

Pin money

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If you're still reliant on semi-automatic quick couplers, take heart. On site safety is the only thing that needs to go without a hitch

A piercing siren sounds, red lights begin to flash and before you know it, you've lost half an hour through stumbling around site searching for an unremarkable-looking rod of metal. On the plus side, you haven't exposed your workers to unnecessary risk of fatal injury.

The issue of accidents caused by buckets and other attachments becoming unexpectedly detached from their carrier machine due to the loss or misuse of semi-automatic quick couplers is a well-documented one.

According to Health and Safety Executive statistics, approximately 13 per cent of all accidents investigated on excavators are attributed to the bucket detaching from a quick hitch and injuring a ground worker. These are mainly fatal and major injuries.

Following a spate of accidents and four fatalities between December 2006 and November 2007, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) brokered a deal in that has seen European manufacturers cease production of semi-automatic hitches. The agreement, however, is not retrospective. As a consequence, around 7000 of these quick couplers are still in day-to-day use on UK construction, demolition and quarry sites.

[Skanska will be banning semi-automatic quick couplers from its sites from November 2009 following a fatal accident on a Skanska UK Skanska/Grantrail Docklands Light Railway site in December last year](#), when a bucket became detached from an excavator and struck an employee.

Kevin Minton, senior manager at the Construction Products Association (CPA), is concerned that if other large contractors follow suit, semi-automatics will move into smaller companies which may not be as well-informed with regards to good practice guides. This is one of the issues currently being addressed within the CPA's Plant Safety Group forum

However, there is a new solution on the market, and its one of those solutions that will have you smacking your palm against your head, wonder why on earth this debate has been raging when the answer is simplicity itself.

Quick Switch UK has unveiled a new device that could well save the lives of construction workers working around mobile equipment fitted with a semi-automatic quick coupler.

Put simply, it is a system that warns the operator via siren and flashing lights when a quick hitch retaining pin hasn't been inserted, or has been slotted in incorrectly.

The Hertfordshire-based company is selling its new sensor-based technology at £600, which includes installation.

Powered by metal detector and with a very specific sensing range, the device will not be fooled by mud or undersized pins or make-shift pin replacements.

While he backs the new product, however, Minton believes it is right that the choice still lies with the individual.

"Not using semi-automatics on site doesn't have to be the only solution. They are safe if used properly, and many companies have decided, from an engineering point of view, that they are more robust than automatics."

He adds: "The fact is, there's no single right answer with regards to semi-automatic couplers. The Quick Switch product does not have an interlock system, and people can ignore warnings. Then again, people do misposition pins inadvertently, so the system is useful."

Still not convinced that forking out a few thousand pounds on alarm equipment is worth the investment? You have been warned.

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