

What Went Wrong

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True Stories from the Trenches

You never know where the danger is going to present itself. Sometimes, the fateful decision that leads to the injury is made by your employee who is injured. Other times, outside forces combined with errors in judgment by job site personnel result in the loss. In either case, the personal cost of the mistake in judgment is huge. Here are two stories.

Experience Does NOT Take the Place of Safety

Joe was a great laborer for his employer, an underground contractor. He was everything that a contractor could wish for — hardworking, easy going and always there when he was needed. His accident was the result of a mistake in judgment.

The project was not unique for the East Bay. The developer was planning on building about 200 homes at the site. Joe's crew was putting in the water, storm drain and sewer lines on the flat site. **No one saw any particular risk presented by the work — they were experienced, and had done this type of work for years.** The soil material posed no unusual risk for it was Bay clay, rock hard after being baked by the summer sun. Everybody was confident that the work would go smoothly, and even better, quickly. "As fast as possible" was the unwritten rule.

The main sewer line was finished the previous Friday. The crew backfilled the main line trench before they left because they did not want the trench sitting open over the weekend. On Monday morning, the lateral work began. Joe was assigned to assist the backhoe operator. It was his job to keep an eye on the top of the main line so the operator could avoid driving the bucket into the top of the sewer main as he was cutting the trench.

Opening up the first few laterals went smoothly without any problems. On each trench, the operator would open up about a ten to twelve foot hole and then Joe would jump into the hole to clear the top of the pipe with a shovel. Joe knew that this was not the way the work was supposed to be done, but the soil was hard and there were no signs of any sand pockets. He knew that trench shoring devices should have been used because the cut was deeper than five feet, and the sides were not sloped.

Joe and the operator then moved to the next lateral. The hole was cut and Joe jumped in to clear the top of the main. As he was scrambling out of the hole, some material broke loose. Joe went back into the excavation to clear the material out. As he turned to climb out again, the side of the 10 foot hole caved in, twisting him like a pretzel and burying him up to his chin. The crew rushed to dig him out, and the rescue crews got to him within minutes. The surgeons literally pinned him back together. He would be in severe pain for the rest of his life.



Is Your Crew Following the Safety Requirements? Are you Sure?

Alan, also a laborer, had been with his employer, a general engineering contractor, for about a year. The City of San Jose was extending its light rail system, and his employer had a significant

piece of the expansion effort. Alan and his co-workers were nearly finished with building a new station. The tracks had been placed, the platforms built, the new sidewalks put down and asphalt laid on the street. All that needed to be done, was to raise the manholes in the street to match the new asphalt surface. Alan was part of the three-man crew that was in the street raising the iron. He felt safe because they were working in the number two lane that had been shut down on the other side of Bay Pointe. There had been no problems during the morning's street operations.

The third manhole of the day was actually in the number two lane only about ten feet from the intersection of Bay Pointe. The crew placed the compressor that they were using on the opposite side of the manhole from Bay Pointe.

There was a truck driver hauling dirt from a new condo project on First Street to a class II dumpsite. He was a bit upset that he could not go straight on Bay Pointe, due to the station construction — but nobody on the condo project told him that he was supposed to use another route.

The grading contractor running the excavation for the condo project was required by the City to submit for approval a

haul route for the runs to the dump. The superintendent thought that someone at the office had obtained the City's approval. He also thought that the route information was being supplied to all of the haulers by the trucking broker representative who was handling the truck tags for the haul. The superintendent was more concerned about getting the material out of the hole and into the trucks than checking to see if this preliminary work had been performed.

The light was green for the driver as he was approaching the intersection. He saw an open manhole in the number two lane of the street he was turning onto, but he did not see any workers nearby. He did see the compressor on the other side of the man hole. He never saw Alan step off the curb and move towards the manhole to complete his work. As the driver began the right turn, he was worried about striking the new curb and sidewalk next to the station. While he did not want to get charged for damaging the new concrete he was really worried about scratching the new mag rims that he had just put on his rig. Halfway into the turn he turned his attention to the left front of his rig to make sure that his left front tire did not run up on to the curb, damaging the new concrete or the rim. The driver never saw Alan at the manhole. Alan never saw or heard the truck make the turn. He did not know that he was in danger until the back right wheels of the end dump sucked him under the trailer as it moved through the intersection. Alan's injuries were worse than Joe's. The surgeons worked miracles to save Alan's life, but he would be effectively house-bound for the rest of his life.

There were many factors that led to Alan's injuries besides the driver's failure to notice that Alan was near the intersection. The traffic control for the manhole work that day should have accounted for traffic turning from Bay Pointe. At the very least, Alan's foreman should have put the compressor between the manhole and the turning traffic to force drivers to swing around the manhole. The grading contractor on the condo project should have made sure that a haul route was presented to the City, approved and followed by the truck broker and the drivers. None of the supervisors on either project ever considered the impact of the other project on their work even though the projects were separated by just a few hundred yards. Had

somebody considered 'what if,' this accident might have been prevented.

You preach safety to your crews at every opportunity. You probably wonder if they will ever comprehend how important their safety is to you, and how you worry about them when they are out in the field. Hopefully, these two incidents will remind you how a brief lapse in judgment can cost you and your crews more than just time. ♦

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