



TRENCH SAFETY

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IRON LOT SAFETY TRAINING SERIES

NATIONAL TRENCH SAFETY MONTH

WEEK 4 TRAINING: THE COMPETENT PERSON

Training Topic:

The Competent Person: The Most Important Role on a Trench Site

Training Duration

15–20 Minutes

Audience

- Equipment Operators
 - Laborers
 - Foremen
 - Superintendents
 - Project Managers
 - Utility Crews
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Training Objectives

Upon completion of this training, employees should be able to:

- ✓ Understand the role of the competent person on a trench site
- ✓ Recognize OSHA's basic competent person requirements
- ✓ Understand why inspections must be completed before workers enter the excavation
- ✓ Identify changing conditions that require new review
- ✓ Recognize common trench hazards
- ✓ Understand why the competent person must have authority to take corrective action
- ✓ Explain why workers should be removed from unsafe excavations

Why the Competent Person Matters

Trench safety depends on more than equipment, rules, and written procedures.

It depends on someone being able to recognize hazards before workers are exposed to them.

A trench can change quickly. Soil can shift. Water can collect. Spoil piles can add pressure near the edge. Equipment can create vibration. Protective systems can be used incorrectly.

Conditions that looked acceptable in the morning can become unsafe later in the day.

The competent person is responsible for identifying those hazards and having the authority to take corrective action.

This role helps connect training, inspection, planning, and jobsite authority.



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What Is a Competent Person?

Under OSHA construction standards, a competent person is someone who is capable of identifying existing and predictable hazards in the surroundings or working conditions and who has authorization to take prompt corrective measures to eliminate them.

On a trench site, that means the competent person must be able to recognize excavation hazards and take action before workers are placed in danger.

This role requires both knowledge and authority.

A person is not a competent person for trench safety simply because they have jobsite experience, seniority, or a title.

The competent person must be able to identify hazards and must have the authority to stop work, remove workers from the excavation, correct unsafe conditions, or require additional protective measures when needed.

Discussion Question

Why is authority just as important as knowledge for the competent person?



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OSHA Competent Person Responsibilities

For excavation work, the competent person may be involved in decisions related to:

- Excavation inspections
- Soil classification
- Protective system selection
- Water accumulation
- Access and egress
- Spoil pile placement
- Hazardous atmospheres
- Signs of possible cave-ins
- Indications of protective system failure
- Changing conditions during the shift

The key point is this:

The competent person is not just observing the job.

The competent person must be able to identify hazards and take action.



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Inspection Responsibilities

Inspection is one of the most important competent person responsibilities on a trench site.

Daily inspections should include:

- The excavation
- Adjacent areas
- Protective systems

The inspection should look for conditions that could result in:

- Possible cave-ins
- Failure of protective systems
- Hazardous atmospheres
- Water accumulation
- Loose soil or falling material
- Equipment too close to the trench edge
- Spoil piles placed too close to the excavation
- Missing or improper access and egress
- Damaged trench boxes, spreaders, pins, or shoring components
- Other hazardous conditions

Inspections should take place before workers enter the excavation.

They should also be repeated as needed throughout the shift.

A trench is not automatically safe for the entire day just because it was inspected in the morning.



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Changing Conditions Require New Review

Excavation conditions can change during the day.

The competent person should reassess the trench when conditions change or when a hazard-increasing event occurs.

Examples include:

- Rain
- Water entering the excavation
- Soil cracking or sloughing
- Vibration from traffic or equipment
- Equipment moving closer to the edge
- Changes in trench depth or width
- New spoil piles or materials near the excavation
- Utility conflicts
- Changes to the protective system
- Workers moving to a different area of the trench
- Any sign of trench wall movement or instability

Changing conditions should never be ignored.

If conditions become unsafe, workers should be removed from the excavation until the hazard is corrected.

Discussion Question

What jobsite changes would make you stop and ask for the trench to be reinspected?



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Hazard Identification on a Trench Site

A major part of the competent person's role is hazard identification.

Common trench hazards include:

- Cave-ins
- Unstable soil
- Previously disturbed soil
- Water accumulation
- Spoil piles too close to the edge
- Heavy equipment near the excavation
- Vibration from traffic or machinery
- Falling material
- Utility hazards
- Poor access and egress
- Improper protective system use
- Damaged protective equipment
- Workers outside the protected area

Hazard identification is not a one-time task.

