

The Warehouse Story

It was 1984, September or October, I believe. Truly unemployed, truly broke. I was willing to do nearly anything to get money. So what the hell, I'll try warehouse work. This will be my first attempt at manly work since my days back at the aluminum factory when I was 19.

My first day was on Monday. I arrived on time; I always arrive on time. I filled out the customary paperwork and was led to my leader.

My leader was very excited on this day, not from me being his new trainee but because he was promoted to management. Yes, this was his first day training anybody. He walked around the warehouse, telling his ex-fellow co-workers that he had been promoted to, from what I could tell, the bottom of the management level. But he was proud!

He said, and I quote: “See, I told all of you that this wasn't a dead end job. Look at me; I have been promoted to management!”

Apparently over the years, he has listened to continuous griping about how this was a dead-end job. Well, after working in the warehouse for **23 years**, he was promoted. Vindicated and validated. He told others to continue to work long and hard and then maybe, just maybe, they too could become management. He was such an

inspiration! I was thinking that if I could just lift heavy crap nearly every day for 23 years, I could be just like him.

Let me describe this place for those of you at home who have never been inside a giant warehouse. It is a huge building! This particular warehouse was a food warehouse. It had many long rows of bulk foods. It was Sam's Club on steroids. It made Costco look like a small 7-Eleven. Everything was packed in cases. Every can you buy in a supermarket is packed in a case of 24. Every commodity that you see is packed in bulk. The cases of boxes, for the most part, are heavy. There are a few exceptions like toilet paper, paper towels, and marshmallows.

This job didn't require any education, but it did require a very strong back. Lifting, lifting, lifting, and then lift some more. My new job also apparently didn't require any training either, as my "leader" showed me a floor jack, pointed to an "office" and then walked away. I forgive him because after all, it was also his first day (as a manager), and he needed to spend his time on more important matters like rubbing it into the faces of his recent co-workers that he was now "The Man."

A floor jack is the little sister of the tow motor. It is used for moving all this bulk food/cases, etc. around the warehouse. You push the "fork" end into a wooden pallet which is the base for all the heavy boxes to be piled up on. You then raise the fork end up a few inches so that the wheels of the floor jack can roll on the cement floor. The other end of the floor jack had the motor and the steering handle. It had a throttle on the handle. You twist it one way

and the floor jack speeds up, and when you relax the handle the floor jack comes to a stop. There was no brake, just the throttle to control the speed from maximum to a complete stop. The steering was sort of like steering a motorboat; when you moved the handle to the right, the floor jack went to the left and visa-versa. Pretty simple if you know what you are doing. I did not.

The office was made out of thin plywood with 2x4's holding it together into a square shape, approximately 8 feet on each side. It had no foundation and wasn't even attached to the cement floor. It had a 2'x2' windowless window where the foreman could look out and keep track of the paperwork.

The foreman was a dwarf. He stood about 4 feet tall, maybe even less. He stood inside the "office," standing on a wooden box, looking out the windowless window. This made him nearly eye-to-eye with his subordinates.

You would approach the office where the foreman would give you a "shopping list" and stamped time on it. The shopping list was the items you were to have piled on the pallet. At the bottom of this list was a completion time. It was the time you were expected to have all the items on the pallet, banded together and have the pallet placed by a semi-truck to be loaded onboard. These times would vary depending on how much stuff was on the shopping list, but they typically ranged from 15 to 29 minutes. When you were done with the list, you would return it to the office for the dwarf – I mean foreman – to stamp the finished time on the list. This way management could keep track of whether you were working hard or whether you were working your ass

off. I am not joking; to “make time,” you literally had to speed around the warehouse like a madman to even have a slight chance of being up to their standards.

Mr. Dwarf handed me my first shopping list. I had my floor jack and was sent off into the giant warehouse. Lots and lots of rows of commodities, but surprisingly none of the rows were marked with what was in them. My list had maybe 20 or so products that I had to have piled on the pallet, and I had about 15 minutes or so to get it done. I can best describe it as having to grocery shop for 30 people. I scanned through my list and started aimlessly wondering around, hoping I would find something on my list.

Within a few minutes I was in luck as I found toilet paper, lots and lots of toilet paper! My list said I needed about five cases of toilet paper so I loaded them on my pallet and was off. Up and down the aisles I went. Since I didn't actually know where anything was, it was a completely random process of what order the items were placed on my pallet. I was getting close to being finished when I noticed my last item on the list was five bags of 50-pound dog food. I looked at my pallet, which by now had grown to 6 feet tall, and I looked at the 50 pound bags of dog food.

