responsibilities, the electrical tasks that may require a standby person, and steps for rescue of victims injured in electrical incidents.