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Not This Again

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Which of these common problems could we find in your shop?

- Damaged electrical cords
- Unlabeled containers
- Latex gloves used with polyurethane paints
- Employees not wearing safety glasses
- Eyewashes not maintained – not accessible, expired, dirty – or no eyewashes
- Spraying flammable liquids outside of booths
- Using compressed air for cleaning at too high of pressure, without safety glasses

We see these same potential hazards again and again. Why are they a concern?

Damaged cords can start fires. They can cause shocks – and those can kill. We see a lot of damage with the cords from detailers' buffers. Those run about 10 amps. It takes less than two-tenths of an amp to kill.

What problems do we see with cords? The insulation gets damaged. The cords get so twisted that wires break. Grounding pins break off. The plug starts separating from the cord jacket. All of these result in cords or, worse, tools that need to be discarded or repaired. Look at ways to prevent that damage. Maybe your detailers should switch to battery-powered buffers. Remind employees to treat cords with care. Buy high quality extension cords, ones with molded plugs that are easy to grasp, so employees pull out the plug instead of pulling on the cord.

Unlabeled containers don't seem like a big deal, as you know exactly what you put into that bottle (as long as you don't forget). But what if someone else picks it up? What if someone thinks that clear liquid is lacquer thinner or water – but it's actually highly corrosive wheel brightener?

This is false: all gloves are the same. Anyone using toluene-containing lacquer thinner will tell you that nitrile gloves deteriorate rapidly. Thin latex gloves seem more resistant to thinner, but they don't block isocyanates, the active agent in all clear coats. Those chemicals are among the most serious hazards in automotive painting; if someone becomes sensitized, even a tiny exposure can trigger a severe asthma attack. So why do shops still buy the latex gloves?

Eye injuries are one of the most common types of injury in automotive repair. Most often, it's a particle in the eye. Chemical splashes happen, too. If we ask what thinner in the eye feels like, we usually get several first-hand reports. Those are preventable. If employees are working with corrosives, face shields designed for splash protection are essential. If they're grinding, sanding, or using power tools, safety glasses will usually be enough – if they're worn. The trade schools require safety glasses for anyone in the shops. But too many employers don't do likewise. So employees fall out of the habit of wearing them.

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We work with shops that have 100% eye protection rules. They're successful. Their employees do quality work. They prove that it's possible to require eye protection all the time.

It's a good thing if you never use your eyewash, if it means that employees didn't get stuff in their eyes. But it's better to be prepared for problems. Which do you think is more expensive, maintaining an eyewash or a permanently blinded employee? If the eyewash is blocked, if the lines are so gunked up from lack of use that the water doesn't flow, if the water is so cold it's torture to use, you've chosen the blind employee. Is that really the choice you want?

Body shops are very conscientious about using their expensive spray booths for their final coats, because doing so provides that very high-quality finish they need. They aren't always so conscientious about using their spray booths for spraying primer or spray-applied body filler, even though the safety features of a booth are designed for just those hazards. Spray booths are intended to control fire risks, by removing sources of ignition when you're creating a flammable atmosphere. Fire doesn't care whether the flammable atmosphere is from clear coat or primer.

We don't expect a spray booth to be used every time you pick up an aerosol can. But if your employees repeatedly spray flammables in any area where sparks can be created, make you're your fire insurance is paid up and your evacuation plan is well-rehearsed.

OSHA's rules on air guns used for cleaning are simple: they must reduce pressure to 30 psi when dead-headed (put against a solid surface), they must provide protection against flying chips, and they have to be used with appropriate personal protective equipment. So why do we see people blowing themselves off with noncompliant air guns and with no eye protection?

Air guns that meet the requirements work as well as the non-compliant ones. Unless you want to reduce your compressed air line pressure to only 30 psi, you need to require compliant air guns. Don't think you can control that if employees buy their own tools? OSHA's standard for hand and portable tools explicitly states that employers are responsible for the safe condition of tools, including those furnished by employees. You're the one who will pay the penalty.

We're hired, usually, to help keep people in compliance with the law. But our job is really to try to keep people safe. We look for potential hazards – with the goal of preventing injury or damage to property. We use history as our guide, a history of people being injured and killed. What has been learned from that sad history becomes the OSHA standards and fire codes you live with. We know that using faulty electrical equipment can cause fires and shocks. Spraying acid solutions without adequate eye and skin protection can blind. If exits are blocked, people can't find the way out when the building's in flames.

So why do we keep seeing the same hazards over and over again? We can guess at answers – complacency, ignorance, "it can't happen here…." It might not happen at your shop. But why take the chance?

This article is intended to provide general information (no advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at 651-481-9787 or chess@chess-safety.com

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