



Just rewards

GE has recently won a major industry award for innovation

Leading highway maintenance contractor Ringway, presented GE Equipment Services Plant Hire with an award for innovation recently for all the work they have carried out on their HAV Tag process. A first of its kind hand-tool 'tagging' system that GE introduced to help Ringway (and other customers) meet the UK's latest safety-warning obligations for high-vibration construction equipment. Educating construction workers about new regulations governing the safe use of hand tools including high-powered electric handsaws, drills, plate surface compactors and paving breakers, is one of the most pressing problems facing many companies.

Prolonged use of such equipment in certain ways can lead to serious injury. The best-known ailment is a condition called vibration-induced 'white finger.' But vibrations from these kinds of tools can cause changes in tendons, bones, joints, and blood vessels including tingling or numbness in the fingers or loss of grip strength. Collectively, the effects are known as Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome, or HAVS. According to the Health & Safety Executive, the UK government's occupational safety-compliance regulatory watchdog, nearly 300,000 people in the country suffer from advanced HAVS. Another five million are deemed 'at risk' of developing HAVS, and an

estimated one million are regularly exposed to 'dangerous' vibration levels.

Vibrations directive

To respond to this occupational hazard, Europe introduced the 'Physical Agents (Vibrations) Directive' in 2002. In July 2005, the UK followed up with the enactment of 'Vibrations at Work' regulations, which, in effect, gave the earlier European PAV Directive the weight of British law. The UK statute, GE Plant Hire EHS manager Robert Allen explains, puts the 'duty of enforcement' squarely on employers like Ringway and not on the equipment provider or end user. In other words, GE has no regulatory requirement to alert or educate customers as to how long they can safely expose workers to equipment vibrations. Just the same, Robert says, GE saw where it could 'add value' for customers by enabling them to comply with HAVS.

Customers have hardly been shy about seeking out that value from GE, when equipment usage limits were introduced in July 2005, depot staff found themselves fielding phone inquiries asking for direction on how long equipment could be used before their employees edged into non-compliance. Fortunately, GE's EHS staff were already positioned to provide

customers with assistance.

Support first came in the form of a spreadsheet listing baseline HSE vibration exposure limits by equipment type. This spreadsheet is comparable to what's now found on labels for new hand-held equipment, but which isn't shown on countless older hand-held tools in wide circulation. Distributing these spreadsheets to depot staff and to a customer's EHS staff was a small but significant step.

Challenges

Communication and education on this subject is a huge task in itself, the spreadsheets were a good beginning, but the real compliance challenge for company's like Ringway, didn't lie in passing the right info from GE's safety experts to theirs. The real challenge lay in getting that info to end users of equipment, in a way that is both easy to comprehend and impossible to overlook. From that mandate the tag concept was born.

Robert and Ringway's Group health & safety manager put together a HAVS working group, to carry out onsite trials of options using different construction crews. The trials tested usage against the HSE's established 'point system' for quantifying cumulative vibration impact, remaining mindful of the maximum time or points that could be consumed while still meeting the operator's, supervisor's and Ringway's production needs. The trials have produced tagging information that is more comprehensive than anything found on new equipment. It took almost four years to collect all the data that goes into the GE points system and tagging program.

Ultimately, the customer's problems become our problems if we don't address them," Robert cautions. Leading the charge in a new arena of safety compliance will save both customers and GE time. Better yet, the tagging remedy is not only less labour-intensive for both GE and company's like Ringway, but it also enables end users to comply. Company EHS reps, no longer have to constantly explain to workers what's required for compliance. Likewise, workers can never claim they didn't know better with a simple-to-understand bright yellow-coloured tag staring them in the face each time they pick up a hand tool. Properly implemented, tagging is as close as a company can get to an off-the-shelf vibration compliance program.

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