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The use of forklifts requires sound operator training and a safe work environment. This is especially true on the loading dock. The direct costs of loading dock accidents can usually be covered by **insurance**. However, this doesn't mean they can be taken lightly. When an accident happens involving personal injury, **workers' compensation** premiums will increase. Over time, these costs can be prohibitive. Product damage also carries with it a huge price.

"There was a time when the dock was dismissed as just the 'back door' of the plant. Today, there's a growing understanding that the dock is the first and last step in an efficient materials handling system," says Michael White, president of Milwaukee, WI-based Rite- Hite Corporation in the company's Dock Safety Guide. "But dock safety doesn't happen by coincidence.

Loading and unloading can't be safe without a strong, secure bridge from the dock to the truck. The best bridge is a permanent, adjustable dock leveller of the correct length, width and load-bearing capacity. The right leveller will help forklifts handle all loads with little risk of accidents. Make sure dock levellers are strong enough to resist the weight and impact of loaded forklifts. Inadequate platform capacity shortens leveller life and creates hazards.

Full Text (890 words)*Copyright Rogers Publishing Limited Apr 2000*

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"There was a time when the dock was dismissed as just the 'back door' of the plant. Today, there's a growing understanding that the dock is the first and last step in an efficient materials handling system," says Michael White, president of Milwaukee, WI-based Rite- Hite Corporation in the company's Dock Safety Guide. "But dock safety doesn't happen by coincidence.

"It results from a real effort to find risks and then reduce or eliminate them. This can mean upgrading the building and equipment, tightening safety rules and procedures, strengthening safety training, or all of these. There's a growing recognition that a safe dock depends on up-to-date dock design, proper load-handling procedures, effective supervision and trained people. That's a change for the better."

To help companies improve loading dock safety performance, Rite- Hite's Dock Safety Guide contains many useful tips. According to Rite- Hite, it's important for materials handling and plant managers to never lose sight of the following:

Safety Training

Workers must understand they share responsibility for their own safety and others. This means all workers should be trained in the safety practices, which apply to their specific jobs. Every worker should know how to prevent accidents and what to do in case an accident happens. If the safety program is to maintain its effectiveness, initial training and periodic retraining are essential.

All workers should be trained in safety rules and in the safe use of the equipment they'll handle--especially forklifts and other vehicles. Workers shouldn't operate equipment for which they haven't been trained on. When a new program is established or a new piece of equipment is installed, workers should get further training. Whenever safety performance slips and a lack of safety awareness is found to be part of the cause, additional training must be considered.

Choosing Equipment

One of the best ways to help eliminate hazards is to design them out through the selection of the right equipment. The more hazards your workers have to think about avoiding, the greater chance of errors and accidents. This is especially the case during busy periods. Effective lighting, good weather sealing, properly sized dock levellers and doors make it easy for workers to go about their jobs safely. You should also implement a planned equipment maintenance program.

Safety Inspection

Operators should inspect the forklift before each shift, using a checklist so that nothing is overlooked:

- Check gauges, warning lights, horn, forks, fork-retainer pins and locks, the upright, back-up alarm and other equipment. Keep hands clear of all operating mechanisms;
- On pneumatic tires, check pressure using a long-handled gauge. Check from the front or back of the truck--never alongside;
- Before working, test all functions, including brakes and steering;
- Look for fluid loss, indicated by a pool under the vehicle;
- All malfunctions must be reported immediately. Place an "out-of- service" sign on the forklift; and
- Keep accurate and up-to-date maintenance records.

Moving Loads

Operators should also do the following:

- Use the correct attachment. If forks or backrests must be removed to change attachments, store them out of traffic areas and secure them to prevent tipping;
- Spread forks to lift the load and insert forks all the way;
- Carry loads low and tilted back;
- Centre wide loads and keep constant watch on the left-to-right balance;
- Never carry uneven or unbound materials--stack and band the load;
- Don't carry materials on the overhead guard;
- Before reversing, always come to a full stop. The load needs to "come along" with a change in direction or a decrease in speed. For the same reason, anticipate hazards to avoid sudden stops;
- If the load obstructs forward vision, travel in reverse; and
- When the electronic signals of a trailer restraint system shows the trailer isn't restrained to the dock face, never enter a trailer.

Dock Levellers

Loading and unloading can't be safe without a strong, secure bridge from the dock to the truck. The best bridge is a permanent, adjustable dock leveller of the correct length, width and load-bearing capacity. The right leveller will help forklifts handle all loads with little risk of accidents. Make sure dock levellers are strong enough to resist the weight and impact of loaded forklifts. Inadequate platform capacity shortens leveller life and creates hazards.

At worst, a structural breakdown during loading or unloading can cause a serious accident. At best, frequent malfunctions will take the leveller out-of-service, creating dangerous bottlenecks at other dock positions. Capacity selection is based on many factors, including loaded weights, ramp incline, forklift speed and frequency of use. Manufacturers typically choose capacities to provide a specified service life under expected loading conditions, and then provide warranties to cover structural failure.

This is an edited version of Rite-Hite's Dock Safety Guide. To obtain a copy, contact: Rite-Hite Corporation (Courtney Kurtin, marketing specialist), 8900 N. Arbon Dr., Milwaukee, WI 53223; tel. (414) 355- 2600; fax (414) 355-9248.

[^ Back to Top](#)

[<< Back to Results](#)

[< Previous Article 3 of 10](#) [Next >](#)

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