

# Utility Arborist Newsline

MAY/JUN 2016  
VOLUME 7  
NUMBER 3

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## Field-Inspired Use of Technology for Better Safety

By Kristin Wild, Asplundh Tree Expert Co.

Clear communication is crucial for safe operations, especially with the potential hazards in utility vegetation management (UVM). Our people in the field understand this and some of them are using wireless and smartphone technology to improve communication and crew safety.

### Wireless Headset System

Most of you are probably familiar with the importance of three-way communication while working on a tree. Here's an



## FOCUS ON SAFETY

example: first, the climber or bucket operator aloft calls out “stand clear” or “headache” before cutting a limb, then the crew on the ground acknowledges the warning by saying “all clear” once they are out of the drop zone, and finally, the worker aloft confirms the drop zone is clear with “okay” or “roger” before making the final cut. Comprehension becomes much harder when working 70-100 feet up!

Asplundh has a number of 100-foot aerial lifts working in various parts of the north-eastern and western United States where towering trees near power lines is not uncommon. Last year, Vice President Larry Gauger in southeastern Pennsylvania was out with one of his 100-foot lift crews and talked with the foreperson, who mentioned how hard it was to communicate with a co-worker up in the bucket at maximum reach. The whistles that are part of his region's personal protective equipment (PPE) were not up to the job, hand signals were hard to see at that distance, and radios only transmit one way at a time. The only solution seemed to be yelling and operating very slowly, making the work more stressful and not very safe or productive. Nearby property owners probably didn't appreciate all the yelling either!

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In researching for a safer, more efficient solution, Gauger came across a hands-free, battery-powered wireless communication system. They come with four headsets designed to fit under hard hats and can be programmed in a variety of ways to improve crew communication. The headset's ear muffs block almost all external noise and the adjustable microphone produces clear sound quality between the crew members on the ground and the bucket operators. The headsets can be programmed so up to four people can be conferenced, or two pairs can communicate separately, which is handy for the flaggers on the crew. There are five volume settings for each headset and a mute button, which can reduce the sound of the chainsaw in the other headsets when necessary. The effective range is over 300 yards from the wireless Com-Center, although large obstacles can affect sound quality, so placing it in an open area is important.

While it takes some adjustment, the crews who have used the wireless communication system are able to maintain a much safer work environment with increased productivity—and they go home at the end of the day with less stress and more voice!



### Using QR Codes to Link to Safety Videos

A little over a year ago, the Asplundh Safety Operations Group started to incorporate quick response (QR) codes in employee safety letters and training materials, providing an easy way to link employees who own smartphones to information on websites such as OSHA or the National Safety Council. If you're not familiar with QR codes, they are those little black and white bit-mapped squares you see on ads and packaging primarily. By downloading a free QR code reader application (app) to your smartphone, you can open the app, point your phone at the QR code, and immediately be taken to a webpage or online video.

Asplundh regional safety superintendent Paul Snethen in Kansas decided to take the QR code a little further last summer. He wanted to reach out and engage our tech-hungry employees with important safety information that had a homegrown, one-on-one feel. With the help of some of his co-workers and a QR code generator app, he made a few simple videos with a smartphone and uploaded them to a shared video website. For example, one of the videos demonstrated how to inspect the speed reducer mounting bolts on a side-trimmer machine—a safety issue that is not easy to explain with just words.



Since Snethen prints and distributes a monthly safety calendar for the region, he simply added the QR codes to the calendar, which links users to the videos. The GFs and forepersons in the field show the calendar to the crews for daily safety briefings. Nearly all crew members whip out their smartphones and start watching the videos. The tricky part is making sure they put their phones away or they can become a distraction on the job.

Overall, the crews love the QR codes and some employees are getting into the act by suggesting or making their own videos for him to review and consider for publication in the calendar. Snethen's manager, Ed Bradshaw, has supported him along the way and at the beginning of the year he even got on camera to deliver a safety message to all the employees in his region.

Using a variety of means of communication is a great way to improve training and build a stronger, more engaged safety culture.

