Apprentice Fatally Burned In Flash Fire

A flash fire killed an electrician’s apprentice when he touched a switch he thought was de-energized.

The mishap occurred at a transformer station. The apprentice was part of a team doing modifications on equipment at the station. Certain lines at the worksite had been de-energized and tagged before this crew arrived. The team, including the foreman, understood that all electrical equipment in the station had been de-energized and all areas of the station were safe. In fact, certain untagged lines were not de-energized.

The victim left the assigned work area and went aloft on a catwalk. When he attempted to measure a switch, his metal tape measure came into contact with an energized part. A flash occurred, and he fell about 25 feet to the ground. He suffered serious burns to 50 percent of his body, including inhalation burns to his respiratory area. He also received non-fatal internal injuries as a result of the fall. He was taken to hospital, but died of infection because of the burns.

Poor communication and lack of training appear to have been major contributing factors in this incident. The crew was told prior to the fatality that a state of “total station outage” existed. They thought that meant the entire station was safe. Instead, it meant “no electricity out” but there was backfeed in the untagged areas of the transformer station. The crew was supposed to be working only in a certain area of the plant, but thought the whole station was “dead.”

If lockout and tagout procedures are used in your work area, make sure you understand them fully. Ask questions if you do not understand something, or have doubts about the safety of a given task. In this case, the foreman should have been informed of the situation.