

OK Champion earns safety honor

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HAMMOND If more small companies took advantage of the Indiana Department of Labor's INSafe program, they'd find that dealing with the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Division becomes much less nerve-wracking.

Hammond-based OK Champion Corp. found that out in the best possible way: by successfully completing the program's Indiana Safety & Health Achievement Recognition Program. The company celebrated the achievement Friday during a luncheon ceremony.

The program, opened to companies with 250 or fewer employees at one site, or no more than 500 employees nationwide, gets the employees thinking about safety above and beyond what the state requires, said Kevin Szirvecz, OK Champion's controller.

Once employees put the new initiatives in place, IOSHA performs a rigorous audit. If they pass, the company is exempt from on-site drop-ins by IOSHA for a year.

OK Champion's President, Paul Knoerzer, discovered the program and presented it to his 32-employee staff, said Office Manager Joanne Coleman, who ended up spearheading the project. The first thing she did was get everyone involved in the program, from administration to janitorial.

"The safety committee is comprised of five different people, and we rotate them every four months," Coleman said. "It brings new people who offer new ideas into the mix."

One of the ideas was plant cleanliness. The plant, where the 109-year-old OK Champion makes equipment for the telecommunications industry, wasn't filthy, but it wasn't exactly clean, either, comparatively.

"The plant is spotless now, and our workers take a lot of pride in that," Coleman said.

Making equipment safer also was a top priority, she said, and it always has been important with machines that were built in the 1800s that didn't have manuals anymore.

Setting up preparedness was the biggest factor, however, Szirvecz said. To that end, the company, which already had a fairly low accident ratio, started documenting near-accidents as well.

"You might have someone who did something stupid one day or something happened that no one might've thought (was important), so reporting these incidents warns people that they can happen," he said.

Several employees also underwent the Red Cross' First Responder training.

The one thing Coleman and Szirvecz want to stress is that any small business can do this and will be better off.

"We didn't have to spend a lot of money making these changes," Szirvecz said. "There are a lot of programs out there for safety, but small companies can't afford them. So to have a program like this, it's something a small business can get involved in."

For more information on the INsafe program, please call (317) 232-2655 or log on to <http://www.in.gov/labor/insafe/index.html>