A Growing Warehouse Space Makes Safety More Important Than Ever

Safety challenges for the warehousing industry are a key focus for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. This is good news for the staffing industry, which provides warehouse employees to numerous clients throughout the country. It's more relevant now because Amazon is planning to build even more warehouses, mostly fulfillment centers throughout the country, according to staffing firms that deal with this space. As of May 2021, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics estimates that there were 1.08 million people employed in the warehouse and storage industry-a 13.5% increase over 2020.

The American Staffing Association plans to work more closely with OSHA on this issue thanks to feedback from its members and an OSHA staff that seems to be far more open to input and changes/updates to Temporary Worker Initiatives including warehousing. ASA is working with OSHA to come up with on an “umbrella” warehouse document that will cross reference specific safety challenges faced by temporary workers. This initiative will coincide with updates to the warehouse TWI. One of ASA's goals is greater outreach to marginalized groups in the staffing space, so they'll know what to watch for. It will also provide a handy guide for clients, so they're more familiar with the risks encountered by temporary workers.

OSHA recently released a TWI bulletin on heat-related hazards--both indoor and outdoor. It focuses on what both the staffing agency and the host employer can do to protect employees from heat related hazards. Even though outdoor heat hazards such as agriculture and construction are targeted areas, temporary workers are just as likely to suffer heat related illnesses and injuries in indoor settings, including warehouses.

Other warehouse safety issues emphasized by the staffing industry include but are not limited to:

- aisle width
- shrink wrapping machines
- fork lift injuries
- conveyor hazards
- walking services
- Pick tower/module hazards, and
- Ergonomics

Warehousing has always posed safety challenges because there are so many hazards. One specific safety concern of ASA members is related to pallet "racking" systems where employees use racks as walk ways even though they are unguarded. Warehouse safety issues have come the fore as more companies such as Amazon grapple with increased orders because of the pandemic. As a result, warehouses are starting to pop up around the country. Amazon opened 35 new warehouses in California in 2021. It opened 28 in Texas.

In addition to engaging with staffing firms on this important issue, OSHA has a page on its website dedicated to temporary workers and warehouse safety. It also touches on other safety issues such as powered industrial trucks, such as forklifts, and exposure to chemicals.

How can staffing firms and host employers contribute to a safe warehouse working environment? As with any other industry, communication is essential. Staffing firms must train their temporary workers in general health and safety. But the host employer is responsible for the training associated within a specific industry. Staffing firms must know what duties their workers will perform, what the safety hazards are, and what they need to do to keep their workers safe.

Safety hazards are many and varied, as they relate to proper forklift use, stacking loads, and safely using automated, mechanical machinery. Here are safety protocols that should be established by host employers, verified by staffing firms, and clearly communicated to temporary workers.

1. **Pedestrian walkways need to be clearly marked.** Clearly marked means yellow tape and guard rails to prevent injuries involving powered vehicles. In addition, proper clearance is necessary to prevent employees from being struck by loads or getting pinned against equipment and racks. Aisle ways must be clear of tripping hazards. Some staffing firms express concerns regarding employees using non-designated walkways above ground level with no fall protection. Host employers need to convey these safety rules to temporary workers and enforce them. Staffing firms should impart this requirement to their employees before they start work.

2. **Stacking needs to be done to keep heavy loads from falling**. It may seem obvious, but heavy loads need to be stacked on the bottom racks, properly squared, and balanced. Racks need to be properly secured to the ground. When inspecting a site for safety, staffing firms should check the racking systems for stability. In addition to collapsing because of too much weight, forklift collisions with racks can cause a collapse. Some forklift rack collisions have been so catastrophic that multiple racking systems have collapsed fatally injuring workers caught underneath.

3. **Use the safety functions on forklifts and other powered trucks**. Because of automation most forklifts are equipped with sufficient lighting, sensors for backing up and detecting obstacles. Fully working brakes, so the vehicle stays put when stacking, loading and unloading, are also essential. Per OSHA requirements, host employers are supposed to provide training for all powered vehicles. Staffing firms should make sure the training is being done and that all functions are in working order. Temporary workers should tell the host employer if something is not working properly.

4. **Wear personal protective equipment (PPE)**. Once again, seems obvious, but many employees either forget to put on PPE, put it on incorrectly, or don't think it's always necessary in certain

situations. Host employers will always require it, and managers are supposed to enforce it. Regardless, staffing firms should tell there employees to always comply with the requirements, even if a manager isn't thoroughly enforcing the requirements.

5. I**nspect worksites and review job positions for ergonomic requirements**. Ergonomics is a focus of OSHA because repetitive motions and heavy lifting can cause strain on muscles, backs and shoulders. This leads to long-terms injuries. Staffing firms should make sure that host employers are focusing on ergonomics in the warehouse setting, especially proper lifting techniques. It may also involve employing mechanical lifting equipment where necessary and setting requirements on how much can be lifted at one time. Staffing firms should have their own ergonomic program, but verify that host employers are following through.

6. **Be aware of the risks of automated equipment**. As more warehouses become automated, the more moving parts there are, especially in automated conveyors and shrink wrap machines. Staffing firms should warn their employees about the pinch points in machinery that can catch clothing including shoe laces. Fingers and even limbs can get caught causing serious injury. Staffing firms need to inspect machinery for emergency shut-off buttons and guards where necessary to prevent injuries. This standard also applies to vehicles. According to the OSHA handbook on warehouse safety, employees should not place arms or legs between the uprights of masts or on the outside of the truck lanes.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of safety issues, but as new warehouses keep being built the need for temporary employers will grow. And without proper training and enforcement, so will injuries and illnesses.