



## **Auto parts JHSC moves ahead on ergonomic changes**

The effectiveness of joint efforts at a Windsor, Ontario auto parts manufacturing plant demonstrate the value of involving workers in the process and building relationships on shared health and safety goals.

### **Making the problem visible**

When a German-owned company opened its first North American facility they did so at a factory and with a workforce used to making plastic barrels and garbage cans. The transition to making automotive parts wasn't without its challenges as the new work environment involved multiple assembly lines, different workstations and new products.

In the plant's first 10 years, the rate of work-related repetitive strain injuries began to climb to alarming levels. Wanting to dig deeper into the nature and source of the injuries, the worker joint health and safety committee (JHSC) members convinced the employer to conduct body mapping for each workstation and assembly line to identify injuries and near misses. They also created an overall map of the plant to identify patterns and work areas with elevated injury rates.

This critical first step helped isolate the source of injuries. Making the problem visible also helped kick-start healthy and productive discussion at the JHSC. Over time it would become clear that worker and employer representatives shared a common goal—reducing work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Finding ways to eliminate worker pain and suffering could also bring production efficiencies. It was a win-win.

### **Ensuring worker participation**

Through the JHSC the employer agreed to conduct hazard assessments for every job in the plant. With initial support from the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, an external consultant was hired to complete a physical demands analysis for every workstation and operator on each of the plant's three shifts.

With the JHSC leading this plant-wide initiative they were able to reassure workers that assessment results were intended to guide prevention efforts, not ramp up production rates and potentially create more injuries. By securing workers' confidence in the process and ensuring the JHSC worker co-chair was present during the assessments, workers became active participants in the process. Because workers were comfortable helping to identify problems and proposing solutions early on, they were also more accepting of workstation redesigns that would come later.

### **Making gradual improvements**

Armed with this invaluable workplace-specific information which identified the problems the JHSC wanted to move on to solutions. They began to tackle a handful of smaller challenges, ones that might yield positive results more quickly.

Transporting and lifting materials was identified as a major source of injury throughout the plant. The JHSC's first priority was to find ways to reduce the amount of manual lifting. One solution involved redesigning certain workstations to incorporate a point of use delivery system. This system brings components directly to workers eliminating the need for them to move and reach for parts. Much of the redesign was relatively inexpensive often using in-house skilled labour to make the modifications.

To support the new delivery system a line stocker job classification was created, new motorized equipment purchased and the parts distribution centre relocated to the middle of the facility. All of these changes helped reduce lifting hazards, travel time within the plant and improved efficiency.



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Other plant improvements such as adjustable scissor-lifts and sliding tables would become common fixtures in the plant. The sliding tables in particular are used to position fuel tanks to waist level where workers can slide the component into place without any lifting. So successful was this intervention it was globally adopted by the company.

### **Committing resources**

Both union and management representatives believe worker participation was critically important to the success of their ergonomic interventions. Having key players involved in the process—a worker JHSC co-chair devoted half-time thanks to negotiated contract language and the commitment of senior company leadership—was also important in moving prevention efforts along.