

Build the Job to Tolerate a Mistake

Todd Jerome Jenkins | v1.0 | Reviewed October 9, 2026 | Discussion + field checks

Why this matters

A missed cue or wrong selection can reveal a weakness in the work's protection. Use one plausible slip to ask what prevents harm. Seek an approved improvement that reduces dependence on perfect attention while preserving every required control.

Objective: Trace a plausible slip to its possible exposure and identify evidence that an approved control interrupts that path.

Key hazards or failure points

A harmful outcome prevented only by memory; one confusing selection reaching dangerous equipment; assumed safeguards; a control bypassed for convenience; an improvement that creates another hazard; unsafe demonstrations.

Practical controls

- Select a consequential step and describe one plausible slip, such as choosing a similar item or missing a cue. Discuss the work conditions that make it possible without judging a person.
- Ask how the exposure could be removed or reduced through approved task or equipment design. Identify existing protection and where technical help is needed. More reminders alone may leave the same vulnerability.
- Obtain the required review. Define the control's function, governing criteria and owner. Keep current safeguards and work restrictions effective until the approved replacement is verified.

Verify It in the Field

On paper, trace the slip, possible exposure and protective control. Ask whether that control also depends on the same missed action. Record the assumption that needs checking; a diagram or discussion is not a functional test. Have the designated person compare the control with its design, manufacturer instructions or governing source. Complete only the prescribed safe inspection or test. Record criterion, method, actual result and time. Never introduce a fault or bypass protection to see what happens.

Review the approved arrangement with affected workers from a safe position. Confirm it can be used during the relevant task stages and has not introduced another exposure. Record remaining restrictions and recheck triggers; complete all other required task checks before release.

Stop and reassess

Hold affected work when a required safeguard is absent, failed or unverified, or the proposed method depends on an unauthorized workaround. Protect people and seek the appropriate technical decision. Do not create a mistake deliberately on live equipment. Resume through the required correction, verification and authorization process.

Ask the crew

1. Which plausible slip could expose someone here?
2. What protects people if that slip occurs?
3. What evidence establishes that protection without creating exposure?

Use the task plan and required specialist decisions before exposure.

Sources: DOE-HDBK-1028-2009, Vol. 1, pp. 1-19–1-20; HSE Managing Human Failures; NIOSH Hierarchy of Controls.

Free next step: [JHA/JSA planning & field-verification worksheet](#)

Expanded guidance and separate forms: toddjeromejenkins.com/toolbox-talks/error-tolerant-work-design-toolbox-talk

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