

How much Thought Goes Into Your Forklift Safety Program?

By
Kenneth W. Hutchins

How many people would make a decision that they knew could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, with less than one day of thought?

Most competent business people would want time to research. Time to compare what they were getting ready to do to similar programs in use by other companies; they would want to know the cost, and the probable return on their investment. How much effort would have to be expended? Most importantly they would want to know if the program, item, or service that they were investing in was a wise investment.

Why is it when it comes to safety, most companies decide to purchase pre-packaged videotape or hire a service without finding out what that service will provide?

The only question most companies ask is "Will this allow my operators to work, so I won't get into trouble with OSHA?"

Planning an effective program requires as stated in the introduction, a combination of research, organization, preparation, and mind set.

Start with research:

How much do you know on the subject?

Unless you have taken a professional presented course in forklift safety instruction, you may be missing vital information that could be of tremendous value to you. I would recommend taking such a course before you take on the responsibility of training operators.

If an accident occurs, there will be an initial flurry of activity by numerous people and organizations. These could include not only your own company investigators but investigations by your insurance carrier, OSHA compliance officers and legal representatives for both your company and the injured worker. All of these people will want to talk to the person in charge of this program.

Eventually the entire situation may end up in litigation. Again you will be called on to explain your knowledge on the subject, where you received your initial training, and what qualifies you to instruct in forklift safety.

Research done before you start training is what will make the difference at this time. First determine what you want to accomplish with the training.

Are you having specific problems with the forklift operators, are there near miss incidents? Dropped loads? Or is it just a general sense that safety is lacking? Once this is determined, look at the issue from top to bottom starting with the basics.

What type of forklifts are you using?

There are seven different classes of forklifts, each with unique operating criteria, and issues to address. Many times businesses will use more than one class of forklift. Are all of your operators expected to be able to run each type of forklift or are they only required to run one type?

What special attachments are you using?

Barrel clamps, work platforms, push/pull and load push, extended forks, ad this list goes on. Attachments can affect the safety or lifting capacity of a forklift. What is in use in your workplace? Are your forklifts equipped with double or triple extended masts? Has the forklift since its initial purchase been modified in some way? These are answers you need before you start your training program.

Are there any special working conditions?

Will your operators be working in a multi-level facility? Will they be operating on ramps, or using an elevator? Will they be driving in and out of a freezer unit or operating near a forge? Operating under overhead cranes? Take these items into account while producing your training program.

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Are you handling hazardous chemicals or materials?

Explosive, flammable, or caustic materials. Are your operators trained to deal with dropped loads, spills, fires, and fumes? Do they have the proper safety equipment to handle these items? Are they up to speed on the regulations and ordinances controlling these items? Do they know who to report to, what information to give when they report, and are your Hazardous Materials program up to date and in effect?

What type of driving surface are your forklifts operating on?

Concrete? Asphalt? Gravel? Shell? Are there instances where they are driving on mixed surfaces such as concrete in the warehouse area and gravel as they exit to load trailers? Are the surfaces subject to change with the climate, humidity, or rain in uncovered areas? Are the driving surfaces smooth or broken and uneven? The most important item, are the forklifts you are using designed for the surfaces on which they are running?

Is there other traffic?

Are there golf carts, trucks, or cars allowed in the area where forklifts are operating? If this is the case, have the personnel operating these other vehicles been trained in how to operate around forklifts and the dangers of operating in his area. Have your operators received training in this area, making them aware of the increased danger, and the precautions they need to take?

Are there offices opening into the warehouse area?

This presents a special hazard in the workplace. Personnel moving from an office environment to an environment where heavy equipment is being operated are in some cases not thinking of the danger as they open the door. Operating in an office where bumping into another person may result in minor bumps and scrapes is quite different from a warehouse or manufacturing situation where life itself could be threatened.

Are there customers or other untrained personnel with access to the warehouse area?

On occasion almost all warehouse or production facilities receive visitors. This may include visiting executives from the corporate offices, employees from another facility, customers touring the premises, or even the security personnel on property. One thing all of these have in common is that they are not as familiar with the location as the employees who work there daily. Other than the security personnel, visitors should be escorted and receive a short talk concerning safety in the area along with any safety equipment they may have to wear such as safety glasses or hard hats. Your security personnel should be well briefed as to the dangers involved, equipment required and this should be repeated for any new security personnel coming on board.

Is there employee pedestrian traffic?

It is always better to keep pedestrians away from forklifts while they are working as much as possible. However, most work places are unable to do this. The second best scenario is to have well marked pedestrian lanes throughout the workplace. Again, mainly because of space constraints this is not possible. Since in the majority of workplaces, pedestrian employees and forklift operators have to work side by side, awareness must be the answer. For the operators, during training, stress the importance of pedestrian awareness. For the pedestrian employees, training during safety meetings, office meetings, and signage throughout the warehouse or manufacturing facility reminding them to be "Forklift Aware" is the order o the day. Remember, "more people are hurt by forklifts, than on forklifts."

