

TRENCHING AND SHORING **SAFETY IN CONSTRUCTION**

COURSE OUTLINE

- **The work that you do in construction can expose you to some pretty serious hazards.**
 - That's why one out of every five workplace fatalities in the U.S. involves construction workers.
- **Some of the most dangerous construction hazards can be found when you're in a hole or a depression that's been dug into the earth, also known as an "excavation".**
 - Compared to other areas on a construction site, working in an excavation more than doubles your chances of being killed on the job.
 - Some of the greatest excavation hazards can be encountered when you work in a trench.
- **An average of two workers lose their lives every month when a trench they're working in collapses on them.**
 - Many of these deaths and thousands of trenching injuries can be prevented.
- **OSHA defines a trench as a narrow excavation, deeper than it is wide, and having a maximum width of just 15 feet.**
- **From a practical standpoint, trenches are challenging places to work, because they are inherently dangerous.**
 - Trenches are naturally unstable because with the help of gravity, they gradually "fill themselves up".
 - All unsupported trenches will eventually collapse or "cave in".
- **So as you would expect, cave-ins are the most common type of accident in trenching work.**
 - They can happen without warning.
 - They travel as fast as 20 feet per second.
 - They make very little noise.
- **One cubic yard of soil can weigh more than a ton, so when a trench caves in it can easily trap, crush and suffocate the workers inside.**

- **Other hazards can be found in a trench, as well. Digging in the ground can disturb:**
 - Nearby structures such as buildings, walls and sidewalks.
 - Natural surface features like trees or boulders.
 - They can fall into the trench and onto anyone who is working there.
- **Utility lines on the site may be carrying water, sewage, natural gas or electricity.**
 - If they are mishandled or damaged it can result in trenching workers being burned, electrocuted, drowned or asphyxiated.
- **Hazardous atmospheres can form in trenches dug near landfills and sewers or on sites that contain hazardous materials.**
 - These fumes, gases and vapors can be colorless and odorless, and can poison or suffocate workers, catch fire or explode without warning.
- **Rain and other water that makes its way into a trench not only increases the chances of a cave-in, but the sloppy conditions make it harder to move safely inside the trench and to get out fast if need be.**
 - Standing water also creates a drowning hazard.
- **There are other physical hazards as well.**
 - Falls are the number one cause of fatalities in construction, and workers can and do fall into trenches.
 - Excavated earth, building materials, equipment, tools, even vehicles can fall into a trench too, and onto anyone working there.
- **Surrounding "traffic" can also create hazards.**
 - Employees who are working in trenches that are located near active roadways or mass transit lines can be hit by passing vehicles.
 - Over time, the vibration that is caused by traffic or other work being done on the site can lead to a trench cave-in.
- **That's a long list, and a grim one, but you need to understand these hazards to work safely in a trench.**
 - The good news is that your employer understands them too.
- **With guidance from OSHA regulations, your employer has created policies and procedures that are designed to guard against these hazards and help prevent accidents and injuries on trenching projects.**

- **Before any digging starts on a new trenching project, the worksite needs to be thoroughly inspected to identify potential hazards, so they can be controlled or eliminated.**
 - The individual who is responsible for safety on a trenching job is called the "competent person".
- **The competent person has the training and experience to:**
 - Identify any hazardous conditions on the job site.
 - Anticipate other hazards that are likely to develop.
 - Take the actions that are required to prevent or control these hazards.
- **The competent person will also be familiar with various soil types and the protective systems that should be used to keep a trench safe and stable under various conditions.**
 - Soil testing and the selection of an appropriate protective system are crucial to safe trenching.
- **Additionally, the competent person will have a thorough understanding of the OSHA requirements for safe excavation as well.**
 - They're authorized to take prompt action to control or eliminate hazards whenever it's necessary.
 - That's why the competent person is likely to be a supervisor, so questions of seniority don't interfere with making the site as safe as possible as soon as possible.
- **Utilities that are in the trenching area can be especially hazardous.**
 - They're easy enough to locate when they're above the ground, but not when they're under it.
- **The competent person will use an official "one-call system" to:**
 - Identify what underground utilities are present on the site.
 - Pinpoint their location.
- **They can then be avoided, or when that's not possible, shut off, blocked or otherwise secured for the duration of the project.**
- **Another thing the competent person will do is to oversee testing for hazardous atmospheres, and if they are found, arrange to ventilate the trench to remove them.**

