Success with Ergonomics

Gold Kist, Inc.

State: Georgia
Company: Gold Kist, Inc.
Atlanta, Ga.
Industry: Poultry processing - SIC Code: 2015
Employees: 16,000 in 11 processing plants in the Southeastern United States

Success Brief: Established ergonomics program that resulted in 80% drop in musculoskeletal claims per 100 employees over 10 years.

The Problem

Gold Kist recognized that it had high rates of workers' compensation claims for repetitive motion disorders and back injuries among workers at its 11 poultry processing plants. The company hired a corporate ergonomist in 1990 to address these issues.

The Solution

In 1990, Gold Kist established an ergonomics program. Key elements added throughout the 1990’s included:

- Ergonomic committees started at all processing plants. The Corporate Ergonomist provided committee training. One of the more effective features of the committee program was that the composition of the committees was multi-disciplinary, including at least four hourly employees, plant management, engineering, maintenance, medical, and safety. This facilitated problem solving since all of the key people are on the committee.

  These committees have continued to develop and have become more effective. As could be expected, some committees moved to an effective level quickly, while some struggled and needed further training and direction. Committee leadership and management support and involvement proved to be key success factors for the Committee program.

- Medical management protocols for treating musculoskeletal injuries and education for employees on early reporting was improved. To obtain consistent protocols, an occupational consulting group was hired to develop protocols, procedures and conduct initial plant nurse training.
A professional knife and scissor sharpening program, which included training and new equipment, was initiated. A properly sharpened knife is a key ergonomic item in helping to reduce risk factors associated with processing chickens.

Written job analysis forms were developed and implemented to assist in studying jobs. These were specific to the poultry industry and its risk factors.

A form similar to a symptom survey was developed. The medical staff completed this when an employee came to the clinic with pain or discomfort. The form provided for a description of the pain and the location of the pain. It also asked for the employee’s opinion on what part of the job was causing the pain and how the employee felt the job might be improved or changed to reduce the discomfort. The forms were forwarded to the Ergonomics Committee for action, and have proved a valuable source of information.

Other program elements included new employee orientation in ergonomic hazards and early reporting, job rotation, ramp-in for new employees, employee publicity and knowledge of ergonomics and engineering guidelines for equipment and plant layout.

By the mid 1990s the program was comprehensive enough to start measuring its effectiveness. An annual Ergonomic Program Assessment was started to measure and score the processing plants on the effectiveness of their ergonomic programs. This assessment takes 3-4 days to complete and provides feedback on the strengths of the plant’s program and improvement opportunities.

By the late 1990s, Gold Kist saw significant improvement in musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) claims per 100 employees (see chart below). The number of claims per 100 employees decreased by as much as 80%. However, for each claim reported, there were still employee first aid visits to the plant medical clinics for in-house treatment. To date, the program has identified and corrected many ergonomic hazards. Going forward, even more detailed hazard identification and more effective control systems will be implemented to continue the reduction in injuries.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the emphasis has focused more on pre-planning good ergonomics and safety into new plant manufacturing processes and building changes. Plant changes were made often to meet customer demands. This presented an opportunity to “do it right the first time,” as opposed to installing new processes and then returning to fix the ergonomic problems reflected by employee injuries and complaints. A pre-planning process called Ergo-Safe was initiated. All process changes had to have a formal review for ergonomic and safety considerations. This was done at the “blue print” stage so that changes, such as lift devices, conveyors to eliminate heavy container handling and adjustable stands could be included in the project. Key individuals for this planning effort were the plant engineers, maintenance personnel and members of the Ergonomics Committees. This planning provided a “proactive” element to the program, in addition to the more traditional “reactive” element.

In the last few years, Gold Kist has made small modifications to its ergonomics program such as “Quick Fixes,” which are obvious ergonomic improvements that can be made with little analysis or study. Many of these come from the hourly employee committee members who know the jobs and see ergonomic problems in their work area.

Gold Kist’s commitment demonstrated its commitment to a comprehensive safety and ergonomics program by tying plant management’s performance reviews to the Ergonomic Program Assessment score. The company also More chairpersons of committees came from the operations side of the plants, including supervisors, department managers, process control personnel and plant superintendents. This increases the ability to get things done.

Annual training by the Corporate Ergonomist augments the effectiveness of the committees. Additionally, ergonomic specifications for each major process machine are continuing to be developed to assist with proper ergonomic design in new plant operations.

The Impact
By 1995, the company's ergonomics program had proven quickly its effectiveness. Workers' compensation claims for work-related repetitive motion injuries decreased by 46%; claims for back injuries from lifting decreased 50%. Costs for new workers' compensation cases also declined by 20% for repetitive motion injuries and 36% for back injuries related to lifting. By 2005, the combined number of MSDs claims per 100 employees had decreased almost 80% from the program inception.

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**Gold Kist Inc. MSD Claims per 100 Employees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Claims per 100 Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>5.63</td>
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<td>1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Text Version of Chart:

**Title:** Gold Kist Inc. MSD Claims per 100 Employees

**Type:** Vertical Bar Graph

**Graph Elements:** 17 - One bar for each year from 1990 to 2005 with the number of ergonomics claims per 100 employees

**Values:**

- 1990 = 7.71
- 1991 = 5.63
- 1992 = 7.81
- 1993 = 7.56
- 1994 = 5.08
- 1995 = 4.08
- 1996 = 3.56
- 1997 = 2.95
- 1998 = 3.13
- 1999 = 3.89
- 2000 = 2.45
- 2001 = 1.52
- 2002 = 2.47
- 2003 = 2.11
- 2004 = 2.50
- 2005 = 1.71
The number of musculoskeletal claims decreased from approximately 8 claims per 100 employees to below 2 claims per 100 employees as a result of implementing an ergonomics program.

**Source:** Don Robinson, Corporate Ergonomist, Gold Kist Inc. (July 2006).