HARD HATS TO HELMETS

Moving Into the Safety Zone

By K.D. Winston

Let's face it: Wearing helmets instead of traditional hard hats on a construction site could look a little odd. Some wearers may feel that a helmet doesn't quite give off "macho" construction worker vibes. But owners, safety managers and workers may want to consider switching from hard hats to helmets to go from the comfort zone to the safety zone.

Although a small player in the fall safety protection industry, Frederick, MD-based Summit Anchor Co. made a big move in 2023 when it switched to helmets instead of hard hats. Gus Strats, the company's president discusses why companies should make the switch to helmets, the challenges to doing so, and how to get managers and workers to move in the direction of a changing tide.

Three Reasons to Consider Switching to Helmets

Just because some workers and even managers prefer hard hats over helmets does not mean that hard hats are the better choice. There are several good reasons to consider replacing hard hats with helmets.

1) Hard Hats Are Not Enough

More than half of fatal work-related traumatic injuries are from falls—particularly from ladders, roofs and scaffolds. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says there are more injuries and deaths from falls from less than 30 ft than more than 30 ft. In 2021, nearly one in five workplace deaths occurred in the construction industry, accounting for 46% of all fatal falls, slips and trips.

Considering these facts, helmets provide better protection from head injuries. If a worker falls or trips, a hard hat can easily fall off. A helmet's chin strap, however, better ensures that the head gear does not fall off. While hard hats are not rated for side impacts from falls, helmets give protection on all sides, not just the top of the head.

George Stallings, vice president of sales for WV-based Sales Solutions Inc., which markets manufacturers of fall protection, PPE and commercial safety and technical experts, agrees that hard hats fall short of the needs of today's workers. The hard hat dates back to 1919 and was designed to protect against fallen objects, but its last update was in the 1960s. They do not as effectively protect against slips, trips and falls, according to safety experts.

"We're asking the hard hat to protect workers from injuries that it was never designed to protect against," Stallings says.

Better head protection helps avoid traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), which are unfortunately common in the construction industry. According to NIOSH, construction workers sustain more TBIs than employees in any other industry and represent one-quarter of all construction fatalities (Konda, 2016). Not only do TBIs impact lives but also livelihoods, affecting a highly skilled worker's ability to work at full capacity.

Interestingly, the International Window Cleaning Association (IWCA, 2021) and the Society of Professional Rope Access Technicians (SPRAT, 2023) safe practices publications required wearing appropriate helmets for workers using rope access years before the construction industry caught up.

2) OSHA Prefers Helmets Over Hard Hats

In November 2023, OSHA issued a safety and health information bulletin on head protection in the workplace that showed the agency's affinity for helmets stating, "When head protection is needed, employers should consider using safety helmets instead of traditional hard hats so that employees are best protected against occupational head injuries."

Months before the OSHA recommendation, Summit Anchor saw the writing on the wall and transitioned its field and shop workers helmets, hoping the change would better protect workers from fallen objects and impacts from falls.

"We care about our workers and want them to use the best tools, equipment and practices to ensure their safety," Strats says.

The company chose helmets that meet both ANSI Z89 Type I standard and the European Safety Standard EN 12492. The helmets, worn by the company's installation and testing departments, include an integral chin strap that provides improved head protection.

3) The Company Could Face Citations & Fines for Inadequate Head Safety Protection Measures

If a company or employee willingly or unknowingly ignores safety hazards, the company could be subject to OSHA citations and fines. OSHA could cite an employer under the General Duty Clause if employees are not wearing helmets, meaning a company could pay thousands for each infraction.

"Misconceptions and conformist thinking prevent some people from making the switch," Strats says.

Some workers rebuff wearing helmets because of the nontraditional appearance. Other workers may feel that helmets are too hot or heavy to work in. Some potential helmet users express worry that the chinstrap might strangle them while working. Company owners may feel that helmets—ranging from $55 to $150—are more expensive than hard hats, which range from $10 to $30 or more, and thus opt out because of cost.

"We viewed replacing hard hats as a small investment when compared with the safety upside that helmets with chin straps provide for our most important asset: our workers," Strats says. "And we advise our clients and associates to do the same."

