

MARKET TRENDS

Increased Focus on Designing Upfits for Better Ergonomics and Enhanced Operator Safety

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Ergonomics and operator safety is a growing concern by HR and risk management departments, since there has been an uptick of workers' compensation claims by fleet drivers.

With the cost of litigation soaring, reducing the risk of injuries is becoming more imperative. As a result of strong trends in the upfit market, there is an increased focus on designing upfits to enhance operator safety. Other factors driving the increased focus on safety equipment are risk management considerations and federal Compliance, Safety, Accountability (CSA) scores.

Across a variety of vocational segments, fleet managers are devoting increased consideration to ensuring upfits will be ergonomically safe for the driver over the service life of the vehicle. For example, more fleets are requesting upfits with additional safety equipment, such as a rear-view camera system, reverse sensing system, back-up alarm, remote start, grab handles, convex spot mirrors, and drop-down ladder racks.

Fleet managers reason that adding ergonomic safety equipment, such as grab handles or a drop-down ladder rack in lieu of a fixed ladder rack, will reduce insurance claims and improve operator efficiency.

Oftentimes, adding this equipment at an upfitter will result in cost savings. Rather than factory ordering a rear-view camera system or reverse sensing system, fleets are adding the equipment at the time of upfitting to avoid increasing initial vehicle cost by upgrading to a higher trim level or paying for additional option package content not required for the fleet application.

Less-than-Ergonomic Upfit Decisions

Under OSHA regulations, an employer must provide a workplace (which includes work vehicles) free from recognized hazards. A variety of upfitting options are available to fleets to help reduce the risk of injury to employees, such as hydraulic self-unloading ladder racks, lower-profile service bodies, and even simple features such as step bumpers; however, workers' compensation claims resulting from poorly spec'd add-on equipment are on the rise.

There are increased complaints about "less-than-ergonomic" upfit decisions. Fleets often find themselves defending upfit specifications against negligence allegations that result from pushing, pulling, lifting, or bending injuries. Inappropriate equipment spec'ing decisions can result in expensive litigation.

Over the years, work trucks have evolved into mobile offices equipped with a variety of in-cab devices, such as GPS and mobile data terminals for job-site reporting, routing, and work orders; along with in-cab filing bins and swivel writing boards, all of which have dramatically enhanced driver productivity. However, these devices and equipment take space, creating a cramped cab environment, restricting a driver's body movement, which can potentially lead to ergonomic injuries. Carpal tunnel syndrome is viewed as primarily an office worker injury, but there has been an increase in drivers filing carpal tunnel syndrome claims.

Spec'ing trucks to meet the diverse needs of your entire work-force is a challenge. You can spec your fleet to a "bell curve" and deal with the exceptions by adding ergonomic-friendly equipment or swapping a driver from a large to small truck and vice versa. Often, decisions are made in the field to modify vehicles without the fleet manager being informed. The home office is often not aware of the modification until there is an issue, such as when someone complains about an ergonomics-related health issue.

For taller drivers working out of a smaller truck, they cite ergonomic issues relating to cab egress and ingress, or discomfort when operating the vehicle for extended periods.

Shorter stature drivers, women in particular, can be at risk if they must regularly stretch and strain while entering and exiting trucks or attempting to access storage compartments mounted on top of the side beds of high-profile trucks. These trucks make it difficult for employees under 5-feet 8-inches tall to access top-opening side bins or work out of a pickup bed.

The Financial Benefits to Ergonomics

When upfitting fleet vehicles, fleet managers are torn between two approaches: Do you use one package to satisfy all drivers and achieve a certain cost level that you can control; or do you allow driver segments to have their own package, which will create a difficult situation operating a fleet of non-standard vehicles? However, some will make the counter-argument that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to truck specifications is an ergonomic mine field, which could have litigious consequences.

The best approach to make a fleet more ergonomic is to proactively identify potential issues and to rectify them before they result in injuries. Liability emanating from using inappropriately spec'd equipment is an issue to which fleet managers should devote more attention, due to the high cost of litigation to defend against alleged negligence and protect the health of employees.

In addition to health issues, poor ergonomics is a key contributor to preventable accidents. In the final analysis, resolving ergonomic issues can have a significant impact in reducing workers' compensation costs, improving user productivity, and decreasing fatigue-induced driver errors.

Let me know what you think.

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