It should happen before work starts, during the shift, and whenever site conditions change.



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Protective System Review

The competent person should review whether the selected protective system is appropriate for the job.

For trench boxes, this may include reviewing:

- Trench depth
- Soil classification
- Water conditions
- Box size and configuration
- Spreader setup
- Manufacturer tabulated data
- Depth ratings
- Visible damage
- Worker position inside the protected area

For shoring systems, the competent person should confirm that the system is suitable for the excavation and installed according to applicable requirements, manufacturer information, or engineered design.

A protective system should not be selected based on convenience alone.

It must fit the excavation.



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Manufacturer Tabulated Data

Manufacturer tabulated data is an important part of trench box and protective system use.

Every trench box Iron Lot sells comes with manufacturer tabulated data that includes depth ratings and a registered professional engineer stamp.

That does not mean every trench box is appropriate for every excavation.

The competent person should review the tabulated data and confirm that the trench box is being used within its limitations.

This includes reviewing the soil conditions, depth, configuration, spreader setup, and any use restrictions.

Tabulated data should be available to the crew and reviewed before workers enter the trench.



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Authority to Take Corrective Action

A competent person must have authority.

That authority matters because trench safety decisions often require immediate action.

Corrective action may include:

- Removing workers from the trench
- Stopping work
- Repositioning spoil piles
- Moving equipment away from the edge
- Providing proper access and egress
- Correcting ladder placement
- Replacing damaged components
- Adjusting or changing the protective system
- Reinspecting after conditions change
- Getting additional engineering or manufacturer guidance when needed

A competent person who can identify hazards but cannot take action is missing a critical part of the role.

Discussion Question

What should happen if the competent person identifies an unsafe trench condition?



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Common Mistakes to Avoid

Even when a competent person is assigned, problems can occur if the role is not taken seriously.

Common mistakes include:

- Treating the competent person role as just a title
- Failing to inspect before workers enter
- Not reinspecting after rain or changing conditions
- Ignoring water accumulation
- Assuming one trench box works for every job
- Not reviewing manufacturer tabulated data
- Allowing workers outside the protected area
- Letting spoil piles remain too close to the trench edge
- Allowing equipment to operate too close to the excavation
- Failing to remove workers when unsafe conditions exist

The competent person must be active, observant, and willing to take corrective action.

Questions Crews Should Ask

Before workers enter an excavation, crews should be able to answer:

- Who is the competent person on this job?
- Has the excavation been inspected today?
- Have conditions changed since the inspection?
- What soil conditions are present?
- What protective system is being used?
- Has the manufacturer tabulated data been reviewed?



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- Are workers staying inside the protected area?
- Is safe access and egress provided?
- Are spoil piles and equipment kept back from the edge?
- What conditions would require us to stop work?

These questions help turn trench safety from a checklist into a jobsite habit.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ The competent person must be able to identify existing and predictable hazards
 - ✓ The competent person must have authority to take corrective action
 - ✓ Excavations, adjacent areas, and protective systems must be inspected
 - ✓ Inspections should happen before work and as needed during the shift
 - ✓ Changing conditions require new review
 - ✓ Protective systems must match the excavation conditions
 - ✓ Manufacturer tabulated data must be reviewed and followed
 - ✓ Workers should be removed from unsafe excavations
 - ✓ Trench safety depends on daily attention, not assumptions
 - ✓ No worker should enter an unsafe or improperly protected trench
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Knowledge Check

1. True or False:

A competent person only needs jobsite experience. They do not need authority to take corrective action. True False

2. What are three areas that should be inspected by the competent person?

3. Name two changing conditions that may require the trench to be reinspected.

4. True or False:

If unsafe conditions are found, workers should be removed from the hazardous area until necessary precautions are taken. True False

5. Name one protective system item the competent person should review.

6. Who has authority to identify hazards and take corrective action on a trench site?



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Employee Acknowledgement

I have participated in this trench safety training session and understand the topics discussed.

Employee Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Instructor Verification

Instructor Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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Week 3 – TRENCH BOXES AND SHORING