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Opinion: Even on Foot, Trucking Is Risky Business

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The overall health of the trucking industry is vital to our economy, but research shows it's still plagued by higher death and injury rates than many other industries — and not just as the result of highway collisions. Truckers need to be as careful on foot as they are behind the wheel.

As of 2007, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 1.4 million truck transportation workers. And each year, one in 18 is injured or made ill by the job.



Trucking has an injury rate 30% higher than other U.S. industries, and on average, BLS reports, more than 500 truckers are killed on the job each year. In fact, truckers are six times more likely to be killed on the job than other workers.

We already know many trucking-related deaths are caused by highway collisions, but the 2007 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries reported 42 deaths from "contact with objects and equipment," making them second only to transportation incidents in frequency. In waste collection, for example, 28% of worker deaths are caused by contact with objects and equipment.

This is an often-overlooked area where prevention activities can and should be focused. Here are a few examples from claims in Washington state. Consider what might have been done to prevent these outside-the-truck injuries:

- A forklift driver whose view was obscured by his load placed 1,000 pounds of steel directly on top of a truck driver who was adjusting the dunnage on a flatbed, causing massive injuries to the trucker's neck, back and hips.
- The tie-down bar slipped from a truck driver's hand, breaking his cheekbone and crushing his sinuses and nerves.
- A dockworker was loading boxes when the top box fell on his shoulder, spraining his rotator cuff.
- A backing forklift pinned a warehouse worker to the wall, crushing his leg.
- A truck driver exiting his cab was struck by a passing motorist. He lived but had multiple injuries to his back and limbs.

According to a new study by the state of Washington — "Preventing Injuries in the Trucking Industry: Focus Report, 1997-2005" — each year, one of every 100 trucking-industry workers in the state will have a workers' compensation claim and lose work time after being struck by or against an object. That's equivalent to 13% of all lost-work time claims. These injuries are devastating to workers and to their families, co-workers and employers.

According to the report, the total workers' compensation cost of injuries from being struck by or against an object is \$68 million. The more injuries a company has and the more severe they are, the higher the cost of workers' compensation insurance.

In Washington, a company's injury history affects costs to both workers and employers: For employers, injuries mean less profit because of higher workers' compensation insurance premiums, and for workers, injuries mean less take-home pay than for others in their industry.

Clearly, employers and workers alike should take ownership of the problem and commit to working on it. Sometimes, for instance, people think injuries are just part of the job or that a certain number are acceptable. In reality, nearly every injury can be prevented by communication, preparation, maintenance and staying alert to surroundings.

If you see a hazard or an incident that didn't cause an injury but could have — fix it. Brainstorm ideas to prevent future problems. Small investments in time and resources can have a big payoff in lives saved and injuries avoided.

The loading/unloading process can be particularly hazardous. Forklift drivers themselves are rarely injured, but watch for co-workers and truckers. It is not uncommon to see many distractions in a warehouse or close calls during the loading/unloading process. Don't ignore these issues. Consider what can be done to make the process safer. For example, no one should ride in or on the forklift except the driver.

Workers on foot — including truck drivers who dismount while the load is being loaded or unloaded — should be told to:

- Be aware of the forklift — and beware of the forklift.
- Turn off music in the warehouse.
- Don't wear ear buds.
- Have a communication plan with the forklift driver and a safe place to stand if you are directing the loading or unloading of a truck.

Then there's load shift, the cause of many injuries. For safety's sake:

- Pallets should be shrink-wrapped or banded for transport, both by forklift and trailer.
- The driver should open only one side door of the trailer and stand behind the other latched door. That will protect most of his or her body from falling cargo.

Is maintenance worth the time and trouble? Absolutely, because poor maintenance also causes injuries. Equipment should be properly maintained, and straps and binders inspected for wear.

Many of these injury prevention tips can be implemented inexpensively, and some are free. Yet the investment in safety is priceless. Commit to a safe work environment. Everyone comes out ahead.

Based in Tumwater, Wash., the Safety and Health Assessment and Research for Prevention Program — aka SHARP — works with Washington's trucking industry to reduce job-related illness and injury.