

Spotlight on Our Members: E.J. Ajax & Sons

This article started out as a congratulations to Minnesota Safety Council member E.J. Ajax & Sons, on recently receiving the 2010 North American Metal Forming Industry Award of Honor for Safety. Well, it's still that, but, thanks to the candor of company owner Erick Ajax, and his willingness to share his company's experience so that others might benefit, it's now a whole lot more. It's a story about the unrelenting effort required to sustain even the strongest of safety cultures, and the opportunities for self-evaluation and education that a near miss can provide.

A recent national news release from the Precision Metalforming Association announced the selection of E.J. Ajax & Sons to receive the top Award of Honor for safety in the \$131 billion dollar North American metal forming industry, noting that the company (named one of the Top Ten Safest Companies in America in 2007), had gone more than 20 years without a lost-time incident and more than seven years without an OSHA-recordable incident. During the following two weeks, Ajax & Sons experienced six near misses, two of which could have been fatal and three involving new employees.



E.J. Ajax team members

“It has been very humbling,” Erick said. “We literally could have had two deaths in our plant – one involving a punch press and one with a fork truck.”

The improving economy figures heavily in this story. “We’re so busy right now.” Erick said. “We’ve been operating really lean and we needed some new people to come in.” In retrospect, he believes appropriate checks and balances and supervision were not in place.

With the help of their safety committee, the Ajax management team has moved quickly to make aggressive changes:

- Onsite forklift training was scheduled almost immediately to improve the process for certifying entry level and re-certifying current employees, as well as to provide train-the-trainer instruction. Licensing requirements for entry level and class C apprentices were modified to put them on provisional status. “They can’t lift anything more than two inches from the floor until we meet with Bill [the instructor from the Minnesota Safety Council] and training is completed,” Erick said. The company is considering keeping new people on provisional forklift status until they have 500 hours of on-the-job training and experience.
- A supervisor’s duties were re-aligned to be more focused on safety for “newbies” and on professional development.
- The entry level person involved in the punch press incident was terminated. He had disregarded instructions from management and his supervisor, doing things that went beyond his authority and skill set. His actions resulted in the explosion of a twenty pound sheet lifting magnet, sending shrapnel, tooling clamps and half-inch bolts flying.

Administration

Carol Bufton
President
carol.bufton@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Ann Kulenkamp
Director of Communications
ann.kulenkamp@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Wade Salstrom
Manager, Administration
wade.salstrom@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Vicki Daca
Bookkeeper
vicki.daca@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Kristy Zack
Communications/Information Technician
kristy.zack@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Membership

Cary Swenson
Director of Membership Services
cary.swenson@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Jeff Lovig
Manager of Membership Services
jeff.lovig@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Linda McNurlin
Membership Services Assistant
linda.mcNurlin@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Steve Rauh
Product Sales Coordinator
steve.rauh@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Alan Terwedo
Emergency Care Coordinator
al.terwedo@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Continuing Education

Regina Hoffman

Director of Continuing Education
gina.hoffman@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Jan Fedora

Consultant, Occupational Safety and Health Services
jan.fedora@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Lisa Kons

Coordinator, Continuing Education
lisa.kons@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Angie Kupczak

Program Assistant
angie.kupczak@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Bill Schreiner

Consultant, Commercial Motor Vehicle/Industrial Safety
bill.schreiner@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Carol Wicks

Program Assistant
carol.wicks@minnesotasafetycouncil.org
104144

Family Safety Programs

Erin Petersen

Coordinator, Family Safety Programs
erin.petersen@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Video Library

Angie Kupczak

Video Librarian
angie.kupczak@minnesotasafetycouncil.org

Erick pointed out that in a high hazard industry like metal forming, there's a statistical ratio of about 10 near-misses to one fatality or serious injury. The fact that Ajax & Sons had six in two weeks has given him plenty of sleepless nights. "We have really thought long and hard about this," he said. "I met with the first and second shifts and explained the changes, and I apologized to them as the manager and owner for dropping the ball and letting these things get to the level they did."

That level of management commitment and employee involvement is a hallmark of the Ajax safety culture. Key elements of the safety program include company-provided safety equipment; ongoing safety training (a minimum of 10 hours per employee annually); substantive input from workers on process improvement, and empowerment of workers to shut down any machine or operation at any time if they question its safety. Near misses are used as a learning experience. Erick personally follows up on every near miss. He asks other employees in the same department "what went wrong and what corrective action steps have we taken to prevent this from happening again?" All safety committee members and supervisors complete the coursework for the Minnesota Safety Council/Minnesota OSHA Basic Workplace Safety Certificate. Apprenticeship training is linked with achievement of a national industry credential that includes industrial safety and environmental protection. The company also has a strong partnership with Minnesota OSHA and was the first metal stamping company in the state to achieve OSHA's Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program (SHARP) designation a decade ago.

An incentive program rewards employee safety with annual bonuses equal to half of the company's savings from low workers' compensation rates. (The company averages \$800 per employee in premiums compared to an industry average of \$3,000 - \$4,000.) The incentive functions as simply one component of a comprehensive safety program – and a culture where failing to report an injury is foreign. The bonus is appreciated, Erick said, "but it's not the Holy Grail. It's a far higher priority for our people to know that they're professionals and go home to their families safe every night with all their fingers. Professionals don't get hurt on the job."

"This is something that we take very seriously," he continued. "It's part of our culture that we don't sweep things under the carpet and we sure don't allow a situation where someone would not report a workplace injury." And given the kind of injuries that occur in a metal forming plant – lacerations, amputations – they're not easy to cover up.

That said, Erick acknowledged that ergonomics and back strain could be one area an employee could attempt to hide. "You can't believe how hard we work on ergonomics – we bring in an ergonomist to analyze workstations in the plant and offices. We have hoists throughout the plant – no one is to lift anything that weighs more than 50 pounds." If they do, the company's strict enforcement policy kicks in: one violation within a 12-month period prompts a verbal warning, the second is put in writing, and the third results in a one-day paid "thinking day" where employees are sent home to decide whether they can follow safety policies. If not, they're fired.

"Ninety percent of the time they course correct," Erick said. "They get it and become an employee who can follow our policies and our continuous improvement process, which is supported by our partnership with MNOSHA, participation in MNSHARP, and all the things that the Minnesota Safety Council has done for us."

Enforcement of safety policies also includes random drug and alcohol testing for all company employees, including office employees and officers. ("Without a doubt the absolute number one thing that has kept us incident-free for over 20 years," Erick said.)

That record is intact, but never taken for granted. "It's easy to brag about our safety record and pound our chest," Erick said, "but the reality is we have the same challenges that others have." As recent events have shown, meeting those challenges effectively is an ongoing part of what he calls "the moral and ethical responsibility of owning and managing a high hazard business."