How to Move Your Company From Hard Hats to Helmets

Summit Anchor is in good company with its switch to helmets. Major construction outfits have transitioned or are in the process of transitioning employees from hard hats to helmets. Other construction companies are not far behind in considering requiring helmets. But for those thinking about making this change at their company, Strats offers several tips on how to make the switch.

Education Before Implementation

Owners and managers should educate themselves on the benefits and challenges of helmets versus hard hats. This analysis should also include which persons on site should wear helmets. Will all who visit the worksite be required to wear helmets?

As an example, California-based Nibbi Concrete made sure every project team had extra safety helmets to loan out for all who visited the site (Hilaski, 2023).

Other issues to examine include which brands of helmets work best for certain workers. There are about 14 helmets currently on the market, according to Stallings. Companies must determine which helmet best meets worker needs and provide proven protection. They should also determine which work areas will require helmet use. It is also important to decide the best time to start implementation of a new helmet policy.

Communication Is Key

Get employee feedback so they can air their concerns and offer insightful information regarding helmet use before implementation. A benefit to this is that workers feel they are part of the decision, a major change affecting their work environment.

Explain the rationale behind changing to helmets, recognizing that it may take several conversations, letters or emails to get workers on board. Also, after adopting the new policy, make sure subcontractors, vendors and owners know about the helmet requirement and the date of implementation.

Make the Investment

Simply purchasing and offering helmets to workers may not be enough. It would be a good idea to make the investment to educate workers about any newly adopted helmet policy, with sessions including instruction on proper use and wear. Stallings suggests that companies involve helmet manufacturers to teach workers about the benefits of helmet use. Workers are more apt to adopt the new policy when they are properly trained.

Don't rush the process to implement the new helmet policy. "After all, we're saving lives at the end of the day," Stallings says.

Make It Happen

While getting employees on board is great, at some point companies have to implement the helmet policy. Give a timely heads-up so people can be prepared to comply with the policy. Make it known that helmets are the standard policy, then actively address noncompliance accordingly.

Dave Madaras, president of Chesapeake Region Safety Council based in Baltimore, MD, says company supervisors should convince workers that wearing helmets is important, viewing it as a "want to do, not have to do" change for their own personal benefit.

"It's not about rules. It's about taking care of oneself," Madaras says.

At Summit Anchor, the workers saw the personal benefits to the enhanced safety gear. Mike Brown, a project manager for the company, says that although the helmets add slightly more weight to a worker's equipment load, he feels the change is worthwhile.

"Not only do you have protection from falling objects, but you also have protection from other job site accidents such as a slip and fall," Brown says. "I think Summit Anchor's transition to helmets is a great idea and further shows its commitment to ensuring the safety of all employees and their respect for life."

Although some think helmets will be uncomfortable, Strats and Madaras say that most workers who made the switch find that they are more comfortable than hard hats. Another study shows that helmets are less hot to wear than hard hats, which is another concern for helmet wearers (Georgia Tech Enterprise Innovation Institute, n.d.; Structural Technologies, n.d.).

Madaras, who has 35 years' experience in the construction safety industry, admits he can be stubborn to change, but he is convinced that helmets are the way to go.

"Don't let your ego get in the way of critical thought," Madaras advises. "If you have to wear a piece of gear all day long, you want it to function properly and want the best protective gear, especially for the head."

Hard hats rely on a 60-year-old technology that does not provide nearly as much protection as helmets. These construction safety experts agree that it is time to move forward into a new era of enhanced safety.

"The hard hat is an antiquated piece of equipment and we're asking too much from what the hard hat can offer," Stallings says, joking, "It's time to send hard hats to the Smithsonian Museum."

If Strats could shout it from the rooftops—of course helmet-clad, attached to a harness tied to a rooftop anchor—he would. That may be a bit much, but the point is well understood.

Using helmets is one way to reduce worker injuries and fatalities. And Strats's company encourages clients to provide proper training on how to wear and maintain helmets.

Even if wearing helmets means stepping outside the box and looking a bit unconventional, making the switch for an extra layer of protection for workers just might save a life. **PSJ**

Michael Brown (left), Summit Anchor project manager, sports a high-visibility helmet with an integrated visor while consulting with Tyrone Powers (right), Spider technician, at a project in Washington, DC, in August 2022. Powers is wearing a traditional construction hard hat.

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