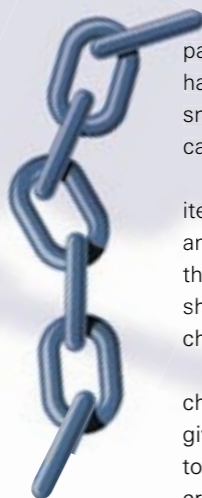




# The strongest link

Have you ever stopped to think how important the humble lift truck really is to your business and to the supply chains you are involved in?

*Robin Meczes* highlights the critical role the modern forklift truck really plays.



What do tinned vegetables, flat pack furniture and garden compost all have in common? Or, for that matter, small car parts, bottles of shampoo and cartons of milk?

They are, of course, all common, everyday items and most people would struggle to find any further connection beyond that. But all these products – and many others besides – do share another trait: at some stage in the supply chain, they all get handled by a lift truck.

The lift truck's role in the modern supply chain is nothing less than pivotal, in fact, and given how important the supply chain is in turn to modern society, that makes the lift truck a critical component in the machine of modern life – whether most people realise it or not.

## Unrivalled versatility

Looking at the supply chain, the importance of the lift truck can hardly be overstated. Whether you look at the production process, the storage of goods or their delivery further down the chain, the role of the lift truck is absolutely central to everything that goes on in logistics.

One of the reasons for this, of course, is the lift truck's amazing versatility. It is much quicker, for one thing, to list the products that cannot be handled by lift truck than to list those that can, because just about anything that can be palletised or put into some other form of unit load can be handled by a lift truck. This doesn't just mean solid, regularly shaped items, either – even powders and liquids can be handled by forklifts in the right package. And even items that cannot be made into regular unit loads – for example by virtue of their size and shape – can often still be handled by lift truck using one of a huge variety of special attachments (for more on this subject, see **eureka** issue 6 at [www.eurekapub.eu](http://www.eurekapub.eu)).

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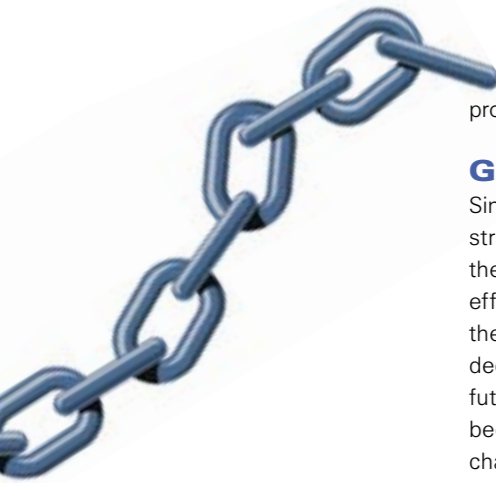
The lift truck also offers unparalleled flexibility in that, in its various forms, it can be driven almost anywhere: indoors or outside, on rough surfaces or smooth, and in wet or dry conditions. Models that have fully enclosed cabs and the right heating and ventilation systems allow the lift truck to be used in a wide range of temperatures, too, from the coldest of cold stores to the searing heat of a southern

European summer. Different sizes and shapes of lift truck, meanwhile, can also handle an amazing range of weights, from the simple pedestrian pallet truck that is used to move a few hundred kilogrammes through to large forklifts that can happily handle 18 tonnes or more.

At the same time, major advances made in lift truck ergonomics in recent years combined with the modern truck's very high levels of mechanical reliability mean that today's lift trucks are more comfortable and can be used for longer

*1. The robustness of modern trucks means they are well suited to all kinds of tasks and can handle the hardest of applications.*





than ever before, raising throughput and productivity to previously unheard-of levels.

### Growing dominance

Since its humble beginnings as a straightforward mechanical lifting device, the forklift truck has been at the forefront of efficient materials handling. Its dominance in the materials handling arena has grown every decade and looks set to continue far into the future, too, as lift trucks evolve and adapt to become even more pivotal within the supply chains of tomorrow.

**“When you take things to their logical conclusion, it’s fair to say that the lift truck isn’t just helping to deliver the goods – it’s more a case of delivering the whole economy.”**

Lift trucks’ increasing robustness, reliability and capability are, of course, one key reason for this trend – lift truck manufacturers continue to refine their products, making them stronger and more capable with every passing year. Key truck performance attributes such as maximum lift height, lift speed, acceleration and braking have been continuously improved with each new model and the trend shows no signs of stopping. Safety levels, too, have been massively improved across the years.

