HEALTHY WORK

CASE STUDY

Retail designers go extra mile on shop floor

Retail Dimension already had good controls in place for dust, but management wanted to go that extra mile.

Over the past two years the Auckland and Wellington-based business has taken a number of measures to improve air quality, including recommissioning its local exhaust ventilation (LEV) system, and is now considering replacing compressed air 'blowers' with industrial vacuums.

General Manager Operations Steve Logan said, the increased focus on health and safety awareness, combined with existing measures, has improved overall health and safety outcomes and contributed to improved employee satisfaction whilst achieving a 50% improvement in lost time incident frequency rate (LTIFR) over the last 18 months.

"It's certainly the way to go," said Mr Logan. "Our aim is to create the safest environment we can for our workers. We are also mindful that when we tender for business with blue chip companies, they are increasingly looking for evidence of this sort of behaviour. Whether this leads to tangible gains is difficult to quantify, but it all helps."

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The company designs, builds and installs interiors for New Zealand's biggest High Street names, design being carried out at its Auckland head office and manufacturing both offshore and at its Miramar factory in Wellington.

Mr Logan, who joined the business two years ago, said the owners had always been diligent about meeting legislative requirements around health and safety, including air quality. He recognised however that exceeding required standards did not need to be onerous and could readily enhance the environment for workers.

WORK-RELATED HEALTH IN ACTION

- increased focus on health and safety awareness has contributed to improved employee satisfaction
- annual lung function tests for all at-risk workers.

The factory has identified three key areas requiring management of airborne hazards: aerosol paints and solvents from spray-painting in a down-draught booth; fine dust from powder coating and wood dust from machining of MDF sheets.

Existing measures included vacuum extraction systems at source drawing off MDF dust above shaping tools, and individual LEV hoods for each welding bay; on-tool extraction units on portable sanding machines; a ventilated mixing room and store for Class 1 – 5 substances; and PPE

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including positive pressure and cartridge respirators.

The company undertakes annual lung function tests for all at-risk workers and is subject to annual recertification of its paint spray booth to ensure that it remains compliant.

In 2014, the company engaged an occupational hygienist to undertake environmental monitoring to ensure that there were no unsatisfactory exposures to contaminants. This showed the site was well below acceptable levels for workspace exposure. Results for the respirable dust exposure monitoring for instance were 0.53 mg/m^3 - compared to the TWA standard of 2.0 mg/m^3.

"Whilst these results were encouraging, there is still some dust present and hence some risk to health "said Mr Logan.

"We had a mothballed vacuum extraction system recommissioned and implemented other recommendations of the hygienist. We are confident that we do not expose our workers to harmful contaminants."

"We have a very strong focus on extraction at source and PPE. We audit all PPE including the cartridge respirators monthly, physically checking them for any maintenance needs and engaging with workers to ensure that they continue to be used correctly."

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The current project is to replace the use of compressed airlines that are commonly used to blow dust from workstations. A much more effective solution is to use basic industrial vacuum cleaners wherever possible. "We researched cost-effective alternatives and our workers are now trialling different vacuums and advising us which are the most effective."

"Unfortunately the use of air hoses is such common practice in a lot of industry. But all it does is blow the dust off the work surface and into the air," said Mr Logan. Our workers have been a bit resistant to the change but with the support of our proactive Health & Safety Committee members, and a genuine desire to improve conditions, we are making good progress. "While we are well within legal limits for air contaminants, this is one more step we can take to reduce that further."

"We have a very strong health and safety awareness within the factory as evidenced in a recent ACC audit where the employee feedback group voted the company a '9 out of 10' for health and safety."

For more examples and information visit www.worksafe.govt.nz