

Know who's ignoring forklift safety

A low-cost, retrofit driver monitoring device is set to cut forklift accidents and tell fleet managers precisely how much individual trucks are being used. Launching in October, ForkLift-TRACK aims to save lives, truck damage, and money. Brendan Coyne reports



Forklift driver training may be mandatory, but accidents happen with morbid regularity. Around eight people will die as a result of a forklift accident in the UK this year, and thousands will be seriously injured as a result of operator error.

'Operator error', as referred to daily in HSE prosecution reports, implies a mistake. But while the majority of operators will work safely their entire lives, the fact is that too many forklift operators drive recklessly, ignore their training, and cause accidents.

Alongside the human cost comes significant bottom line loss. At risk of stating the obvious, damaged trucks, racking and product mean downtime, expensive repairs, and less profit.

How can you ensure training isn't ignored? Simple, says John Pelling, MD of ForkLift-TRACK: Monitor the operators. His firm's system enables precisely that – in greater detail than existing logging systems, he claims, and at far less cost.

The retrofitable system uses motion sensors to monitor truck speed, impacts and cornering, telling fleet managers how unique users are driving. The tamperproof unit, powered by a solar panel adapted for indoor use, passes on driver information (with a unique ID for each driver) to a management system via a radio link, so fleet managers can work out whose driving is likely to cause problems.

Pelling says managers he's spoken to already know who the problem drivers are, but previously found it hard to quantify. "Now they can quantify it, manage it, and take action." He says while it is too early to

claim insurance companies will recognise the prudence of applying the system, companies that can demonstrate that they are quantifying and managing risk are in a better position to negotiate.

But there are already monitoring devices well established in the market. What makes ForkLift-TRACK different? Pelling says the system's key selling points are its low cost and the fact that it is retrofitable in half an hour with no special skills required. "It's about as hard as fitting a roof rack – there's no need to go into the truck's electronics."

However, Pelling stresses that 'low cost' doesn't mean it's a 'cheap' solution. He claims it is technologically more advanced than the systems it competes against.

"It may be inexpensive (less than £400 per truck) but we're using state-of-the-art electronics as opposed to the legacy

"If the truck takes an impact, ForkLift-TRACK logs the 15 seconds leading to the impact. You know exactly what happened and whether the driver was at fault."

technology that's currently on the market," he says. "Which means we can obtain far more valuable data."

"For example, other systems will tell you if a truck has a bump, and when it occurred, but not much more. Our system permanently records what's happening and the driving style. If the truck takes an impact, it logs the previous 15 seconds leading up to the impact. You know exactly what was happening: the speed it was

travelling at, the cornering technique etc., which lets you work out whether the driver was driving sensibly and it was just an unforeseen accident, or whether the driver was driving recklessly and was therefore the cause of the accident."

Naturally, he says operators aren't too keen on being monitored. "But that's life. We're constantly monitored for our own safety, and that of others. This is no different, but bearing that in mind, we're making the system as robust and tamperproof as possible."

Truck management boost

However, the system doesn't just monitor the driver, but also acts as an extra fleet management module, precisely determining individual truck's utilisation. So it's a fleet optimisation tool as well. And it helps with maintenance scheduling.

"Because you know exactly how many hours the truck has done, it means the maintenance manager can design the maintenance programme to maximise uptime. We are now building in the functionality so that you can have automated reports at pre-set schedules, for example, after 1,000 hours, to help optimise maintenance programmes."

Pelling thinks this information will also be useful when it comes to renewing forklift fleets, in precisely determining truck hours needed and more accurately estimated maintenance package requirements.

Launching in October, ForkLift-TRACK is already being trialled at a major forklift manufacturer in the UK. Pelling says other materials handling and logistics firms seeking improved forklift safety and fleet optimisation should arrange a trial.

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Reduce back injuries in the warehouse

Launched earlier this year, Back-Track uses the same motion-sensing technology to identify employees at risk of damaging their backs due to incorrect manual handling technique. The device comes with a promise: To modify staff behaviour or your money back. The entire package can be leased for less than £4 per user per month.

Already in use at companies including Linde, Network Rail and Serco, the Back-Track hardware is a pager sized unit that clips to the user's belt, buzzing whenever they bend their back, rather than knees. The unit then transfers the information to the internet and a web-based reporting function enables managers to see which employees risk back injury, and take action where it is most needed. Back-Track can also be used to monitor staff returning to work with an existing back injury.