The advent of ever more sophisticated information technology systems has also played an important role. Already, lift trucks can do so much more than mere lifting, from weighing the goods they handle to advising fleet managers when they need servicing or repair and from automatically adjusting their own steering sensitivity on corners to recharging their onboard batteries with

### Driving the business

Just as supply chains can’t function without lift trucks, lift trucks can’t function without drivers.

Anyone that watches a professional lift truck driver for any length of time has to admire the skill, precision and efficiency they bring to their work. An experienced lift truck driver going about his daily business – picking up, moving and depositing load after load while avoiding what may be dozens of other vehicles and pedestrians as well as avoiding damage to goods and racking – is an impressive sight indeed.

Despite the driving skills that many drivers embody, however, lift truck operators are, often at least, somewhat undervalued. It’s a shame, because the efficiency and profitability of many businesses can be directly affected by the drivers they employ.

A good driver might be twice as productive as a bad one. They will also contribute to lower truck operating costs by treating the firm’s asset kindly and ensuring, via daily safety checks, that any problems are dealt with before they become much bigger. And the lift truck driver can also make a big difference to levels of product damage, which can in turn affect the levels of returned goods and thus a company’s overall profitability.

The lift truck driver may not be the single most important person in the average supply chain, perhaps (that’s you, after all, right?) but drivers are, beyond doubt, as important to the process as the lift trucks they are entrusted with. Because it’s not just the trucks they’re driving – it’s also the future welfare and profitability of the company.



### Proving the point at Polyflor

One good example that proves the flexibility and versatility of modern lift trucks is Polyflor, a leading UK supplier of commercial flooring.

Following a recent review of handling operations at its main site in Radcliffe, near Manchester, the firm invited six lift truck suppliers including Cat Lift Trucks’ exclusive UK distributor, Briggs Equipment, to bid for a contract to supply a new fleet of trucks to work in a variety of areas on its site.

Briggs won the contract and duly supplied a 35-strong fleet that includes 2.5 tonne LPG counterbalanced trucks, three-wheel electric counterbalanced trucks and a

number of platform power pallet trucks, as well as both 2.5 tonne and 3.0 tonne diesel counterbalanced trucks.

The new fleet is key to Polyflor’s operations, working in both the production and warehouse areas of the site and with some trucks working 24 hours a day moving rolls of flooring that weigh as much as 1,700kg. The work also involves some long shuttle runs outdoors, including steep inclines and uneven surfaces.

As well as supporting the production area, the new lift trucks also help Polyflor handle 66,000 tonnes of vinyl flooring across 10,000 pallet locations in its warehouse.

The electric counterbalanced trucks have all been fitted with special rotator attachments to handle the 2m long rolls of vinyl. The power pallet trucks have also been modified to help them deal with Polyflor’s heavy duty handling requirements.

Polyflor’s drivers were heavily involved in the decision to opt for the Cat® trucks and their preference was backed up by a cost analysis undertaken by Chris Jenkinson, Polyflor’s head of procurement. “We focused on the lifetime cost of the machines,” he says. “Rather than looking for the cheapest product, we focused on brand and quality.”

2. The lift truck is central to most warehousing operations and also has a starring role in many production environments, too.  
3. Chris Jenkinson (right), head of procurement at Polyflor and Briggs Equipment account manager, Tony Worrall, in front of some of the 35-strong Cat Lift Trucks fleet supplied recently to Polyflor’s Radcliffe site.  
4. When it comes to loading and unloading goods vehicles, there isn’t much that can match the versatility of the modern forklift.



regenerative braking and lowering.

Hardly surprising, perhaps, that the lift truck has such a central role in the supply chain, being by far the most common means of unloading inbound goods, helping to feed production lines with the raw materials they need, taking finished or part-finished items between the production line and the warehouse, loading finished items into goods vehicles or into containers for onward delivery and, in some cases at least, even being taken along with the delivery vehicle for unloading at the other end.

Only the heavy goods vehicle itself, in fact, has anything like such a pivotal role in modern supply chains. Importantly, however, the heavy goods vehicle is also hugely reliant on the lift truck for loading and unloading operations and without the lift truck, therefore, the goods vehicle has little real intrinsic value.

Put all this together and it is little wonder that supply chains running without any form of lift truck in them at any stage are, frankly, unthinkable. Because when you take things to their logical conclusion, it’s fair to say that the lift truck isn’t just helping to deliver the goods – it’s more a case of delivering the whole economy. ■

