Think heavy construction equipment and cargo would be tough to steal? Think again... it happens every day, and in plain sight.

Remember when David Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear in front of a live audience? How could he have possibly made such a huge statue disappear, with thousands of people watching?

*Spoiler alert:* He didn’t move the statue...he moved the audience.

Copperfield’s audience, along with the pillars between which the statue could be viewed, stood on a rotating platform. The pillars were draped so that the statue was not visible during the process. The movement was slow, and occurred after dark in an area without visual landmarks. The draped pillars remained in front of the audience, but were slowly shifted so that the statue of liberty was no longer visible between them. Throw in a duplicate set of lights and some showmanship, and the statue “disappears”. After the unveiling, the pillars were draped again and the process reversed to “restore” the Statue of Liberty.

Just like with Copperfield’s illusion, a gigantic backhoe can disappear right off the jobsite, in a matter of minutes, right in front of the crew.

Scott Cornell from Travelers Inland Marine division visited Lovitt & Touché on Wednesday, and shared his knowledge of how to prevent the theft of heavy equipment.
According to Scott, over 200 pieces of construction equipment are stolen every week in the United States. This equals over $1 billion per year. And that’s just the cost of the equipment. It does not include missed or delayed deadlines, decreased productivity, or alternate vehicle rental or purchase cost.

Unfortunately, recovery of the equipment is extremely low, at best around 20% – 30%. Most law enforcement agencies do not have a department that focuses on construction equipment theft, so it is not a huge focus for them.

A magician never reveals his secrets- but thieves do!

According to Scott, most heavy equipment thefts occur in the evening within one hour of the workday. They are often conducted in plain sight, out in the open in front of everyone.

Toward the end of the day, the workers are packing up and leaving, and you may see a few workers left on the site, loading up equipment. The guys loading up that backhoe may even have some paperwork explaining why they are taking it. This is why communication among the site workers is key. If something seems suspicious, and you haven’t heard anything about that piece of equipment leaving the site, you better do some digging (no pun intended). Falsified papers are easy to manufacture, and look legit.

Have you ever seen a parking lot at Home Depot or Wal-Mart, full of trailers? Then you’ll see a tractor backing up to hook up one of those trailers. You assume that if someone has a tractor, then that means the trailer belongs to him. Not necessarily. Just because someone looks the part, doesn’t mean he owns the equipment or cargo. This is how a good portion of cargo theft happens.

A good thing to remember is that most thieves will not attempt a theft if it cannot be done within 10 to 20 minutes. The key is to make it difficult for them to steal your property with layers of security. Scott equated this to that classic movie scene with the bad guy running down the alley from the cops, knocking down garbage cans and throwing obstacles in the path behind him to slow down the officers. Jobsites need to do the same thing with their security. If it becomes inconvenient for the thief and they really have to work, they will most likely go somewhere else where it is easier to get what they want.

Scott also mentioned that these days, the thieves already have a buyer identified before the theft, especially in the Southwest. Law enforcement have done random traffic stops and have found lists of equipment that the thief is out searching for. They are being asked to find specific pieces of equipment for these buyers.
Heavy equipment pieces that are stolen the most are backhoes and skid steers, and top 3 most popular brands for theft are John Deere, Kubota and Caterpillar. Here are the top ten states for equipment theft:

1. Texas
2. North Carolina
3. Florida
4. California
5. South Carolina
6. Georgia
7. Tennessee
8. Oklahoma
9. Alabama
10. Missouri

Scott noted that these statistics may be skewed because all top 10 states have a very long construction season. These states have the largest number of thefts because that’s where the most equipment is lying around. It’s in these areas that organized theft rings are likely to develop. Also, remember that these are voluntarily reported incidents. If a state does not do a good job with their reporting, they will obviously not be included. Just because the state is not in the top ten, doesn’t mean there isn’t a problem…such as in Arizona.

69% of equipment and cargo is stolen from the jobsite (as opposed to the yard, homes or other areas). 3% of equipment stolen is considered “in transit”, but that number is going up due to falsified paperwork and jobsite pickups (called a “fictitious pick-up”). Inside theft (thefts committed by someone who is working on the job) account for 60% of equipment theft.

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