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APPLICATION REPORTS

FIXED PATH

Converting lift trucks to AGVs

Smooth and synchronized teamwork is the best way for a worker and his lift truck to maximize productivity. The traditional vehicle-based, order-picking process can include unproductive steps. By converting ordinary lift trucks into automatic guided vehicles (AGVs) in its central facility, Sweden's Coop has increased productivity by 100%.

A traditional truck-based order picker spends as much time picking as he does picking up empty pallets or containers, delivering full pallets and driving around. As the second largest retailer in Sweden, Coop wanted to make sure the handling of 3,500 pallets per day and 65 million packages per year was as efficient as possible.

Using onboard hardware and software, the new vehicles automatically escort the picker and are always optimally positioned to minimize the distance and effort needed to pick and place products. The vehicles automatically lift the forks to the right height for easy stacking. The units communicate with a remote warehouse management system that plans efficient routes through the warehouse in coordination with other units.

The system also integrates with Coop's existing voice-guided picking technology, which ensures accuracy as productivity soars. Warehouse manager Sune Montonen says the system strikes a perfect balance between automation and human control.

"We evaluated fully automated and mechanized solutions but found them too costly and inflexible in comparison," says Montonen.

Productivity almost instantly doubled at the Coop distribution center, and workers reported decreases in stress and physical strain. The company has already deployed 32 automatic trucks, with a second, larger phase underway. The company's entire fleet totals more than 400 trucks.

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