What is unique about your warehouse layout?

Look for unique characteristics of your location that you may need to discuss during the training program. Items such as ramps, trailer to dock locking systems, elevators, and drop curtain doorways that could obscure vision are examples.

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Are aisles marked for forklift and pedestrian traffic?

In the ideal warehouse situation, pedestrian traffic and forklift traffic is kept separate as much as possible. This may not be feasible in your location. You will still need to walk the warehouse or work area and determine if there are areas that need to have pedestrian crossings marked, warning signs to advise pedestrians of forklift traffic, or speed, stop, or yield signs for forklift traffic.

Are there blind corners that may need special equipment?

There may be corners or entrances to the warehouse or work area that may require the use of mirrors, signs or some other type of warning to let operators know that this is an area that could be very hazardous. Check for these areas, and again rely on the people who work in those areas everyday to tell you of dangerous intersections or areas you may not be aware of.

Any special equipment that may increase awareness?

Sometimes simple items have the most impact. How many times have you heard a car alarm sound in a single day? So many times that most people simply ignore it. The same can be said for the warning equipment on a forklift.

Many forklifts are equipped with a flashing yellow light to warn pedestrians, but it is constantly in use and people tend to get used to it. I know of at least one company that has purchased multiple lenses for these warning lights in a variety of colors, red, yellow, blue, and clear. They change the lenses periodically and the employees report that it seems to get their attention because it adds a new element to the workplace. The same can be said for the horn.

Some companies instruct their operators to change the warning they give from week to week. The first week it may be two short taps on the horn when approaching an intersection, the next week it may be two short taps followed by a one or two second blast.

Again by varying the work environment, you keep employees alert. It does not have to be complicated or expensive. It just has to be well thought out, and produce a safer work environment for the employees without a tremendous investment of time.

Basic training topics

There are specific topics that need to be covered during your forklift operator-training course. The method of delivering this material varies with each person conducting these programs. Some of these methods are:

- Computer based study materials and testing.
- Pre-prepared commercial videos and study guides.
- Written study materials.
- Personal instruction.

You will have to choose the method that works for your individual business. I suggest a combination of methods.

All of the above methods are good tools but none fulfill all of the elements of a good training program. Computer based material is impersonal and carries no impact with the message. Pre-prepared commercial videos are also good at supplementing a good training program. The problem here is that when you turn on a television and insert a video, a large number of people lose interest, and again the importance of the message is lost. Written study materials again take the personal aspect out of the training.

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However combining any or all of these methods with personal instruction is I believe the best message. By providing personal instruction, you are telling the participants that this is important enough to take time out of your day to personally handle this issue. Industrial Truck Safety for example uses a combination of personal instruction, written material, animated slide presentation, and testing.

Most programs that I have seen provide a short test, (twenty to thirty questions), at the end of the course. Our testing for a basic operator-training program has one hundred to one hundred twenty five true false questions for the participants to answer.

All of the questions are tied directly to the slide presentation and personal instruction so that the participant not only see the material but hear it as well.

This provides repetition and reinforcement. The information is laced with real life examples throughout the program to emphasize specific points and the program changes constantly with the types of accidents that are occurring and the specific needs of the client involved.

The participants also do not have to rely on the memory of the presenter to make sure that all of the necessary information is given. This is done in not only the basic forklift operator training program, it is done in the forklift instruction and presentation training program as well.

In this program our participants will view in two days, over three hundred animated slides, witness and participate in sixteen hours of instruction and discussion, and will test with three hundred and twenty five questions.

I have had managers' say this much effort is not necessary. My answer to these companies is "If an operator is involved in an accident because he/she did not receive the proper training, what is the cost?" An accident can cost time, money, and even lives.

This is much too important to give less than the best effort you have to give.

Author and keynote speaker Kenneth Hutchins has over 30 years experience in the Security Industry serving as a Law Enforcement Specialist with both military and civilian agencies in addition to Loss Prevention Management with some of America's largest retailers.

Mr. Hutchins' expertise in security, and safety combined with his entertaining presentations have made him a sought after keynote speaker in the private sector.

Author of "Stealing Back Your Profits" a guide for small and mid-size business and of multiple safety programs Mr. Hutchins teaches at several community colleges around Texas.

Mr. Hutchins is the founder and President of Industrial Truck Safety. Mr. Hutchins also serves as the Operations Manager of Bedrock Electronic Security Technology (BEST) a division of EMCS, Inc guiding the convergence of Physical Security with Information Technology (I.T.) Services and Telecommunications Services offered by BEST and its sister company Bedrock Services.