

Federation of Window Cleaners – Andrew Lee, Health & Safety Officer - FWC

With windows taking up an important part of most buildings, and given obvious health risks working at heights, how has formal training been provided thus far? Are there different levels of training available?

The Federation of Window Cleaners has made it a requirement for members of the federation to attend the nationally accredited Institution of Occupational Safety & Health (IOSH), one-day IOSH Safety Awareness courses. The IOSH Working Safely programme includes sessions in the morning on accidents (prevention and reporting), legal duties for employer and employee, developing a safety culture, practical risk assessment including a session on the use and completion of a Risk Assessment form. In the afternoon the session discusses, Safe manual handling, Working with hazardous substances and Safe working at height.

The course finishes with a multiple-choice assessment and a short risk assessment project. IOSH now stipulate that the certificate lasts for life.

There is also an NVO – National Vocational Qualification in window cleaning. The assessors check the angles that are used for ladders and the Health and Safety checks that window cleaners use are correct. There are lots of different criterias, such as using ladders, Health and Safety, using Cherry Pickers and Scaffolding.

Level 2 NVO certificate in Cleaning and Support Services compiles the following seven units:

- Ensuring own actions reduce the risk of Health and Safety
- Promote and maintain Service Delivery
- Support the work of a team
- Develop and Maintain positive working relationships with customers
- Clean windows glass and facades
- Use portable ladders to access windows and facades
- Use mobile access equipment for cleaning operations

NVQs, are nationally recognised qualifications within window cleaning.

The FWC takes training very seriously and has worked very closely with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to provide four different types of guidance notes to all their members. The FWC recommends that all window cleaners read the guidance notes before working at height, especially as the Working at Height Regulations, which were enforced in April 2005, have changed the way people work at height. The guidance notes covers the below areas:

- * Safety in Window Cleaning – Abseiling, rope access and techniques
- * Safety in Window Cleaning – Suspended and powered access equipment
- * Safety in Window Cleaning – Safe use of ladders and stepladders
- * Safety in Window Cleaning – Using water fed pole systems (still to be finalised with the HSE)

The FWC makes sure that they continue to work closely the HSE and update the guidance notes as soon as new information becomes available. These guidance notes are available from the federation's website for all to use.

With new and different types of equipment, like pole attachments, harnesses and carriages, providing less traditional window cleaning apparatus - how has training developed to accommodate possible new health and safety dangers?

Training is currently in the forefront of the industry, it does not matter if window cleaners are using waterfed poles, traditional window cleaning equipment, using ladders, rope access or powered equipment the window cleaner will review/assess each job separately and undertake a risk assessment to make sure they have the right skills, experience and training necessary to carry out that job safely. The correct training method has a huge role to play in this. For all work at height the most intrinsically safe mean of access should always be the first consideration.

By the FWC working closely with the HSE , it enables the federation to keep members fully aware of any new changes or legislations that maybe happening within the industry and is able to highlight any health and safety matters that members should be aware of.

As mentioned previously the FWC has worked very closely with Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to provide four different types of guidance notes to all their members. The federation recommends that all window cleaners read the guidance notes before working at height as the Working at Height Regulations gives information and guidance to window cleaners on the use of different cleaning methods and controlling the risks involved when working at height. Covering the below areas:

- * Safety in Window Cleaning – Abseiling, rope access and techniques
- * Safety in Window Cleaning – Suspended and powered access equipment
- * Safety in Window Cleaning – Safe use of ladders and stepladders
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Does the available training differ much from country to country? How long is a window cleaner expected to spend training? How and when are they certified as ready - a practical test, written exam?

Different training may vary from country to country but all window cleaners should be suitably trained, competent and should have appropriate knowledge, experience and practical skills for the type of work being undertaken. Employees who are more knowledgeable and safety conscious can gain greater respect from their customers and employees.

Management must assess proof of competence at the earliest opportunity, which may be best to be undertaken on a “live” contract. Any gaps in knowledge should be assessed and suitable training and/or supervision provided until competence is achieved.

Within my own company, J.A. Lee Window Cleaners, each and everyone of my employees have to go through a ten week induction/training period and are not able to operate or use any equipment until they are deemed competent with the apparatus or under supervision. Employees also have to undertake a written and practical exam.

