

Strong Safety Culture Benefits Manufacturers

Manufacturers are becoming increasingly attuned to the importance of having a strong safety culture, according to Jim Poe, CIRAS project manager. Safety culture refers to the value and priority companies place on safety. Maintaining a strong safety culture not only helps companies prevent accidents and avoid the costs of work-related injuries, but it can also lead to reduced insurance premiums and out-of-pocket deductibles as well as improved morale.

CIRAS assists companies in the area of safety in a variety of ways. These range from sending a team to conduct a safety assessment to addressing specific concerns to helping a company understand Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards and requirements.

Jerry Hultgren, environmental health and safety coordinator at MAHLE Engine Components in Atlantic, says, "Our goal is to make sure everyone leaves work safe. That means providing the tools, education, and knowledge to perform jobs safely and to insure that the workplace environment is safe."

Although the facility's safety team conducts monthly audits, Hultgren recently sought CIRAS' assistance to conduct a safety walk-through to see if there were things that his team missed.

"With close to 1,000 different pieces of machinery, we have many different aspects to look at," Hultgren says. "CIRAS offered the opportunity to bring in a different set of eyes to help us find areas where safety could be improved."

In the half-day assessment the CIRAS team, which partnered with the Iowa-Illinois Safety Council, looked at such things as machine guarding, lock-out mechanisms on machinery, protective gear, proper chemical labeling, and housekeeping. The team then compiled a detailed report for the company.

"The photos gave us a visual look at areas of concern," Hultgren says. "OSHA regulations were referenced in the report, so if we had questions we could easily go and look more in depth at the actual OSHA regulation for that particular item."

Noise levels in factories present another safety issue. Among other noise exposure restrictions, OSHA requires

annual hearing testing and training for workers exposed to 90 decibels and above during an eight-hour shift.

Gordon Sargent is regulatory and compliance manager at Ames' Becker Underwood, which specializes in biological seed coatings for agriculture as well as landscape colorants and coatings. He became concerned about noise levels when the company installed larger tanks to increase capacity.

"We use very powerful high-speed disperser motors to produce the colorants," Sargent explains. "Our handheld noise-level tester bumped over 85 decibels on occasion. That is getting close to OSHA's threshold, so I needed to find out what the exposure was over the eight-hour time period."

As a reference, Sargent stated, the average factory noise is 80–90 decibels, lawnmower more than 90, rock concert 105, and jet engine 140.

Sargent contacted Poe, who arranged for Iowa State's Department of Environmental Health and Safety to gather data at the plant. The team outfitted the operators with special noise-level recording devices, which they wore all day. Analysis of the data was then compiled in a report.

"It turns out we were quite a bit under the OSHA threshold, so we don't have to conduct the annual hearing-level testing and training OSHA requires," Sargent notes. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that earplugs are readily accessible, and employees are encouraged to wear hearing protection.



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