

Don't ignore your warehouse floors

Here are seven steps that all warehouse and DC managers should be taking to preserve the life of their facility floors.



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By Bridget McCrea, Editor · December 12, 2018

If you don't think your warehouse or DC floors take a lot of abuse, think again. As the substrates that literally support all of the activities that take place within the four walls every day, floors tend to get ignored until they fail. Then, there's a mad scramble to fix the problem to avoid safety problems or work interruptions. Unfortunately, this reactive approach to floor maintenance can quickly translate into high costs and downtime.

"A floor that's not cared for will certainly have a much lower lifespan than one that is," says Kevin Klotz, president of Coatings for Industry. "That care can range from basic cleaning to applying coatings to your floor, but either way—as with most things—you'll certainly extend the life of your asset by taking care of it."

Ignore this reality, and it won't be long before you find yourself pouring new concrete, installing an expensive overlay system, or hiring someone to come in to repair the cracks in your floor. "Concrete may look strong, but it really isn't," Klotz points out. In high-traffic settings like DCs, for example, lift trucks traverse the floor all day, items fall off shelves, and workers drop tools. "These impacts can be difficult for concrete to handle," he says. "In fact, using a ballpeen hammer, you can lightly tap concrete into powder."

That's exactly why floors should be at the top of any warehouse or DC manager's maintenance routine. "When you have a clean, level surface to work from, everything in your operation performs better," adds Tatsuya Nakagawa, co-founder of sustainable floor coating firm Castagra Products. "On the other hand, if your warehouse floor is damaged and uneven, it not only causes safety concerns, it also wears away your equipment."

Start with a good sweeping

One of the best ways to preserve the life of a DC floor and provide a safe workplace is by sweeping your floors daily. This is critical even for companies that have solid, reliable floors that aren't showing signs of wear and tear. In other words, just because your floor is new—or, because it hasn't experienced any failures in the past—doesn't mean you can ignore the daily cleaning ritual.

"All it takes is some dust or abrasives to land on the surface and for your forklifts to drive over that mess to start inflicting damage to your floor," Nakagawa says. "The problem can surface very quickly, but if you commit to sweeping your floors on a daily basis, you can reduce the chance of that happening."

Here are seven more steps you can take now to preserve the life of your facility's floors:

1) Pick flooring that makes the most sense for your business.

Just like you wouldn't install white, plush carpeting in a playground, you shouldn't select industrial flooring based on look or feel. Instead, pick it based on what makes most sense for your business operations. "If there's a good chance of certain types of chemicals or other liquids spilling onto the floor, be sure to take that into account," says Nakagawa. And if certain areas of the warehouse or DC need anti-slip protection, be sure to install it (knowing that in some cases these surfaces can be more difficult to clean). "We've worked with automotive shops that were dealing with oil and grease spills, which can stain when regular floor coatings are used," Nakagawa explains. "To remedy that problem, they put a clear coat on top of the concrete to eliminate the staining."

2) Look at what's actually causing the mess.

When they realize they have a dirty floor problem, a lot of companies invest in machines that sweep and scrub in one pass, but Richard "Bo" Bodo, director of training at Kärcher North America, says that's not always the best approach. The first step is to look at what's causing the mess. In many cases, light, sweepable soils are the culprits. "Most warehouses are dealing with dry sand and debris that needs to be swept up off the floor so that it doesn't contaminate boxes or other items that are moving in and out of the facility," says Bodo. To reduce the levels of dust, debris and pallet chips, companies look to the sweep-and-scrub machines when they really should focus on sweeping as a stand-alone remedy. "In many cases, companies should be using large sweepers," says Bodo, "and then using a scrubber as a separate unit."

3) Pick up larger debris off the floor throughout the day.

Debris like packaging straps and shrink wrap should be picked up before the sweeping starts and preferably on a regular basis throughout the day. One way to keep this type of debris to a minimum is by placing garbage receptacles throughout the facility (i.e., giving employees a place to put the garbage that they're generating as part of their work). "Remove this waste before doing any type of cleaning," advises Bodo, who has seen too many packaging straps damage the cylindrical rollers on sweepers and scrubbers. "They can literally create enough friction to cut right through the rollers, that can be an expensive mistake."

4) If you're in the snow belt, don't forget about salt.

Dirt, dust and packaging debris are one thing, but if your DC is situated in a cold climate, then salt is another intruder to think about (at least during the winter months). "Salt literally destroys unsealed concrete," says Lou Frank, Coatings for Industry's director of business development. "If your forklifts are running in and out of the building all day as they load and unload trucks, then they're going to drag the salt in with them." Even with regular cleaning, those impacts can be difficult to reverse, says Frank, who suggests a proactive approach that includes the appropriate floor sealant plus regular sweeping out of any salt that may make its way into the warehouse or DC.

5) Look beyond the warehouse floor.

Most DCs have adjacent offices and other spaces that are probably carpeted or tiled—both of which can be more difficult to keep clean. As employees walk in and out of those areas all day long, they track the dirt, dust and grime from the DC floor with them. "If you're not cleaning your warehouse floor

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regularly, that soil gets tracked into the other parts of the building and drives up cleaning costs," Bodo points out. "Plus, depending on the surface in question, it can actually prematurely damage the carpet or tile and create a situation where it needs to be replaced before its actual useful life ends."

6) Use the right equipment and cleaners for your floor surface.

"Some chemicals can do more harm than good on specific floors," says Klotz. "Sure they may clean the floor, but those chemicals—or the equipment you're using—may also damage it." Specific points to consider include scrubber brush selection (is it right for the surface?) and cleaning fluid selection (will it harm the coating on your floor?). "If your floor is coated, you may need to use different brushes and solutions than you would on concrete or polished floors," says Klotz. "Just choosing the right equipment and materials to clean it with are both important considerations."

7) When in doubt, ask for help.

How can you check whether your cleaners or equipment are right for your floors? Ask your installer or do a spot check in an area off to the side, Nakagawa suggests, just to make sure the cleaning products you're planning to use aren't going to damage your investment. Nakagawa recommends neutral Ph cleaners for most floors and tells warehouse managers to watch out for any type of acidic-based cleaner that can eat away at the surface. "Many times people will use something that's too harsh and wind up with a lot of fading and even physical floor damage as a result," says Nakagawa, who tells warehouse managers to talk to the contractor, manufacturer or installer for the ideal cleaning instructions for their floors. "A lot of companies skip this step," he says, "and wind up prematurely damaging their floors."

Total cost of ownership counts

To companies that want to do a better job of maintaining their warehouse and DC floors, Klotz says the first step is to get a good grasp on how you're using the facility and the environmental factors that impact that space. What are the temperatures? What's your traffic like? What could fall onto or spill onto the floor? Are lift trucks going in and out of the building? "Geographically, the answer to the last question can make a big difference," says Klotz, "depending on what those trucks are dragging in with them."

Ultimately, Klotz says companies need to factor in the total cost of ownership (TCO) of their floors, knowing that the ones that are best cared for will be around for the long haul—and hopefully also contribute to a safe and accident-free environment. "Ignoring the potential issues and turning a blind eye at them until they become real problems is the wrong way to go," says Klotz. "Even an isolated spot can worsen pretty quickly, so take care of any failures before they become expensive, monumental challenges."

Companies mentioned in this article

Castagra Products
Coatings for Industry
Kärcher North America

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