ERGONOMIC INTERVENTIONS AT VULCAN MATERIALS COMPANY

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ABSTRACT

Many mining companies apply ergonomic principles, but it is done either informally and/or reactively. Examples of an informal approach include replacing worn equipment, such as seats, with models that have ergonomic features, or modifying tasks to eliminate safety hazards that will also reduce risk factor exposures that may result in musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). A reactive approach is followed when modifying a task/equipment after an MSD occurs. Neither one of these approaches involves a systematic method of proactively applying ergonomic principles to actually prevent injuries or illnesses. This paper will discuss how Vulcan Materials Company applied ergonomic principles and the interventions implemented to reduce risk factor exposures.

INTRODUCTION

According to the International Ergonomics Association (2000), ergonomics is concerned with understanding interactions among people and other elements of a system to optimize their well-being and overall system performance. This is generally accomplished by applying ergonomic principles to the design and evaluation of tasks, jobs, products, environments and systems to match them with the needs, capabilities and limitations of people. When integrated with safety and health programs, ergonomics can be viewed as an approach to reduce injury and illness rates and to improve the overall working conditions for employees by addressing risk factor exposures that may occur during manual tasks. These exposures are most often associated with musculoskeletal disorders, but may also result in other disorders and illnesses, such as heat stress disorders or vibration-related illnesses.

Because mining is often characterized by physically-demanding manual tasks performed under dynamic conditions, greater challenges exist for applying ergonomic principles (Steiner et al., 1999; Scharf et al., 2001). In 2005, NIOSH and Vulcan Materials Company formed a partnership to demonstrate the efficacy of applying ergonomic principles in mining environments. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how Vulcan applied ergonomic principles and adapted the implementation process to meet its organizational and cultural needs.

Process Implementation

Vulcan Materials Company is the largest producer of construction aggregates (crushed stone, sand and gravel) in the United States. Vulcan has over 356 facilities located in 21 states, District of Columbia and Mexico, and employs over 9,000 employees. The facilities are diverse in function, including stone quarries, sand and gravel plants, sales yards, asphalt plants and ready-mix concrete plants. In 2004, Vulcan shipped 243 million tons of aggregates.

As a company, the basic organizations within Vulcan are seven autonomous divisions. The safety program is multi-level with Safety, Health and Environmental (SHE) Teams at the plant level, a Safety and Health Department at the division level (Safety Manager and Safety and Health (S&H) Representatives), and a Safety and Health Department at the corporate level (Safety Director and two safety professionals). Members of the plant SHE Teams include two to four hourly employees, who volunteer for this assignment. The main functions of the SHE Teams are to conduct periodic inspections of the site and then to report the findings to the Plant Manager. The division safety staff provides technical support to the plant management and SHE Teams, while the corporate safety staff provide technical support to the Division Safety Department.

As a member of the National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association, Vulcan committed in 2002 to reduce its overall injury rate by 50 percent within five

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1 Manual tasks include any activity requiring the worker to grasp, manipulate, strike, throw, carry, move, hold or restrain an object, load or body part.
years. Vulcan immediately took steps to address safety and health hazards, which resulted in significant reductions in its injury rate; however, the injury rate was still above its goal because many of the injuries that were still occurring were a result of exposures to MSD risk factors. Vulcan decided it needed to take another approach. In August 2005, NIOSH researchers and Vulcan safety personnel (corporate and division level safety professionals) met to discuss how ergonomic principles could be applied within Vulcan Materials Company to prevent musculoskeletal disorders. Because Vulcan has many facilities with less than 50 employees and limited onsite safety and health expertise, it was necessary to develop a plan to address both of these issues, and also to address the overall size of the company. The plan that was developed took a two-phase approach. The first phase demonstrates how ergonomics can be applied at their sites; the second phase lays the foundation for implementing a process throughout the company. To date, the first phase involved implementing ergonomics processes at two pilot sites within the MidEast Division; the second phase began with introducing ergonomic concepts and Vulcan’s ergonomics initiative to other Vulcan sites.

At the pilot sites (North and Royal Stone Quarries), ergonomics was integrated with the existing safety and health programs, primarily with the Vulcan injury reduction initiative – Taking Work out of Work. Employees are encouraged to report risk factor exposures, using a card shown in Figure 1, to the Ergonomics Review Team, whose members include the plant manager, the pit and plant supervisors and the SHE Team leader. The Ergonomics Review Team, along with input from the S&H Representative, address the concerns using the process shown in Figure 2. When the concerns are investigated, a Manual Task Risk Assessment Form is used to evaluate risk factors, determine which risk factors should be controlled, and establish a prioritization score for determining which exposures should be addressed first.

