

Worksite Truck Safety

By Safety Management Group

You'll find all sorts of specialized vehicles on most construction sites, from excavators, to bulldozers, to cranes and more. Workers tend to treat those vehicles with respect, because they recognize the dangers associated with them.

However, it's easy to ignore a more prevalent hazard on most sites. In general, ordinary trucks are responsible for a substantial number of workplace injuries every year. That includes everything from delivery trucks, to dump trucks, to the mix of pick-up and utility trucks that populate every worksite.

How big is the hazard? Consider highway construction, which employs some of the largest and most powerful earthmovers and other specialized equipment. Between 2003 and 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that there were 962 fatal injuries at highway construction sites, and 443, or nearly half, were the result of workers being struck by vehicles. In addition, 143 of those deaths were the result of workers being struck by vehicles that were backing up. Besides workers being struck, another source of fatalities and lost-time injuries is the process of loading and unloading trucks on worksites.

Because trucks are so common in the construction industry, many workers don't give them a second thought. But the statistics offer sobering proof that safe operation around trucks is every bit as important as the other steps taken to protect workers.

The Importance of Procedures

Developing and enforcing standard procedures for the operation of vehicles on your site, and governing interactions with workers, is an important starting point. In most cases, you won't be able to design the worksite to provide the highest level of safety, so you'll need to focus on ways to address specific hazards.

For example, you'll want to identify areas that may not be visible to drivers or workers and offer measures to ensure that both will be aware. You may want to establish specific traffic "lanes" by using barrels and cones to limit how trucks can access and leave the site, and warning workers to check before setting foot in those areas. You'll also want to define standards for backing vehicles, such as ensuring that a spotter is present when a vehicle backs up, and that the driver and spotter both use clear commands.

Because most construction sites change every day or week, it's also important to establish the procedures through which you'll inform everyone about changes.



Training and Communication

Don't assume that workers will already have a full understanding of the hazards of working around trucks. Your training program should include regular reviews of procedures and safe work practices. Using real-world examples can help workers develop a practical understanding of the hazards. For example, allowing workers to sit in a truck and look at the mirrors will give them a better sense of the limits of a driver's vision.

There should be a single standard for both verbal communication and hand signals to reduce the potential for misunderstandings between drivers, spotters and nearby workers. In addition to discussing the correct procedures, it's useful to rehearse them, and to regularly verify that they are being used properly.

Equipment Maintenance

Trucks used on construction sites must be properly maintained to ensure that they can be operated safely. That includes regular inspections of all safety-related equipment such as brakes, mirrors, horns, and back-up alarms. For added safety, it may be worthwhile to install additional safety equipment, such as back-up cameras or proximity warning systems.

Drivers should be required to check all safety equipment at the beginning of each shift and obtain repairs for anything that is not operating properly. The drivers are also responsible for making sure that windows and mirrors are clean.

Loading and Unloading

The hazards created by loading and unloading operations warrant their own set of procedures. One of the most important steps is restricting the personnel on foot who are in and around the loading area. Everyone working within the loading

area should be made aware of the hazards, as well as the steps to ensure visibility and communication with others on the site.

It's important to engineer hazards out of the site. That includes everything from covering or calling attention to gaps and drop-offs on loading docks and similar areas, to using restraints and parking brakes to ensure that a truck will not move unexpectedly. Loads must be secured so that they cannot break loose or shift. When forklifts or similar equipment are being used to unload, personnel on foot should remain a safe distance away from the operations. Anyone on foot in the immediate area should wear a high-visibility vest, and that includes truck drivers who briefly step out of the vehicle.

In addition, there should be clearly defined procedures to ensure safe operations. For example, before any vehicle is moved, there should be a procedure to ensure that all personnel on foot are clear of its path. If workers are on a truck bed or in a trailer, there should be some kind of visual warning to ensure that drivers know not to start the engine. One simple approach is to require keys to be removed from the ignition and hung on a board or in a cabinet in the office.

Awareness is Key

As with most areas of industrial safety, the more aware workers are about the nature of the hazards, and the more clearly they understand their own roles in preventing accidents, the safer everyone will be. Taking time to ensure that everyone follows procedures and providing regular reminders of safety steps through toolbox talks and other means will minimize the potential for injuries on your site.

