

FORKLIFT SAFETY IN TRUSS PLANTS



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In my last GN Guideline I discussed the management of injury risks associated with manual handling in truss plants. Handling timber and trusses with automated equipment and mobile machinery also comes with considerable injury risks.

Amongst the wide variety of machines found in truss and wall frame plants, the counterbalance forklift is the most common device for handling timber and trusses.

Amongst truss plant equipment, fork lifts rate highly in their potential to cause serious injuries or death to driver, co-worker, or bystander.

The main causes of forklift injuries in the workplace are:

- Pedestrians being struck or crushed by a forklift or its load;
- Forklift operators being crushed by a forklift or its load due to the forklift tipping over or the load being accidentally dropped;
- People falling when standing on pallets or containers raised on the forks; and
- Forklift operators being suffocated when working in a contaminated atmosphere.

(Source: Victorian WorkCover Authority
"Forklift Safety Checklist for Employers")

Whilst gathering information on forklift safety in truss plants I came

across the following report of an accident at a truss manufacturing plant.

"On May 20, 2002, a 34 year-old male truck driver (the victim), who was employed by a wood products facility, sustained fatal injuries as a result of being struck by a load of laminated veneer beams which fell from a forklift.

"On the morning of the accident, the victim was assisting a forklift operator loading a unit of four laminated veneer support beams, weighing a total of 750 pounds, onto a flat-bed trailer.

"The victim was standing on top of the trailer in front of the moving unit, guiding the forklift operator.

"When the operator began tipping the forklift mast and sliding the unit onto the trailer, one end of the unit slid off the forks first and hit the beams that had already been loaded in the trailer.

"The impact caused the unit to bounce and swing rapidly toward the victim. The victim was struck by the load, which caused him to fall off the trailer. His head was then crushed by the load."

(Source: New York State Dept. FACE Report No. 02NY027)

After reading the report in detail I was struck by the exceptional circumstances leading to this tragic event.

Neither the operator or truck drivers were inexperienced, nor did they display outwardly 'reckless' behaviour, but rather a simple lack of adherence to standard forklift loading procedures.

Could a similar incident occur in your truss plant?

Unless you can confidently say that you have a developed and implemented procedures for forklift and mobile plant use, and that you ensure all of your workers and visitors follow that plan, then the answer is surely 'No'.

If you need to develop a risk management plan for forklifts, your local OH&S body will undoubtedly have resources available to assist you in this process.

The main areas covered in the identification of forklift related risks are:

- Workplace design – the physical conditions in your workplace, e.g. is your truss plant laid out in way that separates pedestrians from forklifts? Are mirrors installed at blind corners? Is the operating surface adequate, etc?
- Forklift Selection – the suitability of the forklift and its equipment for the tasks it performs, e.g. does the forklift have a readable load chart that enables the operator to check if it is suitable for the required tasks?
- Operator Skills – the level of training and supervision of all persons who use forklifts, e.g. do forklift operators have the appropriate certificate of competency?
- Forklift Condition – the state of maintenance of the forklift, e.g. are daily pre-operation checks of safety items performed?
- Systems of Work – are there managed plans and procedures for all aspects of forklift operation, e.g. are the correct forklift attachments selected and used for particular loads?

Truss plants present some challenging issues when developing a forklift safety management plan, e.g. unsealed surfaces in timber yards, wide trusses and small doorways, awkward shaped loads, and plant layouts that inhibit separation of pedestrians and forklift traffic.

The required actions to such a plan may seem cumbersome. However, apart from a reduction in the risk of injury, you may reap other benefits, such as increased material handling efficiency and increased equipment life.