The FWC constantly encourages members to develop their skills and abilities to the highest degree.

Health and Safety remains a key priority for the FWC and have been delivering IOSH safety awareness courses since 1997 and made attendance a requirement of membership. The IOSH training concludes with a multiple choice assessment and a short risk assessment, which now lasts for life. The FWC has also produced a ladder safety video and been involved in the production of HSE guidance sheets. During this time the industry’s accident rate has declined but we will continue to promote best practice. The FWC believes that training is key to the industry’s progress but we do understand that it must be affordable for everyone.

What level of professionalism would you say the majority of window cleaners maintain, today? What have been the main health and safety risks exposed to window cleaners that training could help reduce? And, how do time, staff availability and budgetary concerns affect training potential for window cleaners?

The professionalism is very high within the window cleaning industry, and this is very prevalent with the number of members that have joined the federation. The federation represents its members’ interests to the government, including giving input on proposed health and safety regulations, which are paramount in the industry.

Additionally to show the level of professionalism, in most industries, clients want some assurance that whoever they are hiring or working with is trustworthy. Membership in a trade body like the FWC can help to provide that assurance to clients. This extends to the fact that members can display the FWC logo on letterhead, trucks, etc., and also are given a professional identification card on behalf of the FWC.

As window cleaning is such a hazardous industry, members are also provided with extensive safety information. The FWC is a major resource for such information. The federation is involved in the creation of safety standards, and provides training courses, videos, CDs, brochures and other information to members. This includes IOSH certified safety courses. If an injury does occur, insurance is provided as a benefit of membership for injury or fatality. And if problems crop up for employers due to an on-the-job injury or other legal or financial problems, the federation also provides a free 24-hour legal advice line.

How many accidents (fatal or otherwise) occur each year from the lack of maintenance of proper health and safety standards? What new pieces of equipment have come into the market to help reduce the health and safety risks? And, what poses the most health risk to window cleaners: the chemicals used, hand tools, ladders or other equipment?

According to the HSE (excluding 2006), over the last ten years the average fatal accident that has been attributed to portable ladder use has averaged between 1 – 2 deaths per year. Accidents were due to the misuse of portable ladders.

Common causes of falls include the user; over-reaching, slipping from the rungs and the ladder slipping and falling. The industry is getting more safety conscious by attending training courses and gaining a better understanding of equipment and making sure window cleaners have the appropriate knowledge and experience of the type of work being undertaken.

Window cleaners should never use a defective ladder and should make sure they regularly monitor, service and repair their ladders. Making sure they keep an up-to-date paper trail of all repairs and inspections carried out on their ladders and equipment. Lack of training and incorrect or damaged tools poses one of the greatest risks for window cleaners.

What are the major differences in safety procedures needed when cleaning residential windows compared to commercial windows?

None - it does not matter if they are using waterfed poles, traditional window cleaning equipment, using ladders, rope access or powered equipment the window cleaner will review/assess each job separately and undertake a risk assessment to choose the safest method of access to carry out that job.

Over the last five years, more and more safety accessories to use when working at height have become available within the industry, enabling window cleaners to use the best tools for their job. For guidance on tools that are suitable to work-with when cleaning window areas can be found on the FWC website.

Commercial work will be monitored more closely as clients may ask for written methods of work and risk assessments to be shown.

One difficulty a window cleaner may come across is that residential areas do not always like change and like window cleaners to stay with the more traditional cleaning methods, rather than the alternative method of portable tools, such as waterfed pole systems.

The importance of maintaining clean windows

Having clean windows is very important - having day-light coming in from windows is key as no one wants to be looking into or out of a dirty windows. First impressions are vital in any business and industry. It is an impression that can only be made once, and often sets the tone for the relationship or partnership to come.

How confident can both the customer and the cleaner be about safely and effectively cleaning windows to a spotless shine?

It is like any job – a professional window cleaner will complete his job at a very high and satisfactory level. Making sure that all windows are clean.

Either the window is clean or not, the end result will be the only judge of the effectiveness of the method of access and method of cleaning.

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