- **The competent person will also ensure that emergency rescue equipment will be available on the site, such as:**
 - Breathing apparatus.
 - Safety harnesses and lines.
 - A basket stretcher.
- **Additionally, the competent person will determine if any nearby structures or natural features could fall into the excavation, and arrange for proper safeguards if it is necessary.**
- **They will also inspect the site for:**
 - Surface water, such as ponds or streams, that could divert into the trench.
 - Patterns of runoff that may lead water into the trench during a rainstorm.
 - Subsurface water that is present in the soil.
- **Ditches or dikes can then be constructed, or pumping equipment installed, to reduce the potential for water hazards in the trench.**
- **The competent person will evaluate street traffic, mass transit or other vehicular activity on or near the worksite as well.**
 - Signage, barriers and high-visibility clothing will then be used to control traffic and help prevent workers from being struck.
 - Extra support may also be used to reinforce the trench against any collapses that may be caused by traffic vibration.
- **Since trenches are naturally unstable, nearly all of them require some type of protective system to prevent cave-ins or shield the people who are working in them.**
- **OSHA safety rules require that any trench that is five feet or more deep must use some sort of "protective system".**
 - Trenches less than five feet deep do not require a protective system if the competent person finds no potential for collapse.
- **The type of soil on the site is a key factor in the stability of any trench, and the type of protection that the trench will need.**

- **Soil is categorized by how well it "sticks together". This quality is called "cohesion".**
 - A soil with more cohesion is less likely to collapse into a trench.
 - Soils with less cohesion... such as those containing a lot of sand or gravel... are likelier to cave in.
- **There are four types of soils. The most cohesive type is solid mineral matter called "stable rock".**
 - Trenches that are dug into stable rock do not need a protective system.
 - They are the only exceptions to OSHA's requirement for protection against cave-ins.
- **"Type A" soil is less cohesive than stable rock, and "Type B" soil has less cohesion than Type A.**
 - Trenches dug in these soil types always require protective systems.
- **"Type C" soil is the least cohesive, and as a result the least stable of all.**
 - It's the "worst case" type of soil.
 - Doing trenching in Type C soil requires careful precautions to prevent cave-ins.
- **It's important to remember that multiple types of soil can be found on one worksite, and even in a single trench.**
 - If for any reason a soil type on a site cannot be determined, you must assume it's the "worst case", Type C soil.
- **Before trenching begins on any site, the competent person will:**
 - Perform soil tests.
 - Evaluate the results.
 - Determine the most effective protective systems for the site's soil conditions.
- **There are four basic types of protective systems. Two of these involve angling and shaping the walls of the trench to prevent cave-ins:**
 - "Sloping" cuts the sides of the excavation away from the trench bottom on an angle.
 - "Benching" cuts the sides away in "bench" or "stepped" shapes.

- **The angles of the slopes and the dimensions of the "benches" are determined by the types of soil and other conditions on the site.**
 - Sloping and benching may be used alone, or in combination with each other.
 - Benching should never be attempted in Type C soil.
- **The two other protective systems are "shoring" and "shielding".**
 - Shoring uses hydraulic, mechanical or timber reinforcement to support the walls of a trench to prevent a cave-in from occurring.
- **Shielding uses movable devices called "trench shields" or "trench boxes".**
 - Their metal walls are designed to protect workers from the effects of a cave-in if one occurs.
 - Personnel work inside the shielding system and move it along the trench as their work progresses.
- **Even with protective systems in place, conditions on a trenching worksite can change from day to day, and sometimes from one hour to the next.**
 - Changes like these may affect the stability of the trench and protective system, or change the atmosphere from "safe" to "hazardous".
- **Conditions that affect the stability of a trench and its protective system include:**
 - Weather, such as rain, snow, high winds and freezing or thawing.
 - Water that collects in the trench.
 - The weight of materials or equipment that are placed near the edge of the trench.
 - Shock or vibration from machinery moving along the edge of the trench, or from other activity on the site.
- **The "atmosphere" in a trench can also be a safety issue.**
 - Hazardous fumes or gases can be released as work progresses on the trench.
 - They can accumulate in the trench overnight, or build up during a work shift, such as when gas or diesel-powered equipment is operating on the site.

- **Your employer follows policies and procedures designed to protect you and your coworkers from these hazards.**
 - First, OSHA requires that the competent person inspect the worksite, trench and protective systems before the start of each work shift.
 - If any hazards are found, no worker will be allowed into the trench until corrective measures have been taken, and the risk has been controlled or eliminated.
- **Inspections will also be made throughout the work shift to determine if conditions have changed and adversely affected the site, such as after a thunderstorm or the passage of heavy equipment alongside the trench.**
 - If a hazard is identified, workers must leave the trench until the problem has been dealt with.
- **Depending on the hazard, protective measures that might be taken can include:**
 - Installing shoring or shielding systems.
 - Equipping workers with safety harnesses and lifelines.
 - Pumping out accumulated water (because water removal can create hazards of its own, this process will always be overseen by the competent person).
- **OSHA also requires that trenches which are more than four feet deep and are at risk of developing hazardous atmospheres be tested at the start of each shift.**
 - If testing reveals an unsafe condition, adequate ventilation must be installed.
 - If necessary, workers must put on respiratory protection before they can continue work in the trench as well.
- **The air in the trench must then be retested as often as is necessary during the shift to ensure that additional changes do not endanger workers.**
- **Even with protective systems in place and inspection and testing being conducted regularly, working on a trenching site can still be hazardous.**
 - Many accidents result from slips, trips and falls that occur as workers enter and exit the trench.
 - Sometimes being able to get out of a trench quickly could be a matter of life and death.
- **OSHA requires that any trench four or more feet deep be provided with safe means of "access" and "egress".**
 - This can include ladders, stairways or ramps.

