

Beyond The Cab

The only safety management newsletter dedicated exclusively to addressing injury prevention and workers' compensation cost control for trucking companies.



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Preventing Injuries Associated with Loading / Unloading

Many of the trucking companies insured through Midwestern Insurance Alliance are characterized by having little or no driver involvement in loading or unloading freight. Despite that fact, any discussion relating to the non-driving hazards in the trucking industry must include the very significant exposure created by loading and unloading.

Last year in one state alone, there were 10 fatalities that occurred during loading or unloading of commercial trucks. Below is a brief summary of just 4 of them. Note that none of the drivers were actively involved in loading or unloading the trailer.

On September 9, 2004 driver was standing on the bed of his tractor-trailer watching a forklift move a four-ton milling machine onto his vehicle. As the forklift moved forward, the milling machine tipped over and crushed the driver.

On August 24, 2004 a driver was rolling up his tie-down straps on the passenger side of his truck while a forklift operator was unloading 1"x24"x50' plastic pipe from the driver's side. While trying to get the forks under the pipes, the forklift operator knocked the load of pipes off which struck and killed the truck driver on the other side of the truck.

On November 3, 2004 a driver was killed when a pallet of lumber fell on him during off-loading at a warehouse. The victim had been watching a forklift operator unload his truck.

On October 6, 2004 an owner-operator was taking the binders off a load of logs

that he was delivering to a mill when the logs fell off the truck and struck him.

Although fatal work injuries are attention-grabbing, consider for just a moment Heinrich's accident triangle. In 1931, HW Heinrich published his findings from a review of hundreds of thousands of safety incidents. His data showed that on average, for every 300 near-miss events without injury, there would be 29 minor to moderate injuries and 1 major injury or fatality. The application the accident triangle to the number of fatalities mentioned above, implies that last year (in one state alone) there were 290 minor to moderate injuries and 3,000 near miss incidents involving loading or unloading. Now multiply those numbers by the 48 contiguous states to get a better picture of the magnitude of this issue.



Prevention Strategies

Because freight can shift or break free during loading or unloading, drivers on foot should never be on the opposite side of a truck from a forklift while it is loading or unloading material. For the same reason, drivers should not be permitted in (or on) a trailer when it's being loaded or unloaded by mechanical means (such as a forklift, crane, etc). Instead, drivers should be instructed to wait a safe distance away from the truck, even when a drivers' lounge is not provided.

Drivers should be trained to anticipate potential hazards, such as a load-lock that came loose during transit, unsecured empty racks inside a trailer, or freight that has shifted and is leaning against the

trailer doors. Being struck with any of these objects upon opening the trailer doors could result in a debilitating injury.

Clear and strongly enforced procedures should be followed to ensure that no trailer is inadvertently moved before the trailer has been completely loaded (or unloaded). Far too often forklift operators or others still inside a trailer fall to the concrete surface between the dock and the trailer when a truck is prematurely moved.

If any drivers are permitted to operate forklifts, assure they are appropriately trained in the safe operation of the specific forklift they will be operating, load limits, loading procedures, and communication with personnel on foot.

When using carts, pallet jacks and other non-motorized material handling aids, drivers should be cautioned not to place themselves downhill of a moving load. The weight of the load, instability or equipment failure may cause it to roll downhill out of control

Because securing loads with tarps presents a frequent hazard to drivers, implement procedures (or mechanical tarping systems) to assure drivers are not exposed to hazards that increase the likelihood of an incident.

The hazards associated with loading and unloading trucks are influenced by the type of trailer, the freight, the manner in which it is being loaded/unloaded, environmental conditions and a host of other considerations. For that reason, this article does not attempt to provide prevention strategies to address every hazard. Instead, the preceding prevention strategies are intended to address some of the most common hazards and should be viewed as a starting point from which to evaluate your company's own loading/unloading exposures.