Choosing The Right Lift Truck

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Increasing efficiencies and reducing costs in a manufacturing facility can be a challenging task, especially considering all the factors that contribute to expenses. However, taking a close look at a facility’s lift truck fleet to ensure each truck is being used for the right application is an astute way to help manage costs.

Three steps can help facility managers understand how lift trucks are being used in a facility and whether they are being used for the applications for which they are intended. These steps are fleet observation, cost measurement and consultation with a trusted lift truck dealer.

Step 1: Observation

Lift trucks are designed with specific tasks in mind, so there truly is a right truck for every application (See Table 1). Some lift trucks can perform multiple functions, but a truck is typically limited to two tasks, like horizontal transport and order picking.

There are two basic ways to get a better understanding of how lift trucks are being used and where they are most needed to accomplish material handling tasks. One is physical observation of the process by which materials are picked for orders and put away for storage. For example, reach trucks are designed to lift or retrieve pallets from racks, while pallet trucks transport loaded pallets of products from one area of the facility to another, such as from docks to racks. Facility managers can observe pallet movement to see where pallets are loaded and unloaded, and whether materials are moving frequently or are idle while waiting for an available lift truck.

Fleet optimization software is also available and can provide a clear view of every lift truck in a facility, including how each is used and how efficiently they are working. That information can help a facility manager determine the right number and mix of lift trucks (and operators) for maximum performance and optimum efficiency. Some fleet optimization software is savvy enough to track individual truck histories based on usage data linked to each truck’s serial number and then present that information in a web-based interface that can be accessed online at any time. Making changes based on the generated data can increase efficiency and reduce costs.

Step 2: Measurement

Calculating service invoice totals can be a great way to understand exactly how much a lift truck really costs to maintain throughout its life. The best way to measure costs is to analyze the facility’s cost per pallet move. However if that level of detail is unavailable, a simple calculation can be done by adding the total maintenance invoices for each vehicle for the calendar year and dividing that number by 12 to get a monthly average. If that figure is more than the cost of a lift-truck lease payment, it may make sense to lease a newer-model truck that requires less maintenance and offers advanced technology, like AC motors, which can increase productivity.

Some fleet optimization software can track everything from per-truck maintenance costs to age to service hours, providing a clearer picture of a fleet’s needs. That’s just the beginning, however. A web-based interface can facilitate data like:

- Per-truck parts and labor costs
- Reports that can identify facility or regional cost-saving opportunities
- Fleet replacement analysis
- Consolidated invoicing

Thus, aggregating many data points in an easily understandable manner can help a

facility manager monitor and reduce overall costs per operating hour.

Truck Design:	Truck Trailer Loading and Unloading Pallets	Horizontal Travel in the Warehouse	Full Pallet Put Away and/ or Removal from Rack	Case Picking and Order Picking
Sit-down Counterbalanced or Stand-up Counterbalanced Truck	X	X		
Reach Truck			X	
Turret Truck			X	X
Orderpicker				X
End Rider Pallet Truck	X			X
Center Rider Pallet Truck		X		X
Walkie Pallet Truck	X			

Step 3: Consultation

Although very important, data availability in the observation and measurement steps should not trump the value a lift truck dealer can provide when determining whether a facility's lift trucks are being used both appropriately and efficiently. Dealers have significant experience from working with different customers, so they are familiar with a wide variety of operations, procedures and warehouse layouts. Also, their extensive knowledge of lift truck applications qualifies them to offer sound advice on truck usage.

Dealers may see areas that can be streamlined or adjusted to increase productivity, such as opportunities to use narrow aisles or double-deep racking. They can even recommend and implement fleet optimization solutions, such as The Raymond Corporation's iWarehouse® system.

Trying to force a single lift truck type to work in every process required will result in lost productivity and frequent maintenance, which can lead to downtime. Selecting the right truck for the job optimizes productivity, efficiency and, ultimately, costs. Observation, measurement and consultation with a trusted lift truck dealer, coupled with plenty of data, will help ensure the right trucks are being used in specific applications.