

FORKLIFT TRAINING FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT ASSOCIATED WITH A COMPANY

Background

We are frequently contacted by individuals, not associated with a company, wanting to be trained as forklift operators so they can secure a better or higher paying job. Since we get so many inquiries, we think it is important to address this issue in great detail for the benefit of the people asking the questions and also for the companies which might be looking to hire them. There is a great deal of misinformation and misconception floating around and we would like to set the record straight.

In the late 1990's, OSHA revised their forklift standard 29 CFR 1910.178, in particular paragraph L, which outlines how training is to be conducted. Before this revision, OSHA only stated operators needed to be "trained and authorized" which was widely interpreted and hard for them to enforce effectively. The OSHA standard now requires that training be site and equipment specific, which means training can't be generic or "one size fits all" in nature. With a vehicle such as a semi-truck, you can attend a CDL (commercial driver's license) course and over a period of weeks or months obtain a "license" to operate a semi. Since most over the road trucks are very similar in their basic design, controls, and application, this is possible and practical. Forklifts, also known as Powered Industrial Trucks, have many different designs, substantially different controls and thousands of potential applications; therefore, one single course that covers all designs, controls and applications is impractical.

A good analogy would be that of an airplane and a pilot's license. If you walked into a flight school and said "train me as a pilot, I want to fly a plane" they would not be able help unless you provided them with far more information. A 747 jumbo jet is a plane, an F18 hornet fighter is a plane, the space shuttle is a plane, a single engine Cessna is a plane and so on. All of these have very different flying characteristics and extremely different controls. If you did not know which type of plane you would be operating; training for all of them is not practical. They would also want to know what flying application you are interested in; will you be flying in the mountains, in the winter, in stunt shows, in the tropics, in combat, etc. The same thing goes with forklifts, there are sit-downs of all fuel types, stand-ups, man-ups, walk behinds, and more. Their stability, load handling and controls are vastly different. For example, a highly experienced sit-down rider operator won't be able to jump right on a stand-up forklift and run it, they are just too different. Application is also an issue, how a grocery store, a warehouse, a manufacturing plant, a steel mill and a lumber yard use forklifts are very different.

What do companies want and what are they asking for?

What do employers really want?

Companies advertising for forklift operators typically want employees with substantial prior experience, typically a year or more of it. They want someone that can function almost immediately on their types of forklifts and application. The good companies realize they will still have to provide these employees with some training on their forklifts and application, but they want someone that will be productive very quickly.

What do employers sometimes mistakenly ask for?

- Only licensed forklift operators
- Only currently certified forklift operators
- OSHA approved forklift operators
- A card, certificate or document saying you are qualified to operate any forklift, anywhere

Many employers mistakenly ask these questions, not realizing there is no such thing as a “forklift license,” that operators are certified for a specific site and equipment, and not for all lifts and applications, that OSHA does not qualify forklift operators, and that paper documents don’t carry over from company to company.

What should you do?

- A. ***Operators who are currently certified at another employer.*** You are great candidates for employment, proving your experience should be no problem. Tell your potential employer what types of forklifts you have operated, how long you have been using them, etc. You can also provide the date of your last training and show them proof of prior training/experience such as a permit if you have one. If you do not have a paper document don’t worry, that is of little to no value to your potential employer anyway, whether they know it or not. Let them know you are interested in learning their specific lifts and application and in participating in their training program.
- B. ***People who have operated a forklift in the past but are not currently certified or working as a forklift operator.*** You are also a good candidate for employment. The fact that you are not currently using a forklift should be no problem, unless it has

been many years since you have run one. For example, if you were a forklift operator for five years, but have not run one in the last four years, you are still a great find for a potential employer. The fact that you are not currently certified really means nothing, other than you might be a little rusty and need some time to get back “up to speed.” This is the group that many times gets shorted by potential employers. Be sure you represent your skills well to the potential employer. Write out information about your past experience so they understand you know how to operate a forklift and are comfortable doing so. Don’t let them get away with telling you that you are not qualified to be hired, just because you don’t carry a current card or have a current certification; that is ridiculous.

On the other hand, do not oversell your capabilities. If you once ran a forklift for two days, but it was ten years ago, that IS NOT 10 years of forklift experience. If you mislead them about your experience level, it could get you fired; or worse yet killed. You should know that you will need training on their forklifts and applications once you are hired. It may be different than what you knew before, and it may take a while for you to get fully comfortable in this new setting.

- C. ***Those with no prior forklift experience.*** If you are in this group, you may be young (18-25 years old), or may be in the process of switching career paths and are older. You have little or no functional forklift experience and are looking to obtain a job driving one. Most forklift training companies and safety consultants will not provide training to you. Not knowing where you will be going, what lifts you will be using and how you will be using them, are hurdles which are simply too big to overcome.

Our advice for this group is simple, promote yourself. Tell your prospective employers that you will show up on time every day, have a good attitude, be clean and sober, work hard, etc. These traits, for many employers, are more important than any forklift skills you might have. Some companies will overlook your inexperience, hire you anyway, train you as an operator and get you up to speed. Other companies may not hire you as an operator, but rather in a lower-level position if they think you would be a good employee. Once you show them how good an employee you can be, many times they will train you and promote you into a driving position.

We can also suggest that you check your local community college as many of them offer hands-on training. Additionally, look at a staffing agency who may be able to help you find training and a job.

Although we are not currently in a position to help you with training or job placement, we wish you the best of luck and hope that you will find a great job soon.