Behavioural change

the last bastion of lift truck safety?

The lift truck is the single most dangerous vehicle in the workplace. Last year 43 Europeans were killed at work in accidents involving lift trucks and forklifts account for up to 30 per cent of total vehicle related accidents every year.

by Sue Tupling

Whilst developments in product safety and increased focus on health and safety management has undoubtedly contributed to the 15-year decline in non-fatal accidents, businesses can still save a considerable amount of money and pain by considering how to modify driver behaviour.

The cost to business from forklift related accidents is enormous; in terms of damage to goods and buildings, lost time and productivity and legal costs. But the human cost is even greater, every year thousands of lives are shattered through major injuries sustained in the use of forklifts and, worryingly, across Europe older workers are nearly three times more likely to have a fatal accident.

Hidden costs

Ensuring the health and safety compliance of your materials handling operation is required by law and as an employer, health and safety is your personal responsibility. Lift truck manufacturers, such as Cat Lift Trucks, have thoroughly addressed equipment safety, but failing to consider the wider responsibilities of managing a fleet safely can put both your business and your reputation at risk.

A reputation of non-compliance, particularly if coupled with prosecution, can mean that your insurance premium goes up, employee morale goes down and good people won't want to work for you.

According to Ken Stoll, EH&S Manager at UK Cat Lift Trucks dealer, Briggs Equipment: "Lift truck safety is about identifying hazards, as well as evaluating and minimising risks which, when done correctly, will add value to your businesses and can even provide you with a competitive edge.

The Law

Several pieces of legislation apply when it comes to the use of a forklift truck:

- Article 137 of the EU Treaty
- Machinery Directive 2006/42/EC
- European Norm EN 1726.1 Industrial trucks
- The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (UK)
- The Provision and Use of Workplace Equipment Regulations (PUWER 1998)
- The Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations (LOLER 1998)
- OSHAS 18001: 2007 (is an internationally recognised occupational health and safety management system standard)

"The machine/pedestrian interface is the most obvious hazard and must be evaluated for risks and necessary precautions taken. There is a lot of stored energy in heavy vehicles," said Stoll.

"The maths is very simple: if a 5 tonne lift truck hits you at just six miles per hour it would have the same impact energy as a light car hitting you at 30 miles an hour."

Accidents - kinds and causes

The causes of lift truck accidents vary but, in a nine year accident investigation study across a fleet of 14,000 trucks in the UK, it was found that the main causes of fork truck accidents can be categorised into four broad areas:

1. Untrained operatives - accounting for between 10 and 15% of all accidents
2. Unsafe working practices – the biggest contributor to forklift accidents (40%)
3. Poor site management – 10% of accidents result from this
4. Interaction with third parties on site.

The two areas for concern - untrained operatives and unsafe working practices - both involve driver behaviour.

Untrained operators usually fall into either the 'experienced but not competent' category - i.e. those who either have acquired the role through years of experience with no formal training - or temporary/agency staff.

Unsafe working practices continue to occur and are the biggest contributor to lift truck accidents. Examples of the most common unsafe working practices include:

- **disconnecting seat safety switches**
- **disconnecting reversing bleepers**
- **parking on gradients without chocking wheels**.

But the list is endless, and most examples of unsafe working practice arise as a result of taking short-cuts. Increasing numbers of workers report not having enough time to get their jobs done and there is a link between the high level accident months and peak seasonal (i.e. pre-Christmas) periods. Peak production and tight deadlines place pressure on forklift operatives and the temptation exists to take short-cuts to try and meet management demands.

Competences of safe drivers

Given that the driver accounts for as much as 44 per cent of the cost of lift truck operation, and considering that the statistics show us that it is operator factors (i.e. increasing agency/ temp workers, ageing population) that are increasingly cause for concern; changing driver behaviour offers the greatest opportunity for preventing accidents happening.

Lift truck operators need sufficient training to be competent to do their jobs and customers are increasingly asking to see hard evidence of an organisation's competences from H&S incident rates to driver training. So not only is driver competency required by law, it makes good business sense when it is a factor in winning or keeping new business.

But competence extends beyond basic training. As Europe's lift truck workforce is ageing, and we are employing increasing numbers of migrant and part-time workers, forklift competency and safety should be a process of lifelong learning for all workers. Typically temporary or part-time workers have less access to training and are also less informed about the risks of their jobs. So not only do risk assessments need to evolve on a dynamic basis but specific job training should be continually updated to keep abreast of changes in work.

Peer pressure for change?

The fact is that most lift truck accidents are avoidable simply through changing driver behaviour. But this is not just the responsibility of management. Every employee has a duty by law to keep himself and others safe by understanding the risks involved in operating forklifts. So perhaps a little peer pressure will go a long way to ensure forklift operators use their common sense and become accountable for their own behaviour every day.■

Article feedback is welcome: ***Editor@eurekapub.eu***

Forklift training checklist

Forklift training must encompass the following four areas:

- Basic training - passing the test specific to the type of truck being driven.
- Specific job training - defined as knowledge of the workplace and any special handling attachments, this should be regular and continuously updated to keep up with the changing workplace.
- Familiarisation training – for new equipment or new developments - which can be done "on the job" under close supervision.
- Refresher training to ensure that the licence to drive the forklift is kept up to date and that unsafe working practices (i.e. bad habits or 'learned incompetence') are addressed.

Safe truck - How lift truck technology is being used to reinforce behaviour change

Despite companies having training and compliance systems in place, forklift incidents are still all too common. Most of these could be avoided with changes in driver behaviour. The truck manufacturers have introduced on-truck safety innovations which help to modify behaviour, for example: speed limiters; safety seat switches. Recently fleet control/telemetry systems have been developed which directly influences driver behaviour. One example is Briggs Equipment's Speedshield system. This encourages best practice by enforcing a tailored, HSE checklist on start up. It also measures wheel rotation speed, for wheel spinning or speeding, authorised operator access, impact detection and a suite of shut-down options. Speedshield reports, by exception, directly back to the line manager when the drivers' behaviour patterns become erratic or questionable. In this way, driver performance can be measured and monitored at all times, providing information to the manager so that correct behaviour can be recognised and rewarded and poor behaviour managed.