

Pneumatic access platforms for safe and efficient working at height



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Working at Height – some help and guidance

The new Working at Height Regulations came into effect in April 2005.

The regulations do not ban particular practices or equipment outright, but they will require employers to ensure that work at height is properly planned, appropriately supervised, and carried out in a manner which is, so far as is reasonably practical, safe.

Furthermore, employers must provide appropriate training and instruction and select equipment which is appropriate for the application with due regard to all aspects of safety. The regulations include schedules detailing specific requirements and considerations appropriate to different types of access equipment, and will require equipment and work places to be inspected and results to be recorded.

In addition, 'persons at work' are required to report any activity or defect that might affect safety, and to use the equipment in accordance with their training and instructions.

Step-ladders, ladders, trestles and scaffolds are still the most common means of access to high sided vehicles for repairs, preparation, painting, sign-writing, application of decals etc, but Schedule 6 of the proposed regulations states that: 'Every employer shall ensure that a ladder is used for work at height only if a risk assessment under Regulation 3 of the Management Regulations has demonstrated that the use of more suitable work equipment is not justified because of the low risk and the short duration of use; or existing feature on site which he cannot overcome.'

In the CV world working at height is a routine and regular requirement, with specialist access platforms specifically designed for safe operation in paint spray booths and similar areas. As a result, it is unlikely that either the 'short duration' or the 'practical problems' arguments could be sustained.

It is a sad fact that almost as many people are killed and injured falling from heights of less than two metres as from greater heights.

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No stretching

Further requirements relating to ladders (and incidentally the term 'ladder' includes step ladders and similar equipment) stipulate that the ladder must be long enough to provide a safe handhold – no more balancing on the top rung to reach the top of the vehicle.

But what are the alternatives? Staging and scaffolds can be made safe, provided that they are properly made and assembled, have properly designed hand rails, toe boards, access ladders etc (Schedules 2 and 3 of the Regulations give more guidance on these) but they tend to be inflexible in application and very space consuming in the restricted width and length of a typical work bay. Also, generally the working height is fixed with such arrangements.

Various forms of scissor lift are available. Many of them are electric or powered by a small engine, in which case they are not suitable for use in potentially flammable atmospheres such as paint spraybooths, and they often use hydraulic rams which present the potential for oil leakage and paint film contamination. Some scissor lifts are totally pneumatic and overcome these problems, but they take up a lot of space and cannot be easily manoeuvred.

Probably the best known safe access system for paint spraybooths, and one that has a history stretching back over 20 years, is the Wallman. It is air driven, so there are no ignition risks or oil mist hazards. It can also move rapidly and safely to the required working position, and does not obstruct the rest of the booth. It moves in all three dimensions and can provide access to the vehicle ends, as well as the sides and top. Air supplies for the spraygun and Breathing Air mask can be taken from an onboard supply, so there is no need for air hoses trailing on the floor.

From the same family as Wallman comes Liftman. Liftman provides an alternative solution for circumstances where it is not practical to install platforms in a booth or where the access requirements are limited or for work outside or for functions other than painting. Liftman is compact, only 800mm x 1050mm at the base, and has a very tight turning circle. Despite this, it is remarkably stable, and would need to be tipped to almost 30 degrees before it would over-turn.

Significant business gains from utilisation of Wallman or Liftman are also likely, including speed of vehicle throughput, quality of finish, and a reduction in paint usage due to improved transfer efficiencies. On top of these benefits can be added the reduction in lost labour costs of employees being off work following falls, or worse the consequential costs of employee claims following injury.

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