What defines a trench from an excavation? What are some of the hazards associated with digging excavations and trenches? When does a trench or excavation become a confined space?

An excavation is defined as any dug-out area of ground other than a trench, tunnel or excavated shaft as a result of removing material. A trench is an elongated dug-out area of land in which its depth exceeds its width. Trenches can be extremely dangerous with significant hazards that must be controlled in order to perform work safely.

Proper planning is important when a ground breaking operation is going to take place. Many hazards can be eliminated or mitigated properly when identified in the planning stage of digging operations. Common hazards associated with this work include location of site and trenches. When does a trench or excavation become a confined space?

Proper housekeeping is very important due to the narrow confines of the trench. Ensure no debris or materials block exit points in case of an emergency.

Will your trench or excavation be considered a confined space?

A confined space is defined as an enclosed or partially enclosed space that is not primarily designed or intended for human occupancy, except for the purpose of performing work, and has restricted means of entrance and exit. A trench is considered a confined space when it is deeper than 1.2 metres because it has limited access and egress, and is not designed for continuous human occupancy. As a result, safety precautions that apply to confined space entry such as air monitoring and ventilation apply to trenching operations. Also, when a worker is working in or around a trench greater than 1.2 metres, the employer must ensure that protection measures against cave-ins or sliding material are installed and a competent employee acting as a safety monitor must be used.