I was in my 20's and in relatively good shape, so lifting 50 pounds up over my head was not that big of a challenge but trying to balance these bags on top of a pallet packed with other stuff and not have this tower fall over, was going to be a crap shoot. The tower already reminds you of Pisa. But it had to be done; I slung the bags up into the air and, like the children's rhyme, “where they land, I do not care.”

That wasn't completely true as I watched in horror my tower slowly tilted to one side, and then gravity took over and finished all of my hard work with a thud. Everything was now lying all over the floor. Boxes were dented, toilet paper was crushed, and you don't even want to hear what happened to the toothpaste.

I restacked everything all over again. This time the dog food was on the bottom, and toilet paper was on top. I banded everything together and limped back to the loading dock with my pallet. I must apologize to whoever bought those dented cans at the supermarket.

Then I took my shopping list back to Mr. Dwarf, and he stamped the finished time on it. My time was close to an hour to do the 15-minute list, but hey, it was my first run.

I then received another list immediately with new stuff and a new time. I then begin wandering around a different part of the warehouse. This continued for the rest of the day.

My times were 3 to 4 times longer than the company's suggested times, and my products were somewhat crushed from time to time. I should have taken a picture of the bulk bag of Reese's Cups I ran over. It was a rare combination of artistry mixed with total grossness.

I continued fumbling around the first week on the job. My times may have been slightly improved to where it was taking only double the time to complete. But I was trying, and this company had offered no training or guidance. Fumbling around was all I could do, even the co-workers

were too busy trying to make their time to offer any assistance. But that was all about to change.

I was in the middle of one of my runs, in the process of again lifting heavy bags of 50-pound rice, when someone pedaling a tricycle pulls up beside me. My brain temporarily lost itself; it couldn't comprehend what it was seeing.

"What the f---?" I was thinking. It was my midget boss, Mr. Dwarf. The man actually rode around the huge warehouse with a tricycle! He came up to me and started telling me off about how my work wasn't up to standard.

Here I am tired and sweating. I am towering over this guy holding a heavy bag of rice over my head. I am thinking to myself that I could just drop this sack and crush this bastard. We could have Rice-a-Roni with him being the Roni.

Here is a man who couldn't possibly do what I am doing, yelling at me. I could lift Mr. Dwarf up in the air and toss him if I wanted to. I didn't like him getting up in my face, even if it was just to my navel. He warned me to drastically pick up the pace, or I would soon be fired. He then rode off into the sunset on his red tricycle. It had a basket on the front bars but no bell.

Friday, the last day of my first full week, I am psyched! This is the day that I will make "time" on my shopping list. I approach Mr. Dwarf. He is standing on his wooden box in the flimsy, make-shift plywood office. He hands me a shopping list, and we stare eye-to-top of head. I grab my list, jump on my floor jack, full throttle ahead. I am up and down the aisles, weaving around other co-workers. I have partially

memorized where some of the items on my list are stored. I have 29 minutes. Things were going fairly well; this was the best run I have ever made. My 6-foot tall column of aluminum cans was stacked and banded together, but it was going to be close. I am on the other side of the warehouse with less than a minute to go. I jump on my floor jack and begin speeding full speed for the office to get my shopping list time stamped.

I round the final turn, heading straight for the office. Victory is mine! Maybe. Approaching the office, I let off the throttle. Nothing is happening! I am not slowing down. This is not my fault; it is a faulty floor jack with no braking ability. This going to be bad, as I am going full speed, straight toward the office.

I look at the windowless window; I can see Mr. Dwarf. His eyes are wide open with that look of impending doom. This floor jack is packed with nearly a ton of cans. I can do nothing except jump off the unguided missile. The floor jack hits the office and literally moves it. The plywood is not attached to the floor and the whole structure slid about 10 feet across the cement. Mr. Dwarf fell off of his wooden box and flipped over onto the floor. Paperwork was scattered everywhere.

Mr. Dwarf stood up and looked glaringly at me. I looked back at him. Our eyes locked. No words were spoken as I walked over to the time cards and punched out for the last time. It could be debated whether I was fired or that I quit, but the result would be the same. This ended my career

at the warehouse, and I was only 23 years short of being promoted to management.

NO DWARFS OR MIDGETS WERE INJURED IN THE TELLING OF THIS STORY.

– Dale McCombs, 2014

What do you think? Tell us at YourMcThoughts@McThoughts.com

(c) Dale McCombs, 2014.
All rights reserved.
Reprint with permission only.