

Top five causes of forklift accidents and how to avoid them.

Face it. Accidents can and do happen. Why? Well that's the question typically asked after the fact. The number of reasons why are way beyond five. Yet these five reasons end up included in those findings reports more often than others.

- 1. Novice Operators and/or Lack of Proper Training:** If you are new to operating power industrial trucks (forklifts) of any kind OSHA requires training prior to operating. So to watch a few minutes of video and being told and allowed to simply hop on the equipment doesn't work. It also violates the OSHA standard. Think about it for a moment. Most forklifts in operation are large multi ton machines manufactured to pick up other large or heavy objects. Power industrial trucks can and do tremendous damage when operators hit things. Property damage is one thing. Imagine being a new operator given pencil whip training and you actually have an accident where you injure or heaven forbid kill someone! Forklifts are different from automobile yet some think they are just as easy to operate. Really? We wouldn't ask a first day medical student to perform heart surgery but we often toss the keys for the forklift to inexperienced workers. So how do you fix it? Follow the training requirements per OSHA standard 1910.178. Take them through the formal classroom. Take them through the practical training showing them: the exact equipment they will operate, the environment they will operate, dangers, warning labels & what them mean, areas of concern in the working environment, other equipment and pedestrians, pedestrians, did I mention pedestrians? Then allow them to operate the machine but only under direct supervision of supervisor and/or instructor. Slowly, under specific instruction and evaluate. Allow them to gain experience but remember until you certify the new operator under your company forklift safety training program the supervision must continue at all times. No exceptions ever. Hey look there are more details I could add and go on but think you get the idea.
- 2. Careless Operation, Under the Influence & Horseplay:** People are human and we do enjoy a good laugh. Unfortunately judging by the ever growing number of "fail" videos popping up on the internet we seem to be interested at laughing at other people's pain these days. Having a chuckle at a harmless gaff is one thing. Not taking accidents or injuries in the workplace serious can put you out of

business. That brings me to those operators that have now gained enough experience in the operation of forklifts that they get cocky. Maybe they have a lapse in judgment or think it will never happen to them. They get a bit lazy here and a tad “oh well” there. Next thing you know Bang! Their carelessness has just damaged a customer’s product or worse yet they hurt someone. Please don’t get me going on Horseplay. You know exactly what I’m talking about. Those that think screwing around in the work place is okay behavior. The “Hey let’s chase Tom with the forklift” types that laugh at Tom’s fear up until they jam Tom up against a solid object severely hurting him. Not the same when the laughing stops and the seriousness of the situation set in. Another issue that seems to slide under the radar is those that try to operate while under the influence. Ever take a moment and read that medication you take? Does package state “should not operate heavy equipment?” If it does don’t get on the equipment and tell your boss. Do we even need to discuss liquid lunch and alcohol? Sure you get the points by now. Look if you don’t feel good, you’re taking meds or feeling cocky stop. Slow down and do the job. Do the right thing. Organizations must have a no tolerance policy with horseplay and need to go one step beyond. They must schedule and provide specific training to all three. Bring it front & center, discuss it in detail and do a facility walk around with the entire crew discussing it again. This is where good management and solid teams come in.

3. **Fatigue, Stress & Overwork:** This ties to the previous in many ways but given the last ten years of industry consolidation has become a growing problem. We have and currently try our best to do more with less. In every single industry. It doesn’t matter what your age the amount of productivity demanded today is driving all of us. Millennials included by the way. Up early to work, home late and when family goes to bed back to online work. Over and over day after day until again, Bang! We are wearing ourselves down to the point of breaking. (just look at the amount of negativity surrounding us) This seems a no brainer but how many of us have seen the drifting auto in the next lane during morning rush hour? Is it texting or lack of sleep? Maybe both! Been in that mandated company meeting or seminar witness to a coworker nods off? Deadline stress coupled with the fear in the job market (more negative go figure) and the idea of having one person do the job of many adding to the overwork situation. This a clear sign of management or lack of in my opinion. Sure as a peer you have some skin in the game to watch out for your coworker. “Hey Tom, everything okay?” Simple but powerful question. This is why organizations that make it a point to break the

production at all costs syndrome have stronger teams. Do something odd. Do something different for the crew. In the past I would bring in a grill and cook for everyone. Nice things to do for your team yet close observation of your team would be better. Willingness to ensure they take a break is so important. Last example is this. If you have employees that don't take all of their vacation time each year you have an issue. They need that time off. Ensure they get the break and your productivity will rise. I guarantee it.

4. **Working Environment & Layout:** Where you operate power industrial trucks is extremely important. Does your organization have the right equipment for the environment being operated in? Inside, outside or both will influence the equipment needs. Never ceases to amaze me when visiting with clients to see a piece of equipment they acquired "years ago" when they were in a different location still in action and it's limiting their productivity. Are the operators exposed to weather? Loud environment? Low visibility or blind corners? Not to mention ramps, docks, low hanging impact areas, do not enter locations and let's not forget pedestrian traffic. Remember a pedestrian has the right of way. Period. One of the biggest areas of concern is when something in a facility changes yet no training is done. I worked with a company that was growing rapidly and they had an issue with access to the outside. While searching to upgrade to a new building they had a temporary metal ramp to the outside installed. In the first week two different forklift operators had accidents on the ramp. One minor the other involved serious injury. The OSHA fines were huge. Why? The company allowed operation of equipment on the ramp prior to providing the practical training update required by the OSHA standard. If you have changes to the working environment the standard requires you train your employees simple as that. One of the other areas of concern this client encountered was low doors and mezzanines. Trust me moving into a larger facility with a better layout was a happy day for them. You can have a poorly laid out location you just need to ensure you train to it. Even if you do the training every year as a reminder it helps.
5. **Bad Equipment & Lack of Proper Maintenance:** Poor maintenance is a major pet peeve of mine. Sorry but there is absolutely no excuse for bad equipment in the workplace. None! Electric lifts with large chunks of corrosion on the battery. Propane lifts with bent or missing tank pins. Broken safety equipment such as lights, horns or beepers. Operating damaged or broken equipment is a recipe for disaster. Every walk into a place and they have stuffed &

taped over the backup beeper? I have. OSHA loves that fine. Here is a freebie for you. Your forklift maintenance records. Maintain a file for each piece of equipment listing out every time any maintenance is performed on it. Keep copies of the parts, service slips, and packing slips in the file. Keep this file handy. Why? If you are inspected by OSHA due to a reportable chances are you will need it all to prove you've done the proper maintenance on the equipment. Don't shop for the lowest price here either. Find the most qualified mechanics to do you work. Either in house or 3rd party doesn't matter. Make sure they know their stuff. Likewise as a manager if the daily inspection shows issues with equipment fix them but be sure to document the repair.

To sum things up

So the bottom line is simple. Train, train some more and document all the training. If you don't feel you have the time to knowledge hire someone that does. Communication is important and so is observation. As a manager if you see these issues step up right away. Don't tell yourself you're so busy and ignore them. If you ignore them it can and will cost you. Tell me this. Do you want to wake up every day and look in the mirror asking yourself that "what could I have done" question for the rest of your life? **No** you don't.

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