- **Ladders must be fastened securely in the trench, inside its protective system.**
 - They must extend at least three feet above the edge of the trench (this gives you something to hold on to so you don't lose your balance at the top).
- **To make sure everyone can get out of the trench quickly if they need to, ladders, ramps and stairways must be located no more than 25 feet from where people are working.**
- **Accidents can also happen when you cross over a trench, so safe walkways must be provided for this purpose.**
 - A walkway that crosses an excavation that is more than six feet deep must be equipped with railings and toeboards, to prevent people and tools from falling into the trench.
- **The soil that is dug out a trench is called "spoil".**
 - When "spoil piles" or other materials or equipment are placed too close to the edge of a trench, their weight can cause the trench wall to collapse.
 - OSHA requires all materials to be placed at least two feet back from the edge of a trench.
- **This "setback" also helps prevent these materials from sliding, rolling or falling into the trench as well as onto the workers who are inside.**
- **If conditions on the site require it, retaining devices such as the "trench shields" that we discussed earlier can be used in these situations as well.**
 - To protect workers inside, a shield must extend at least 18 inches above the edge of the excavation.
- **Mobile digging or lifting equipment that is being used to excavate a trench can also create problems.**
 - If it approaches too near the edge it can cause a collapse, or even fall into the trench itself.
 - Equipment operators are required to keep their machinery back a safe distance, at least two feet, from a trench's edge.
- **When operators cannot get a clear view of how close their equipment is coming to the trench, hand or mechanical signals must be used to guide them.**
 - If space permits barricades and stop-logs can also be used as physical barriers to prevent the equipment from getting too close to the trench.

- **On any worksite, preventing accidents and injuries requires teamwork.**
 - When you're involved in a trenching operation you can do your part by "working defensively".
- **Like "defensive driving", working defensively means thinking "safety first" every day, and watching out for trouble so you can prevent it or avoid it before it causes an accident.**
- **Make a habit of following these safe work practices. They could save your life or someone else's:**
 - Never enter an unprotected trench that is 5 feet or more deep.
 - Never enter any trench that has water in it... unless precautions have been taken to keep you safe.
 - Never enter any trench, of any depth, that has not been approved for work by a "competent person".
- **Other important practices that should be followed when working around a trench include:**
 - Always wear a hard hat in a trench.
 - Always stay inside the protective system of a trench.
 - Never pass underneath or work below loads that are being handled by lifting or digging equipment.
 - Always stand clear of any vehicle that is being loaded or unloaded.
 - Always wear hi-visibility, "reflectorized" clothing when you are working on a site that is located near any type of vehicular traffic.
- **Don't be complacent. Stay alert for dangerous situations that could cause accidents and injuries.**
- **If you notice a hazard:**
 - Warn your coworkers about it.
 - Control or eliminate the hazard if you can and are authorized to do so.
 - Otherwise, tell your supervisor or the competent person so they can take care of it.
- **If a cave-in occurs, do not enter the excavation yourself to try to rescue a coworker.**
 - You could be trapped in a secondary cave-in and become a casualty too.

- **If you ever see a coworker overcome by hazardous fumes or gases, do not enter the trench or linger there to try to rescue them.**
 - Many would-be rescuers have been overcome as well, and have died as a result.
- **If an emergency does strike, inform your supervisor, and call in first response professionals immediately.**
 - These groups have the equipment and training to deal with emergencies so that nobody else gets hurt.
- **Remember that the best way to cope with a trenching accident is to prevent it happening in the first place.**

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- **To prevent accidents and injuries on a trenching project, your employer will follow specific safety policies and procedures as required by OSHA.**
- **Before work on a trench begins, a "competent person" will inspect the worksite and identify potential hazards.**
- **Based on soil tests and any hazards they've identified, the competent person will determine the most effective type of protective system to use in the trench.**
- **All worksites, trenches and protective systems will be inspected before the start of each shift, and as necessary during trenching activity.**
- **If conditions change, no workers will be allowed in the trench until any new hazards have been controlled or eliminated.**
- **When you're working on a trenching project, you can help keep yourself and your coworker's safe by being "safety minded" and "working defensively".**
- **Trenching work has its risks, but accidents and injuries don't have to happen.**
 - Now that you're aware of the potential hazards and know how to avoid them, you can help ensure that everyone goes home safe at the end of the day!