

ELECTRICAL FIRE SAFETY

Electricity is an all too common loss cause for fire incidents each year. Workplace fires can result in dire consequences including the potential for fatalities, injuries, property damage and business interruption. Electrical hazards result in numerous workplace fire incidents each year. Defective electrical equipment or misuse of equipment can result in overheating or arcing. These conditions lead to ignition in areas where combustible or flammable materials are present.

Fortunately, there are basic steps and maintenance practices that can help minimize the potential for an electrical fire incident in your business. The lumber and woodworking industry faces unique hazards that require ongoing and specialized attention. The purpose for this article is to highlight several preventive measures associated with electric panel boxes and extension cords.

Shock and electrocution hazards associated with performing electrical work are well documented. Electrical installation, service and repair work should be performed only by trained and qualified electricians, in accordance with nationally recognized standards including the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and National Electrical Code (NEC).

ELECTRIC PANEL BOXES:

- A minimum 36-inch clearance should be maintained in front of wall panel boxes. Employees should not be allowed to store or lean stock against panel boxes even temporarily. In storage or congested areas, the use of steel posts or railings may be necessary to help maintain proper clearances. Painted floor markings in front of panels can also help identify areas that are to be kept clear.
- Panel box doors should be kept closed. Panel doors left open allow sawdust to easily accumulate creating a significant fire safety hazard.
- Panel boxes should be clearly labeled. Circuit breakers within a panel should be accurately labeled.
- Blank cartridges should be used to fill open space where there are no circuit breakers on a panel.
- If a circuit breaker trips, investigate the underlying cause for the overload and correct the root problem. Do not allow taped circuit breakers or leave electric boxes open for cooling purposes.
- In areas where sawdust is present, electric boxes should be properly cleaned at the end of each day so that sawdust is not allowed to accumulate.

EXTENSION CORDS:

- Extension cords are approved for temporary use only. In the lumber & woodworking industry, this will typically involve portable power tools that are used in different areas at different times. Power tools, equipment and appliances that are normally arranged and kept in the same location should be plugged directly into a wall outlet.
- Extension cords should be UL listed and approved. Cords should be properly rated for the application and for the equipment or tools being used. Cords not listed and rated for outdoor use should only be used indoors and should be kept dry.
- Cords left on workplace floors are particularly subject to wear, tear and damage. Every effort should be made to minimize cords on the floor in high traffic areas. The use of overhead retractable cord reels is a desirable option. Extension cords should be unplugged when not in use.
- Never use cords that are worn, frayed, torn or otherwise defective. Extension cords should be visually checked for safe working condition prior to each use.
- An extension cord should not be plugged into another extension cord (no “piggyback or daisy chain”).
- The use of multi-plug strips should be limited to office equipment such as computers, printers and fax machines.

Managing electrical fire safety issues should be an ongoing and integrated portion of your overall loss prevention effort. Consistent use of the preventive steps highlighted here are intended to help minimize the potential for property damage or business interruption resulting from an electrical fire incident in your business.