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Engineers' clothes set alight by fireball

19 July 2011



Two engineers were set on fire by an electrical explosion as they tried to seal off a faulty fuse box at a factory in Cumbria.

Carlisle Crown Court heard that, on 12 September 2006, a small electrical fire in a fuse box at global package firm Innovia Films Ltd's factory in Wigton. Workers put out the flames with a fire extinguisher and then re-routed the power supply so that the cooling equipment, which is used to maintain product

quality, could continue to operate.

The following day, engineer Gordon Metcalf, 62, and an apprentice, who does not wish to be named, were asked to plate over the fuse box to prevent it from being accessed until it had been properly inspected. They were removing debris from the box when a fireball shot out of the circuit board, setting their clothes on fire. They ran into an adjacent room where colleagues used a fire hose to put out the flames.

Mr Metcalf suffered burns to 47 per cent of his body in the explosion. He was in a coma for four weeks and remained in hospital for five months. He is still undergoing treatment for his burns and will never be able to return to work. The apprentice suffered 42-per-cent burns to his hands, arms, and torso, and spent nine weeks in hospital.

The HSE's investigation found that the firm failed to carry out a suitable risk assessment and failed to isolate the power supply to the fuse box before the men started work.

HSE Principal Inspector Mark Dawson told SHP that the factory should have been shut down to identify and rectify the fault. He said: "Two workers have suffered devastating injuries that will impact on them for the rest of their lives. Mr Metcalf has faced a long painful recovery and still requires treatment.

"It was an astonishing decision to allow work to go ahead without the live electricity supply being switched off, and even went against the company's own work procedures.

"If the factory had been shut down for just a day and a half then neither of the workers would have suffered severe burns."

Innovia Films appeared in court on 18 July and pleaded guilty to breaching s2(1) of the HSWA 1974 and was fined £90,000. It was also ordered to pay £26,790 towards costs.

In mitigation, the firm said it had taken immediate action, in the wake of the incident, to review its risk assessment and operating procedures. It now ensures that all engineering work is properly planned before a permit-to-work is issued. It had no previous convictions and told the court that it had a good safety record.

A spokesperson for the company said: "We are, of course, extremely sorry for the suffering caused to our two injured colleagues, and are pleased that we were able to deal with this matter in a way that saved them from having to give evidence and relive the events of nearly five years ago.

"Innovia Films remains absolutely committed to health and safety. We have worked hard to further improve our safety system to ensure that such an accident does not occur again in the future and that work will continue."

Following the hearing, Mr Metcalf said: "I still cry at the drop of a hat. If someone asks what's happened to me, that's the hardest bit. I wake up in the middle of the night and just can't get back to sleep once I start thinking about it.

"There's no way I can return to as an electrician, as I struggle to grip with my hands. I'm also

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constantly short of breath and my skin flakes off if I knock my hand. I just wish Innovia had cut the electricity supply before asking us to do the work."



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