

Just Rolling Along

A gravity roller conveyor is one of the cheapest work partners you can wish to have in your arsenal of materials handling equipment.

In manufacturing and distribution they feed cutting equipment, store work in progress, load and unload containers, speed up cross dock distribution systems and can even fold away when not required to allow you to park up, store pallets or just tidy up between processes.

There are many very simple low cost applications that allow work to be handled and manipulated particularly through processes. Here's an example.

You have 50 consignments to prepare. Usually this job involves collecting each individual component part, putting it into the unit consignment, sealing, labelling and affixing documentation, bulking up all the consignments, checking the quantities and palletising the batch for collection for shipment.

As a principal that can be developed by splitting up the tasks, organisation is key so you find 50 cardboard boxes, on a pallet and put them in an accessible location with all your other packing materials and trot off to get the goods.

You return with one set and box it up seal it and off you go again, I know you have already worked out where I am going with this so I will cut to the chase. With a gravity roller conveyor you can set up all your boxes at once or say 10 of them if space is tight, take your trolley and pick for the lot, set up the first 10 and then go to the end of the conveyor and lift them off straight onto the pallet because the conveyor is set up on a gentle fall so the next box will gravitate to you. This is the net gain:

1. You get quicker doing 10 boxes than just one
2. The packing process is faster from bulk
3. Up to 50 times less leg work
4. Better concentration
5. Easier visibility
6. Less room for mistakes
7. Counting by recognition
8. Better work in progress management
9. Faster consignment turn round time
10. Less effort, less damage risk. This includes people as well as products!

Most people can think of 2 or 3 – 10 is real knowledge.

Conveyors not only support work as an extra or many extra pairs of hands. They will store it in advance of sequential operations so that it is there on demand. This is a real time saver. I have seen companies free up the equivalent of 1.5 extra forklift trucks, save shift times and manning levels and free up resource to add massive production gains and pay for the conveyors in only a few days. When you consider

a fork truck costs upwards of £8,000 and usually around £15,000 plus the operator this is serious money. It may take you a week or so to get ahead to batch up the work and rotas but once you are set up you will stay ahead and the savings are more than worth the effort.

If you didn't know, I can't think of a seasoned production manager who likes fork trucks in and around plant and machinery. Fork trucks cause billions of pounds worth of damage to work places and equipment every year. More than half of them are doing work they should not be doing and are just wrong for the application. Conveyors are one way of keeping them out of harms way and making better, safer use of them.