



INCIDENT PREVENTION— TACTICAL RESPONSES FOR ENSURING SAFETY & COMPLIANCE

Operators offer insights on how they minimize safety hazards

By Jack Morgan

We contacted several TRSA member operators who addressed various components of an effective safety program designed to maintain compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requirements. Below are excerpts of our discussions of the tactics they’re deploying in the plant and on the route to keep staff safe.

ERGONOMICS

While there is no federal ergonomics standard, some states, such as California have such rules and OSHA also can cite companies under the agency’s general duty clause if they believe employees aren’t working in an ergonomically safe environment.

One initiative that at least two of the operators we interviewed have implemented to improve safety and efficiency is the 5S system. A Japanese workplace management program, roughly translated, 5S stands for: Sort, Set in Order, Shine Standardize and Sustain,” says Chris Kientzel, safety and production specialist for AlSCO Uniforms, St. Louis.

For the wash floor and finishing area, Kientzel suggests helping staff tackle ergonomic hazards. Broadly speaking, these include instances of physical stress and strain risks to employees from excessive pushing, pulling and reaching for goods at work. While applying the 5S principles of straightening, cleaning and organizing a work area, taking the steps noted below can help further reduce injuries in the washroom.

- Use slings and trolleys to present soiled product for loading.

- Position rails directly above the machine opening. This will minimize the effort needed to drop the contents into the machine.
- Provide carts with slings that receive the clean product and require little manipulation by the operator.

On the finishing side, Kientzel suggests implementing 5S principles, while reducing employee physical strain with:

- Antifatigue mats where staff stand.
- Feed carts with spring-loaded bottoms for less bending and reaching.
- Arrange work areas so that products are either directly in front or to the side of the employee performing the task. This will reduce twisting.
- Don’t drop slings on top of each other with product that can easily tangle (pants, coveralls, sheets, towels etc.). Present one sling of product at time. This will reduce the need for pulling or tugging on product.

Israel Cartagena, maintenance, fleet and utility team leader for the Roscoe Co., Chicago, also relies on 5S in conjunction with his company’s peer leadership program. “The 5S program offers guidance on how you set up your work area, how you maintain the work area, how you keep it clean and organized,” he says. “Peer leaders help make sure the 5S principles are consistently followed. Those people are kind of like soldiers out there because you know, management and supervisors can’t be everywhere. But there are peer leaders in their work areas.” This includes route staff, who remind route service reps (RSRs) to break up any loads greater than 50 lbs. into smaller loads before lifting to cut the risk of back and shoulder injuries, Cartagena says.

FIRE PREVENTION

Avoiding citations for fire hazards that can damage property and threaten staff

is another key focus among the operators we contacted. Most have standard procedures for managing such risks. Several common precautions include:

- **HEAT-SENSING EQUIPMENT (COST \$10-\$100 PER UNIT OR MORE):** These devices monitor heat, using thermal-imaging cameras and infrared thermometers. These sensors trigger alarms if they detect excessive heat in dryers or other equipment to alert staff of a problem before a fire ignites. Cartagena says the Roscoe Co. had an infrared thermographic survey done of all the plant's electrical systems to uncover potential fire hazards. The surveys are recommended once every three years.
- **REGULAR MACHINERY MAINTENANCE:** This includes removal of lint, dust and any flammable materials from dryers and other equipment, as well as cleaning lint traps, vents and exhaust ducts.
- **FIRE SUPPRESSION SYSTEMS:** If a fire breaks out, these systems can help minimize damage. Regular inspections and maintenance of sprinklers are crucial to keeping them in working order. The same goes for smaller devices such as fire extinguishers, along with training staff in their use.
- **EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN:** Staff should know where to go and what to do in case of a fire. The plan should include evacuation procedures and assigned duties for staff.

AVOIDING SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION OF TEXTILES

Tactics vary by industry sector. For light-soil items, such as healthcare textiles, Michelle McNeil, director of safety for the Healthcare Linen Services Group (HLSG) St. Charles, IL, recommends leaving no goods unattended for long periods. "The key there is you can't leave it overnight," she says. "You've got to wash it, dry it, fold it. You can't let it sit." On the industrial

side, Dan Getter, manager of safety operations for UniFirst Corp., Wilmington, MA, notes that an effective system of procedures requires compliance with established safety rules. For example, he notes that, "We have a rule that no soil product can be left on a truck overnight. That's not allowed. You come back, you get your product, even though it may get back in late at night, it has to come off that truck. It has to be staged in a safe area. We prefer it outside, away from the building. If the product needs to be brought into the building, it has to be stored in a safe area, under sprinklers with heat detectors. So that in the event that something were to start to create a fire, it can be addressed immediately with the proper safety equipment."

