

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

by: Orlando Castelblanco

It's early in the morning and the crew rolls up to the jobsite with coffee in hand, ready to work. The plan? It's pretty much the same as yesterday. Same trench box. Same approach. Same confidence. It worked yesterday, so why not?

The problem with this scenario is that the ground really doesn't remember yesterday.

Overnight rain, shifting conditions, nearby traffic vibrations, or a change in excavation depth can turn a "routine" setup into a serious hazard. **Assumptions are where the risks begin.**



That's the lesson: **one size does not fit all.**

In construction, experience is valuable—but it can also become a blind spot. We hear "This is the box we always use." or "It'll be fine. It worked before." That default mindset is common, not because the crew doesn't care, but because familiarity can create comfort, and comfort can lead to complacency. The job still has to be evaluated based on today's conditions, not yesterday's results.

Bottom line: comfort does not equal safe.



It is important that one understands that not all trenches are the same. This is a given, right? This is Trench 101. You may have trenches that look identical on the surface, yet as you dig down, the variables can completely change the risk profile. With that said, there are some factors we need to really understand:

- Soil conditions are not static. What was stable yesterday can become unstable today. Soil classification and proper inspection by the Competent Person are vital. **Reassess; don't assume.**

- Understanding the depth and geometry of your excavation plays a huge part in stability and the protection of your crews and project.
- Traffic, nearby working equipment, and even the placement of spoil piles can add pressure to trench walls. These are loads that bring weight down on trench walls. Make sure that all spoil piles are at least two (2) feet away from the edge of the excavation. This is important and not just a guideline, but a measure of control.
- Understanding your water table and water conditions is another key part of soil classification. Rainwater, groundwater, and saturation reduce soil strength, sometimes drastically. **Water changes everything.**
- The human factor is what ties it all together. Crew experience, communication, and awareness can make or break a safe operation. A strong and engaged team is critical even more so than any piece of equipment. Training, communication, and situational awareness are critical for any crew to understand a job.

Equipment isn't universal either. **Not every trench can or should be protected the same way.**



Choosing the right protective system is critical for any excavation. Do you need a steel trench box, hydraulic shores, or an engineered system? The answer starts with understanding your soil conditions and proper soil classification.

You also need to understand your equipment and its limitations. For example, if you're working in an 8-foot trench with a backhoe on site, a steel trench box may not be the most practical or safest option. In that case, an aluminum modular system might be a better fit.

There are multiple factors to consider, and the right decision comes down to matching the system to the conditions and not defaulting to what's familiar. Each type of protective system has its place and limitations. **Using the wrong system isn't just inefficient. It can be dangerous.**



The Competent Person (CP) role is a huge part of any project's safety practices. This is where leadership shows up. This is not just a title; it requires awareness, decision-making, and the authority to act. The CP is trained, certified, and designated by the employer to keep the jobsite safe. That means evaluating soil conditions, inspecting trenches, identifying and resolving (or isolating) hazards, and adjusting the plan when conditions change (for example, after weather impacts).

The reality is that if conditions change, plans must change as well. If there is any hesitation, uncertainty, or something that simply feels off, **THE JOB PAUSES.**



The most effective crews don't just follow procedures. They understand why those procedures exist. They pay attention and communicate. More importantly, they adjust.

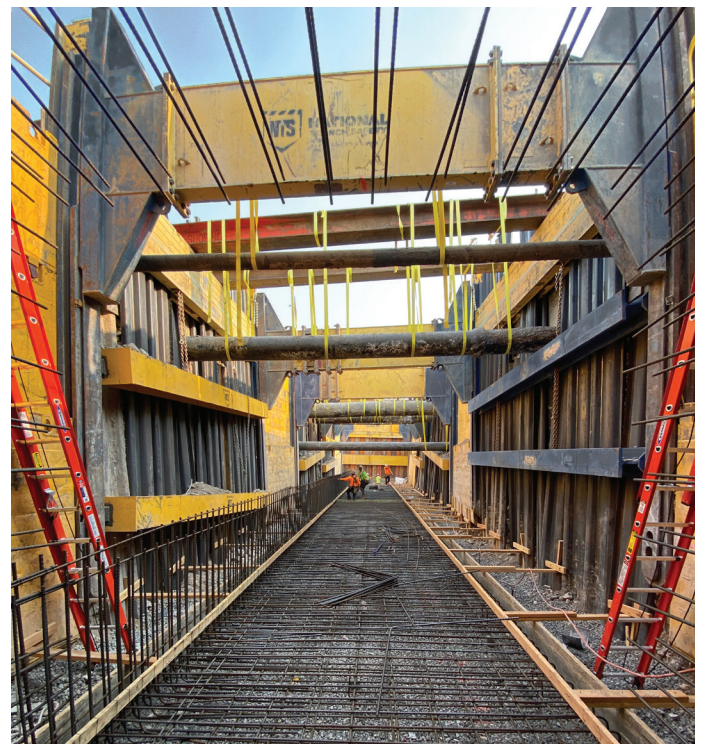
At the end of the day, the ground doesn't care about what worked yesterday.

Remember that there is no such thing as a standard trench. Every excavation has its own conditions, risks, and story. Pay attention, and when it comes to safety, the safest plan is the one built for today, not the one reused from yesterday.

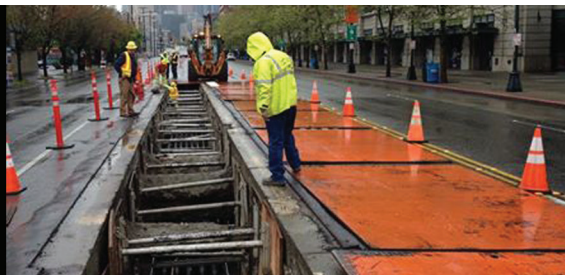
Looking back, there are lessons and takeaways that we can learn from the field. For starters, remember to slow it down and reassess.

- Never assume yesterday's plan works today.
- Reevaluate soil conditions daily.
- Keep spoil piles at least two (2) feet from the edge.
- Ensure safe access/egress within 25 feet.
- Bring in engineering support when conditions change.
- Ask your crew one simple question: "What is different today?" This question alone can prevent problems before they even start.

It's important to keep in mind that all of this is a **MINDSET** and not a checklist. Safety is not a box that you just check off and move on from. It is all about being aware, adapting to change, and holding each other accountable. This is **CULTURE**.



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