

Ropes: The 'new' solution in industrial access

With high safety standards and many efficiencies, rope access growing in popularity

In today's industrial world, everyone is under more pressure than ever to work smarter — to find new ways to save costs and get jobs done faster and safer. And this is exactly why more and more plant managers and maintenance supervisors are coming around to an access solution that feels new to them but is standard practice in many parts of the world: rope access.

Rope access has been used for decades both overseas and in Canada and can cut costs by an average of 50 percent when compared to more traditional access and scaffolding methods. In addition, contrary to a common misconception, working from a rope can often be safer than other forms of access.

It's also been around for a long time; you can find historical references to rope access dating back to B.C. It came of age more recently, however, only half a century ago, as an industrial services tool in the North Sea offshore oil industry when it was used to inspect and repair remote areas of offshore platforms. Today, it's matured into a safe, time-saving strategy for a wide range of industrial service jobs, from painting and insulation to equipment repair and welding.

Rigorous training and fail-safe equipment

There are several good reasons for the great safety track record in rope access: First, the comprehensive training and adherence to the Industrial Rope Access Trade Association International Code of Practice (IRATA ICOP). IRATA certification requires, among other things, rigorous equipment inspection and tracking, third-party audits to ensure operations meet international rope access standards, and global incident reporting. In addition, you're always tied off. Plus, with crews on the job for a shorter timeframe, there's less overall at-height exposure hours.

Equipment for rope access is also



critical to its safety and success. The best rope access equipment is designed so it's fail-safe, which is to say that if something isn't configured correctly, it keeps the worker in a safe position until the error can be remedied. Our company works directly with engineers and technicians who manufacture rope access gear to help guide improvements in design, enhancing safety and efficiency in the industry.

And finally, rope access jobs are always worked in crews of three or four, with a highly trained Level 3 Safety Supervisor with eyes on the team providing guidance and ensuring crew safety at all times. If necessary, the supervisor can move in to correct the problem at a moment's notice.

Endless applications

Once people understand just how safe rope access is, applications come into focus quickly. There's less rigging to set up and take down, so most of the billable time is spent with a skilled tradesperson actually doing the work. The harnesses used by the trades on ropes are nothing like typical fall-arrest harnesses for workers at height. Rope access harnesses are full-body harnesses built more like swinging chairs, where workers can remain comfortable and productive for hours at a time.

There are other key advantages as well. Work using rope access often has zero footprint on a plant floor. Operations go on uninterrupted around whatever work is being performed on ropes. Better yet, there's no need to transport or stage large pieces of equipment. And, with smaller crews and less equipment, it's much less expensive.

The rope access business is growing in the U.S. as the pressure to reduce costs is stronger than ever. Plant managers serious about finding new, better ways to get the job done are open to learning about the safety and technical advantages of rope access.

Rope access shines most brightly on jobs requiring access to a very high work area or work scopes that are vertical or near vertical, such as towers and columns. Rope access is also suitable for confined spaces such as tanks for liner repair and furnaces for refractory repairs.

However, it's important to understand that rope access is just one tool in the toolbox. It's an efficient access option to get a skilled tradesperson into position. To take full advantage of the time and cost savings rope access offers, it's important to find a rope access team that can deliver a wide range of skilled trades



and are first and foremost trained and experienced in their specialties: inspection, surface preparation, coatings, insulation, fireproofing, leak repair, welding, masonry and other trades. In other words, the actual service being provided should come first, and the rope access is a means

to an end. Ideally, rope access should be seamlessly integrated with other access tools such as scaffolding, motorized solutions, suspended platforms and elevators.

For more information, visit www.brandsafway.com or call (800) 558-4772. ●

The Craftspeople on the Ropes

What kind of person is comfortable performing industrial services using rope access? If you're picturing a gymnast with a penchant for risk-taking, you'd be all wrong. For some, it began with learning rope skills via mountain warfare school in the Canadian Army. In fact, many rope access managers are former military, although that's not a prerequisite.

Most tradespersons aiming to get certified on ropes often come in with a certain amount of fear. They are tradespersons first and aspire to become rope qualified as a way to deliver their skills more effectively. It can be a point of prestige among the trades to be rope qualified.

Not just anyone can get certified through the Industrial Rope Access Trade Association (IRATA) Rope Access Course. For even the most basic rope certification, candidates must get through training that involves study and the practical application of equipment, with the primary focus being on safety. The training helps them overcome any fear. And of course, you need someone with a strong commitment to safety.

There's also the physical aspect. Although you don't have to be a star athlete — it's more about technique rather than muscle — you do have to be relatively fit to master rope work.

About 30 percent of candidates don't make it through training. For those who make it, however, the rewards are significant. Tradespeople who are certified to do rope access have the opportunity to get involved in new and sometimes more interesting projects, and they have more job security. There's always work for a skilled tradesperson who knows how to work safely at the end of a line.

