Lifting Dock Safety Standards

Joe Manone, Vice President, Rite-Hite Corporation

Nearly 100 workers are killed each year in the United States as a result of forklift-related incidents. The situation calls for clear communication to the right person, at the right time, and at exactly the right location — especially at the loading dock where forklifts and pedestrians are often on a collision course. Forklift drivers also need to be aware of what's happening at all times during the fast-paced semi trailer loading and unloading process.

Fortunately, communication-related technologies and best practices have evolved to reduce the risks of forklift-pedestrian collisions and other catastrophic accidents at the loading dock. Now is the time to understand the issues involved and what can be done at the dock to improve communication and increase safety for forklift operators and pedestrians.

Traveling Forklifts Around Pedestrians Forklifts traveling when people are nearby creates an inherently dangerous situation. Yet progress has been made to address forklift-pedestrian accidents.

On the employer's side of the issue, many companies have refined their safety polices and procedures concerning forklifts. The call is also out for more forklift-operator training as more become aware of the facts. In 2006, the Occupational Health & Safety Administration (OSHA) issued 3,080 forklift violations. The most were issued for inadequate operator training. According to the National Institute for Occupational Health & Safety, the second most common cause of forklift-related fatalities is when a forklift strikes a worker on foot.

Recognizing the seriousness of the issue, OSHA and the Industrial Truck Association formed an alliance in 2004 to promote the safe operation of powered industrial trucks, including forklifts. More emphasis on training is also driven by the fact that employers establish the rules of the road for forklifts, needing only to follow OSHA guidelines.

Challenges At The Dock One of the most difficult places to operate a forklift is the shipping/receiving/staging area of a loading dock. When combined with the fast-paced nature of most docks, the need to ensure forklift operator and pedestrian safety takes on added importance.

The challenges for forklift operators at the dock range from maneuvering in tight confines to negotiating frequently slippery surfaces. Loading and unloading trailers makes the job even more challenging, especially when multiple forklifts are used

simultaneously to service the same trailer. Servicing trailers also requires skill and close concentration. An extra level of focus is essential when production and shipping deadlines dictate a faster-than-normal pace.

For forklift operators, the bottom line is to use caution at all times. From a pedestrian's perspective, the safest course of action is to watch for forklifts. Other forklift drivers who enter the dock staging area when forklifts are already servicing trailers are expected to remain on high alert.

Special Concerns: Vision And Operating Realities One of the most pressing issues during trailer loading and unloading is impaired forklift operator and pedestrian vision. A variety of other operating realities at the dock also combine to create special concerns.

A forklift driver's ability to watch for pedestrians is hampered when the forklift moves into the trailer where it is essentially operating inside a tunnel. The result is a dangerous blind spot that is only diminished when the forklift is fully backed out of the trailer.

Another major concern is the inability of pedestrians and forklifts to see a forklift operating inside a trailer. The problem is worse when a trailer is approached from the side and a forklift is operating inside at the front end of a trailer.

A host of other circumstances influence the safety of forklift operators and pedestrians at the dock. One example is when pedestrians and visitors enter the dock area without the forklift operator's knowledge. It's also not uncommon for pedestrians and visitors to step outside of zones designated for pedestrian travel. Other challenges range from difficulty hearing audible warning devices to the amount of stopping distance needed for a traveling forklift.

Capitalizing On Best Practices, Technology Safety at the dock hinges on company's philosophy toward safety and proper policies and procedures. The key is to enact best practices and put technology to work.

Just a few proven best practices include mandatory forklift operator training, well-posted speed limits, and enforcement behind the rules of the road. Safety conscious companies also incorporate the use of the most basic safety devices, some of which include forklift-mounted mirrors, convex mirrors, and traffic control signs.

Many have also capitalized on forklift-pedestrian safety technologies, such as proximity laser scanners to create forklift-safe zones throughout the plant/warehouse. Some opt for motion sensors or infrared systems to alert pedestrians that forklifts are at plant intersections, or when forklifts are approaching from somewhere in the plant.

A growing number of safety-minded companies are looking to next-generation technology to address safety issues specific to the dock. One such technology uses lights and an alarm to communicate the status of forklifts inside the trailer. With the system, forklift drivers and pedestrians know when a forklift is working inside the

trailer so they can exercise proper caution against that forklift backing out. The use of lights can also be used to enhance communication of the status of vehicle restraints to the forklift operator, adding another level of protection against potentially catastrophic trailer-separation accident.

Making The Right Decisions As is often the case, the ability to move goods and finished products through the supply chain quickly and efficiently is about effective communication. The same holds true for the loading dock where the potential for forklift-pedestrian accidents threaten the safety of employees and the productivity of the operation. A wise decision is to implement and follow through on time-tested safety forklift practices at the dock. Investing in technology that takes communication to the highest possible level is yet another that delivers invaluable results.

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