

Fatal Alert

May 26, 2006

An 18-year-old male employee had worked for the employer for approximately four months. This employee and some of his co-workers had developed a behavior pattern to periodically ride as a passenger on a moving rough terrain forklift. They would stand on the boarding step and hold onto the boarding grab handles while riding. On the day of the mishap (the Friday prior to a three day holiday weekend), the 18-year-old fatally injured employee attempted to board the forklift as a passenger while the machine was in motion. He had been walking beside the forklift talking to the operator when he attempted to board. The operator (who had ridden the forklift as a passenger himself) continued driving toward the load about to be picked. The operator saw the mishap employee rising up to the boarding step from the corner of his eye and then a moment later realized the mishap employee was not standing on the step. The operator looked over his right shoulder and saw the mishap employee lying in the yard. The operator's first impression was that the mishap employee was "joking around" as he was prone to do. As the operator looked again, he realized something was wrong, stopped the machine, and ran back the approximately 15 feet to where the mishap employee was lying prone and face down. Assistance was immediately summoned from another nearby employee who had not witnessed the mishap. A call was made to "911" and medical responders quickly arrived. In the interim, company employees provided appropriate first aid assistance. The mishap employee was transported to the local medical center where he was pronounced DOA due extensive head injuries. Autopsy toxicology testing for the mishap employee was positive for cannabinoids in low concentration.

Significant Factors

- The employer did not have a forklift-training program in place. Though the employer himself had not personally observed employees riding on the forklift as a passenger, it was a relatively common and known practice among the employees. The week prior, the mishap employee had been cautioned by a more seasoned co-worker to not ride on the forklift as a passenger. The mishap employee "blew off" his co-worker's sage advice and counsel. The employer had not ever specifically discussed this topic at workplace safety meetings.
- The operator of the forklift on the day of the mishap was a friend & close co-worker of the mishap employee and was one who also occasionally rode as a passenger. He was junior to and less experienced in operating the forklift than was the mishap employee. The operator did not stop the machine when the mishap employee attempted to board, nor did he tell the mishap to not make the attempt.
- The mishap employee had established a pattern of driving fast – both with the company forklift and his personal vehicle. He had been cautioned about his on the job behavior in this regard; though there was not evidence he had changed his behavior.

- The mishap employee exhibited a pattern of periodically arriving at work late while hung over from alcohol abuse the night before. His co-workers also were aware that he occasionally used drugs. The employer did not have a drug testing program. Autopsy toxicology results were positive for cannabinoids in low concentration.
- The mishap employee was the youngest member of the workforce and was one who tended to view himself as “bullet-proof”. Though a capable worker, he exhibited behaviors consistent with immaturity.

Recommendations

- All employers, regardless of industry, should be made aware of this mishap. Employers must be versed in understanding the psyche and wide ranging maturity levels of the youthful members of their workforce. Employers should make work assignments commensurate with knowledge, experience, and maturity. Employers must devote added mentoring, training, and positive reinforcement to the youthful members of their workforce.
- A forklift training program must be in place for all affected employees in all workplaces. The detailed OSHA requirements have been in effect since 1999. An effective training program should include discussions about riding as a passenger and “horseplay”. In turn, a positive disciplinary program should be in place to eliminate this behavior from the workplace.
- Drug users and alcohol abusers should be eliminated from the workplace. Those in leadership positions should be cognizant of drug use and alcohol abuse indicators. Employers should incorporate programs to perform pre-employment, random, reasonable suspicion, and post-mishap drug & alcohol testing.