

TOOLBOX TALK #28

HOT WORK: A PERMIT IS JUST A PIECE OF PAPER – PART 2

Note: This is the second part of our series on Hot Work. For more information, check out TBT-27

Workers who perform hot work can quickly become complacent. They don't realize that simply "pencil whipping" the permit without making the area safe for hot work can place them and their coworkers at risk. It's human nature that the more frequently you perform a task the more comfortable you become with it. Before you know it, you let your guard down, skip steps, or decide you needn't worry about safety because it will just take a minute – and then the unthinkable happens. Even the best hot work program can't prevent a fire or explosion if it isn't used, steps are missed, or hazards are ignored.



Fire watch

Permits help the permit-authorizing individual (PAI) identify if a fire watch is needed, how many are required, and where they should be located.

Employees sometimes complain that the fire watch work is boring. The fire watch is there for only two reasons: to see if anything starts on fire; and if it does, put the fire out or sound the alarm. Once hot work begins, it is the most important job on site.

A fire watch failing to see a fire, not knowing how to use a fire extinguisher, how to fight an incipient fire, or when to activate a fire alarm, can injure or kill employees and destroy a business.

Training

Training is less about the permit and more about the employees' ability to recognize the risks of doing hot work. A permit is just a piece of paper. One question employers often ask is what training do employees need for hot work permits? Training can be broken into three parts: the operator, the PAI; and the fire watch.

The operator must know how to set up and operate the equipment or process that the hot work permit covers. The training information is obtained in the manufacturer's operating manual, classroom instruction, and hands-on training. OSHA leaves it up to the employer to determine the most effective way to train the operator to do hot work safely.

The PAI must be trained on a wide range of information. Each workplace faces unique hazards and this is the information the PAI must understand, be able to identify, and know how to protect against. One-size-fits-all PAI training is not appropriate. Along with the hazards to look for, the PAI must know when a fire watch is required; how many are needed; and what locations they should watch.

Although it is very important, the person responsible for the fire watch itself should know more than just how to use a fire extinguisher. They should know the hazards, what is prohibited, and how to protect the area. A fire watch must remain vigilant and understand why they must watch the assigned area for at least 30 minutes after work concludes.

Conclusion

Not understanding the sometimes-deadly effects of doing hot work in a hazardous, unprepared, or prohibited area puts employees and their coworkers at risk. No matter how well-developed, if a permit is pencil whipped, ignored, or misunderstood it cannot protect employees or the site.