

The Safe Warehouse: Paying Attention to Product Placement

**By Jason Bader, Principal
The Distribution Team**

As many of you know, I have been teaching a one day warehouse management class around the country for the last few years. What I love about teaching is the fact that I continue my education through the comments and suggestions given by the participants. My favorite definition of humility is to always remain teachable. I am truly humbled by all the great ideas passed on to me by the students. I figure that it is just my responsibility to pass them on to you.

During this course, we spend a fair amount of time discussing safe working practices. There are all kinds of injuries that occur in the warehouse – anything from the dreaded paper cut to the occasional severed digit. What most folks don't hear much about are the frequent sprains, strains and muscle pulls that can seriously hobble your star performers. What I have found, through the help of my student practitioners, is that most of these injuries are due to product placement. Where we place products in the warehouse can either reduce or enhance the number of workplace injuries.

The course book that I teach from makes the suggestion that employees in the warehouse should warm up and stretch before they start the day. I often have the amusing vision of workplace calisthenics popularized in mid-80s Asian factories. Can you imagine your crew breaking out a Richard Simmons video before the shift? Amusing, but probably not going to happen. The simple fact is that we do not condition our folks to prepare for the rigors of the day.

Since we are not going to start our day with a yoga pause, perhaps we can change the environment our people work in. Take some time to observe how your people handle products in the warehouse. In particular, start paying attention to what they have to do in order to pull products from the shelf. You will often observe people pulling heavy product from a height greater than 6 feet off the ground. Conversely, you will see people lifting heavy objects from shelves or floor space lower than 2 feet off the ground. Both of these situations contribute to workplace injury. The problem is compounded when these items are considered high hit or high pick.

If you want to reduce this type of injury, start by considering the weight of your products. Items, or packages greater than 40 pounds should be shelved in the strike zone. For those of you who may not be picking up on my baseball analogy, I want you to think about storing heavy pick products between your shoulders and your knees.

As a secondary thought, consider the popularity of the products picked. Would you want your highest picked products to be stored on the bottom shelf? Sounds like a recipe for a sore back to me. High frequency picks, either above or below the strike zone, are going to take a toll on your team. Beyond the injury prevention benefit, placing high pick items on the middle shelves will speed up the picking process and make your team more efficient.

I hate mezzanines. Ok, I don't really hate them, but they are a huge contributor to workplace injuries. The problem usually centers around the type of product that is placed on a mezzanine.

When I ask students this question, several of them suggest that they store lightweight product up there. I kind of see the logic, but let's be realistic here. Most industrial mezzanines could handle a full size Humvee, so a pallet of pipe fittings would probably be ok. Other students mentioned that they quarantined higher priced products up there. Again, not a bad strategy unless you consider that most loss due to theft is from internal means.

The problem with both of these scenarios has to do with product popularity or hits. Either of these criteria for residence in the lofty heights could force your pickers to frequently climb and descend the staircase. I am not as concerned with the climbing aspect, but I am very concerned with coming down. Imagine what a picker looks like when they descend the stairs with an arm load of product. What happens to their vision? Let's just say that their ability to see the lower stairs is impaired. I think you can see where this is headed.

If you have a mezzanine, you might want to consider storing products that are infrequently picked. Think in terms of items that have fewer than 10 annual hits per year. If you haven't ever done a hits analysis, you may be in for a bit of a shock. Let's just say that the residents of the second floor will have plenty of company.

For those of you who prefer to use the vertical space above your normal primary picking bins, I think you have made a wise decision. Be careful not to allow this high storage space become a primary picking location. Creating high primary pick locations subjects warehouse employees to the same risks as frequent mezzanine travel. The use of rolling aircraft ladders is great as long as their use is fairly infrequent. At least it is better than the pallet rack scaling activities of our youth. Don't look so innocent – we all did it.

Making use of vertical space is just good utilization of the available footprint. I rarely meet a warehouse manager who complains about having too much space. There are several pieces of equipment, lift cages and high order pickers that are designed to facilitate elevated operations. Would they be a good fit in your warehouse? Will they fit in your budget? Only you can answer those questions. I am just asking you to consider the safety implications of product placement.

About the Author:

Jason Bader is the managing partner of The Distribution Team, a firm that specializes in helping distributors become more profitable through operating efficiencies. The first 20 years of his career, were spent working in distributor operations. Today, he is a regular speaker at industry events and spends much of his time working with individual distribution companies. For more information, call (503) 282-2333 or contact him by e-mail at Jason@Distributionteam.com. Also visit The Distribution Team's website at www.thedistributionteam.com.