

# Caution; Forklifts Operating in this Area



TruckSure  
By Trevor Toohill

I was prompted by a couple of first hand incidents and observations to put some thoughts on paper about the use of forklifts in the transport workplace.

Firstly, some praise for the skill and dexterity of the expert operators witnessed first-hand at various logistics companies that I have visited recently. To see these operators in full swing with a queue of trucks waiting to be loaded and under maximum duress and time pressure is nothing short of amazing.

I take my hat off to them all – mostly that is.

Then there are the occasions where you witness crazy acts and sheer stupidity with the operators that do not take seriously the piece of machinery that they control. Accidents and injury are the net result of the inexperienced and careless operators.

Injuries are not commonplace but unnecessary damage to transported goods is occurring on a regular basis and this is costing the transporter plenty in terms of client inconvenience and increased insurance premiums and excesses.

An example recently witnessed springs to mind – I was visiting a client down country and as the manager and I were walking out through the warehouse to the yard the forklift driver passed us with a full load of four large cartons stacked high and obscuring all frontal vision. The truck to be loaded was parked remotely in the yard and the driver had to negotiate a large number of potholes in the yard tarmac. You can probably guess. Yes pothole engaged and full load on the ground.

Heaps of things wrong with this scenario – firstly there should have been no potholes in the loading area. Secondly there was plenty of room to load on the concrete surface under the canopy or in the warehouse. But most importantly the driver just could not care less.

There's a lot that can go wrong in any workplace, but this is especially true in industrial warehouses. Complex machinery, uncontrolled traffic, and the desire to optimize productivity means that every employee must be aware of risk factors at all times. But with adequate planning and training programmes, risks of injury and accidents can be substantially reduced in regard to forklift operation. Safety standards not only keep employees healthy, but they also prevent damage to equipment and stock.

The three most common causes of accidents related to forklift operation are tip-overs, irresponsible driving, and pedestrian accidents. If these three factors are addressed, the risk of workplace injury and damage will decrease substantially.

## Prevent Forklift Tip-Overs

When a forklift tips over, the initial reaction of many drivers is to jump off of the hoist. Unfortunately, this is a leading cause of serious injury. Forklifts can weigh several tons, so if the hoist lands on an operator it can easily cause serious injury.

Here are a few ways to minimise the chance of a tip-over:

- Reduce speed before turning. This slow speed should be maintained throughout the turn, and the steering wheel should be rotated slowly.

- While operating the forklift, lower the forks and tilt them back to keep the load stable.
- Keep loads low, and make sure the hoist is tilted back for stability. The forklift can tip if heavy loads are angled too far backward or forward.
- Do not load the forks beyond the max capacity of the hoist.
- Unstable loads should either not be moved or moved with extreme care.
- Oddly shaped loads that are tall or wide must be moved carefully and slowly.
- Assessments are integral parts of any training program. Make sure the forklift test examines the employee's ability to avoid tip-overs.
- Only operate the forklift on an even smooth surface.

## Acting the Goat and Irresponsible Driving

Fooling around should be immediately addressed by those in control of the loading area. The operator must understand that driving the forklift irresponsibly means they are not only putting themselves at risk, but they are compromising the safety of other employees and pedestrians. Forklifts are heavy, inflexible and cumbersome. Even experienced drivers can make mistakes, so if a driver is operating in an unsafe fashion, especially if it's intentional, they should be addressed.

## Keep Pedestrians and Co-Workers Safe

Forklift operators are responsible for avoiding pedestrians. Just like driving a vehicle on a road, pedestrians always have the right-of-way, even if they are walking in the forklift driving path. To avoid surrounding workers, the driver should always be looking in the direction the forklift is moving, whether it is forward or backward. At blind spots and intersections, always use the horn.

Employees in the work area may not be paying attention. Even if the floor is adequately marked and warning signs are placed throughout the workplace, always assume that pedestrians are not being observant. If you think the employee might be unaware of the forklift, stop moving until making eye contact. Never let employees near the forklift unless they are operating it, even if the forklift is not moving.

If visibility is blocked due to a high load, drive the truck backward. If this is not possible, have a spotter act as your eyes. Make sure no employees are near the path of travel, and move slowly.

Never let an employee walk beneath raised forks, even if there is no load. Never lift a load that requires another person to position or hold the load while the forklift is moving. This is incredibly risky and presents a high chance of injury.

Even if strict guidelines are in place to prevent forklift accidents, it's still important that all employees understand the risks involved. Periodic assessments (WorkSafe NZ approved OSH certificates) can help here, as can addressing issues or irresponsible behaviour immediately.

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