

TOOLBOX TALK #22

EXCAVATION COMPETENT PERSON

The task of inspecting a trench and its protective systems belongs to the competent person. OSHA requires that inspection takes place daily and “as conditions change”.

Who qualifies as a competent person? Someone who is “capable of identifying existing and predictable hazards” and has the authority to correct or eliminate them. This person should also have the authority to stop work and remove employees from the trench or excavation if needed.

Additionally, the competent person is tasked with designing structural ramps, monitoring any water removal equipment and knowing when to check for hazardous gases.

Be careful. The selection of the competent person could lead to a conflict of interest. The person responsible for safety might also be in charge of making sure the job gets done on time and on budget.

Time and financial pressures can lead to unsafe practices during trenches and excavation jobs. This is especially true in construction where, for example, a subcontractor may have other jobs lined up at other sites later in the week. We often hear, “I’m just gonna be there for a few minutes.” But soil collapses do not follow a timeline.

One possible way to eliminate that conflict of interest is getting another “set of eyes” on the situation to ensure supervisors/lead persons aren’t giving in to those pressures. Even the smallest of employers can have unannounced jobsite visits by the owners, their purchasing department, their quality control department, or a third party (safety consultant). To ensure safety expectations are implemented, some companies are also requiring foremen and supervisors to send photos of proper safety systems as part of a daily job safety analysis.

Many contractors have safety officers or safety directors who act as that additional set of eyes for their subcontractors. It’s important to give the competent person for a trench/excavation just one role: ensuring safety.

