

FORK LIFT SAFETY:

The practical steps employers should be taking



From driverless cars to machines that read x-rays, automation is quickly improving our lives and our safety. While it offers a fantastic future, we must be mindful of the problems of the present. In the fork lift truck industry, more and more technology is reach the marketplace designed to enhance operations for those operating conventionally, as Tim Waples, Chief Executive of the Fork Lift Truck Association explains.

With technology moving at lightning speed, we're seeing developments now, which according to some academics were pure theory just a few years ago. In Japan, AI robots are helping to enhance care for the elderly and infirm, while, in Brazil, postmen are using drones to deliver parcels to remote mountainous villages. Of course, we're businesses, here, too. Industry 4.0 has arrived and it's building up momentum.

Skillshift: Automation and the Future of the Work, a report released by the McKinsey Global Institute in 2018, suggests:

"Over the next 10 to 15 years, the adoption of automation and AI-technologies will transform the workplace as people increasingly interact with ever-smarter machines."

"These technologies, and that human-machine interaction will bring numerous benefits in the form of higher productivity, GDP growth, improved corporate performance, and new prosperity..."

In practical terms, it means a reduction in wage bills, it slashes energy consumption and optimises space utilisation. Its biggest benefit, however, is how it will transform safety.

In recent years, great strides have been made across a wide range of industries through improved equipment, practice and awareness. Despite this, the number of life-changing accidents each year remains too high, with employers reported a staggering 71,062 employee non-fatal injuries in 2017/18 under RIDDOR.

Human failure

Contrary to popular belief, most of these accidents are not caused by a failure of technology, but of humans. Automated systems are designed to get it 'right' every time. And they nearly almost always do.

Last year, there was a case at Uber involving a driverless car colliding with a pedestrian during supervised road tests. Although there was a fault in the system, which can be expected, the car's human driver was too distracted to identify it quickly enough.

You see, we rely on human behaviour to get the job done, but, unlike computers, they get things wrong from time to time. We get distracted. We get tired. After all, we are human. But, this does mean that the biggest threat to your business is your workforce.



Advances in technology may eventually remove humans from the equation. However, we have not achieved that Utopian vision and may not for some time. For most businesses, the practicalities of automating operations demand too big an investment of time and money to be feasible.

Fork lift safety

In the fork lift truck industry, we are seeing more and more technology reach the marketplace which is designed to enhance operations for those operating conventionally. While sensors, anti-collision systems and cameras can really help safety, their benefits are far outweighed by those of insisting on good, safe practice. It's crucial that your employees don't become too reliant on these aids: it could come at the expense of their own skills and knowledge.



We may have Europe's most stringent health and safety legislation, but the number of serious injuries caused by lift trucks in the UK is on the rise. Every day, five workers in the UK are hospitalised as a result of lift truck accidents, with devastating results for those involved.

These are not simple bumps or scrapes. The characteristic strength of lift trucks, which is valued by industry, means that those involved suffer dislocations, complex fractures, amputations and worse. Operators do get injured in accidents, but the majority (57%) of those

affected are workers on foot, such as warehouse operatives.

In an ideal world, humans and lift trucks would never interact. Installing physical barriers and designating walkways can be very effective at keeping your pedestrians safe on site. However, this is not always practical to implement at older sites. But even where it is, the policies surrounding their use isn't being policed.

Accidents are an inevitable consequence of our reliance on human behaviour and they come in at a cost far beyond pain and suffering. Fines and damages alone can run into seven figures and SHP has covered many of these cases. There's also a genuine risk of prosecution for businesses and the individuals accountable for them. Where serious negligence occurs, these individuals may face prison sentences

Knocks, bumps and scrapes

Most incidents, however, never result in a court appearance, let alone time behind bars. I'm referring to those everyday knocks, bumps and scrapes which are the tell-tale signs of bad practice.

Working in confined spaces with other vehicles and colleagues means that racking – quite literally – takes a big hit. Indeed, I'm aware of one leading UK retailer who readily accepts a multi-million pound annual bill for repair and replacement alone.

But that's just the start. When racking takes a knock, chances are stock is being affected, too. Dropping a pallet, for example, can set you back

several thousand and that's before you account for time and money spent cleaning up, restocking and recycling.

Then there's the cost to the truck itself. Damaging a forklift can be an expensive habit. Replacing a seat can cost several hundred pounds, but safety-critical components, such as overhead guards, can cost thousands to fix.

Over the length of a typical contract (around five years), your truck's repair bills can increase your total rental costs by as much as 5%. Across a large fleet, this could mean a bill for as much as £100,000.

Spills and collisions may seem minor as no one was hurt, but collectively they cost British industry billions each year. While automation offers a more cost-efficient tomorrow for business, it's not a practical or affordable option for SMEs, the group most at risk of accidents. For now, they must continue running small fleets in real-world situations.

However, all is not lost as making significant and lasting change is possible through commitment and a far smaller investment. We regularly hear of managers who overcome this clearly untenable situation by taking ownership for safety on site and influencing company culture and behaviour throughout an organisation, from the boardroom to the shop floor.

After all, it is down to each and every one of us to look ourselves in the mirror this morning and ask "How will I make a difference today?"