LINT MANAGEMENT TIPS

The common response to our questions about controlling lint in a plant that

can pose a potential fire hazard, plus workplace quality and safety issues, was that companies must conduct regular "blowdowns" to keep lint from settling on surfaces. Then maintenance staff can sweep it up. Operators can use a series of ceiling-mounted fans or lint-collection equipment to remove airborne lint before it settles on surfaces. Naturally, these systems require regular maintenance and visual checks to make sure they're operational. Several operators we spoke with said they believe blowdowns help, but that in some cases regular cleaning of machinery and fixtures also is needed to control lint. Russell Holt, chief compliance officer Superior Linen Service, Tulsa, OK, notes that whatever method (s) you prefer, "Regular cleaning schedules should be strictly adhered to." Linen plants generally produce more lint than garment-laundering operations, several operators said. Cartagena recalls working for an ex-employer where lint was a major issue. "I mean you walked out

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DAILY BLOWDOWNS OF LINT FROM ALL SURFACE AREAS WOULD BE SUFFICIENT, PROVIDED THAT THOSE SURFACES ARE FREE OF GREASE, OILS OR OTHER MATTER THAT WOULD MAKE LINT ‘STICK’ AND BUILD UP,” HE SAYS. “HOUSEKEEPING IS KEY TO PREVENTING LINT. THIS INCLUDES A REGULAR SCHEDULE FOR CLEANING AND PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE (PM) OF LINT-PRODUCING EQUIPMENT, SO THAT IT DOES NOT BECOME AIRBORNE IN THE FACILITY, AND THE CLEANING OF DUCT WORK.”

of there...your eyelashes were white,” he says. For uniform processing, he recommends controlling heat in dryers to reduce lint production in finishing. Stephen Jenkins, director of health and safety for Cintas Corp., Mason, OH, adds that for some areas a hands-on cleaning regimen is necessary. “Daily blowdowns of lint from all surface areas would be sufficient, provided that those surfaces are free of grease, oils or other matter that would make lint ‘stick’ and build up,” he says. “Housekeeping is key to preventing lint. This includes a regular schedule for cleaning and preventative maintenance (PM) of lint-producing equipment, so that it does not become airborne in the facility, and the cleaning of duct work.”

CHEMICAL CONCERNS

Ensuring chemical safety can hinge on design considerations, Jenkins says. “Companies can prevent spills by designating specific areas to store chemicals that have physical safeguards (shields and/or barriers) and adequate spill containment.” Other factors to consider include designating staff to work with chemical vendors during deliveries. Training these staff and complying with Material Safety Data Sheet disclosure requirements are also a must, several of our sources said. Holt adds that storage should take place in a cool, dry area, away from heat, along with appropriate containment structures, such as concrete trenches. Management should issue goggles, aprons, masks, respirators or other personal protective equipment

(PPE) as needed to protect staff who could experience exposure to harsh chemicals, he says. Getter notes that it’s important to coordinate with chemical vendors, in order to constantly review potential weak points in chemical distribution. “Our industry as a whole should continually improve the working relationships with the accountable suppliers,” he says. It’s important to continue building that relationship so that, “We can work together to look at the system as a whole from the delivery port all the way through to the final injection into the washing machine, through to the DAF (dissolved air floatation system) after the wastewater processing. These programs should be reviewed at least annually to look for weaknesses,” he says.


PROTECT PEOPLE AND PROPERTY

Getter, a former police officer, shared lessons he learned as a street cop that are applicable to laundry operations. “There are three elements, and those things really carry over to any situation: ‘lighting, locks and landscapes,’” he says. “Make sure you have adequate operational lighting in all areas where employees and visitors are coming to or leaving the plant.” This includes parking lots where fleet or private vehicles are parked. LED lighting offers an efficient and environmentally friendly option, he says. “Second, make sure all locks—including those on fleet vehicles—are in good working order. Believe it or not, the locks on the

vehicles tend to get abused a lot more than the ones on the building,” he says. “They tend to be broken.” Third, pursue “target hardening” to ensure that landscapes around the facility aren’t arranged in ways that could shelter intruders, Getter says.

Jenkins adds that video monitoring of parking lots can help discourage vandalism or the theft of vehicle parts such as catalytic converters, a common target for thieves. And no matter how small or large a company is, it’s helpful to have an emergency plan in place to deal with various contingencies. “Robust workplace-violence prevention and active-shooter response plans must also be key components of a company’s security plan in today’s world,” Jenkins says. Pursuing a proactive relationship with local law enforcement provides benefits as well. Most importantly, like other areas of health and safety, he says that a culture of employee engagement and awareness is critical to maximizing the effectiveness of established controls,

Several of the operators we contacted also are installing or planning to install dashboard cameras in their fleet vehicles. If rolled out thoughtfully, these systems needn’t generate complaints from staff. While they do record driver misconduct, such as speeding or distracted driving, the cameras also can provide exculpatory evidence in collisions where the route driver isn’t at fault. Cartagena, whose company is in the process of finalizing the installation of three-way cameras in their fleet vehicles, says the program isn’t designed to punish drivers, but rather to train and—ultimately—protect them. “It’s part of running a tight ship,” he says. It’s not just about monitoring their activities that might be inappropriate. ... It’s about safety.” In most cases, doing what OSHA requires enhances a company’s ability to protect staff. **TS**

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