

Health and Safety – keep compliant while cleaning up in commercials

For commercial garages and repair workshops leaks and spills are part of the working environment. For most, the cleaning and disposal of liquids like fuels, hydraulic fluid and lubricating oils involves little more than blue roll and drip trays. But is this safe, compliant, reliable and economical?

Commercial vehicles are the bedrock of the modern industrial economy, transporting pallet freight, bulk liquids, passengers and parcels. In the UK alone, around half a million commercial vehicles are operating on a daily basis and each may travel hundreds of thousands of miles during its operational life.

Regular servicing is key to keeping these vehicles on the road but presents a number of unique challenges for service and repair businesses. Commercial vehicles typically contain diesel fuel oil but a multitude of other liquids are also present in considerable quantities. Lubricating oil requires regular replacement to ensure the health of an internal combustion engine and related elements like the vehicle transmission. However, in addition to fuels and mineral engine oils, commercial vehicles are also likely to hold materials such as ATF, EP90, hydraulic and brake fluids, engine coolant and antifreeze, as well as battery acid and screen wash. Each of these materials potentially represent environmental and health and safety hazards for the vehicle service industry.

Contact with oils and fuels is noted as a factor in the skin condition dermatitis, for example. UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance notes that the disease is up to seven times more likely among motor vehicle repair workers than the average UK worker. In response, HSE recommends the prompt clean-up of spills to reduce exposure risks and limit the chances of other hazards like slips and trips. In fact, many of the liquids found in commercial vehicle are specifically denoted as hazardous materials.

The UK's Environment Agency classifies hydraulic oils, which may contain polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) as hazardous, for example. Engine and transmission oils, fuel oil, diesel and petrol also all fall into the hazardous category which further extends to include commonly found components like air bags,

batteries, and catalytic converters. Even whole vehicles may be classed as hazardous waste unless particular measures have been undertaken to address environmental protection.

Indeed, in the UK and elsewhere measures to ensure appropriate waste disposal are a regulatory requirement and business owners have a specific 'duty of care' to ensure that any hazardous waste produced or handled by their business causes no harm. Companies and directors may be fined or even jailed if they fail to comply.

Furthermore, materials that are contaminated by hazardous materials, including clothing and the rags or cloths commonly used to mop up spills, may also be classified as hazardous waste. Not only must these materials be disposed of appropriately but it is also illegal to mix hazardous wastes. As a result, in the UK it is illegal to dispose of a used oil filter in the same receptacle as the oily cloth used to clean the mating surface for the new filter. Similarly, vehicle fluids such as mineral oils, anti-freeze, and any oily water must not be mixed, making many common industry practices illegal under current UK legislation.

As a result, automotive workshops and their supply chain partners are now finding that they are having to manage hazardous waste consignments for the first time. Like every business, they are now required to complete a waste transfer note for each load of waste that leaves their premises. They are also under an obligation to ensure that their chosen waste carrier is appropriately registered to dispose of their business waste.

In addition to classifying, separating and storing any hazardous waste correctly, owners of commercial vehicle workshops are required to keep waste to a minimum. They need to do everything reasonably possible to prevent, reuse, recycle or recover waste materials produced by their business and meet the stringent requirements for waste carriers if they transport any hazardous waste materials from their premises.

Meeting waste disposal obligations

Given the duty of care that is now expected from companies producing hazardous waste and the substantial penalties that are associated with a failure to do so, all commercial vehicle workshops should develop a waste management strategy. Such a strategy not only ensures legal compliance, but also supports the growing need to adopt environmentally friendly business practices.

An important part of any waste management strategy in the automotive industry is the disposal of materials that are used for cleaning or in the mopping up of spills. Many commercial vehicle repair operations use simple rags or paper blue-roll for cleaning and mopping up. However, this approach brings considerable penalties in terms of efficiency, cleanliness, and environmental impact.

With greater focus on waste materials and environmentally friendly cleaning practices, one approach that is gathering traction is the use of third-party suppliers which deliver high quality wipes and mats on a contract basis. Once used, these cleaning cloths are collected, laundered and returned for reuse.

MEWA Textile Management, based in Wiesbaden, Germany, is one of the leading players in the sector and its products include cotton MEWATEX® wipes. Highly absorbent, robust and durable, these wipes are able to absorb significant volumes of oil, grease or other fluids found in vehicles and service workshops.

Compared with standard paper wipes, the improved absorbency capacity allows service workshops to save a considerable amount of time when it comes to cleaning, but also offers significant environmental and health and safety benefits. For example, not only are the cleaning cloths and mats reused, the cleaning process allows any oils to be collected and used to heat water for the cleaning process. For instance at MEWA, heat from the washing process is also recovered while any wastewater is treated in an environmentally-friendly way before being discharged. In addition, by using a contract supplier for their mats and wipes, users also eliminate the need to manage the purchase, storage and delivery logistics of single-use products.

For commercial vehicle servicing, wipes and cloths create unnecessary and often hazardous waste. By reusing these materials, vehicle workshops have an opportunity to address the environmental impact of their business while also helping to ensure legal compliance and supporting improved health and safety best practice.



About MEWA Textile Management

MEWA supplies companies across Europe with professional and protective clothing, cleaning cloths, oil-collecting and floor mats as well as parts-cleaners from 45 locations in full service.

In addition, articles can be ordered in the MEWA brand catalogue for occupational safety.

Approximately 5,600 employees serve over 188,000 customers from industry, commerce, trade and gastronomy.

In 2018, the MEWA Group generated sales of 704 million euros. Founded in 1908, MEWA is today a leader in the textile management segment. In November 2013 MEWA came in the top 3 of the German Sustainability Award in the category "Germany's Most Sustainable Products / Services".



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