**Figure 2. Ergonomics Process Flow Diagram.**

The Vulcan process includes documenting the concern and the action taken to address the concern in a pilot Access database. As Vulcan expands its application of ergonomics throughout the MidEast Division and the other six divisions, information from the submitted cards and controls implemented will be captured in a division or corporate-wide database and will be used as a resource for finding solutions to specific exposures, as well as to identify trends.

In April 2006, Vulcan employees at the two pilot sites received ergonomics and risk factor awareness training. The objectives of the employee training were two fold – to provide employees with skills for identifying risk factors in their work area and their skills for identifying safety or health hazards, and to encourage employee participation in the ergonomics process. Prior studies have shown that an important element of successful ergonomics processes is employee involvement (Cohen et.al, 1997). The employee training was given in two 90-minute sessions, one week apart, and was modified to include a homework assignment that encouraged employees to complete report cards identifying risk factor exposures for two tasks they do as part of their jobs. The first session of this training was given by the Division
Safety Manager, and the second session was given by
the S&H representatives assigned to the pilot sites. To
become familiar with the training, these instructors
attended a train-the-trainer session offered by NIOSH
in February 2006.

The S&H Representatives assigned to the pilot
sites and the Ergonomics Review Teams at both pilot
sites were provided additional training on
implementing the ergonomics process, primarily how
to process report cards, evaluate risk factor exposures
and determine appropriate controls. This training,
given in April 2006, was a combination of classroom
training and a field exercise. In the classroom,
participants discussed how to implement the process,
evaluate various implementation tools, and viewed
several short videos to gain practice at identifying risk
factor exposures. The field exercise provided practice
with observing actual tasks being performed by
employees and with completing the Manual Task Risk
Assessment Form. The field exercise was followed
with a brainstorming session to determine solutions for
the observed risk factor exposures. The training
methods and risk assessment tools were based on
previous experiences of implementing participative
ergonomics in surface and underground coal mines
(Burgess-Limerick et al, in press; Steiner et al, 2004;
Torma-Krajewski et al, 2006; Torma-Krajewski et al,
in press; Unger et al., 2002).

In July 2006, the S&H Representatives and
Ergonomics Review Team members were offered
another training session focusing on job improvements,
primarily selecting hand tools and modifying manual
tasks. Additional information was provided on the
stress experienced by the back muscles and spinal discs
during various lifting tasks. Participants were given
practice at determining options for reducing exposures
to risk factors by analyzing several tasks performed at
their sites and then brainstorming job improvements.

Vulcan initiated the second phase of its
application of ergonomic principles in November 2005
by offering all of the safety and health representatives
training that helped them to identify risk factor
exposures and to determine simple task improvements
for reducing or eliminating risk factor exposures.
During this training, the representatives were asked to
submit examples of job improvements implemented at
sites within their divisions. Approximately 10
improvements were submitted and posted on the
Vulcan intranet. In February 2006, ergonomic
concepts were introduced to the Mideast Division plant
managers. This presentation focused on Vulcan injury
statistics with risk factor exposures and how
ergonomics helped other companies with reducing their
injury rates. The Mideast Division Engineering
Department also received training in July 2006. This
training emphasized the need to apply ergonomic
principles during the planning and design stages to
prevent exposures to risk factors. Specific components
of this training included anthropometry and
workstation and conveyor design principles. For a
homework assignment, participants were asked to
design a scales yard clerk workstation that could be
used as a prototype for other Vulcan sites. The
training/presentation offered during this phase was
conducted primarily by NIOSH researchers, with
support from Vulcan safety and health staff who
provided information specific to Vulcan injury rates.

Because Vulcan is applying ergonomic
principles at several levels within its company, there
are several champions. (The need for a champion is
discussed in Torma-Krajewski et al, 2006.) At the pilot
sites, the plant manager and the S&H representatives
are the champions. At the division level, the division
safety manager is the champion; and at the corporate
level, the champion is the corporate safety manager.

**Interventions or Job Improvements**
To demonstrate the ability to apply ergonomic
principles at mines, interventions or job improvements
implemented as a result of a report card being
submitted were identified and documented. Employees
submitted 42 report cards, 14 from the North Quarry
and 28 from the Royal Stone Quarry. From the initial
submittal of cards, risk factors and body discomfort
were evaluated (Figures 3 and 4). At the North Quarry,
poor postures, repetitive motions and bouncing/jarring
were the most frequently reported risk factors, and
knees were the most frequently reported body part
experiencing discomfort. In contrast, at Royal Stone,
repetitive work and bouncing/jarring were the most
frequently reported risk factors, and the lower back
was the most frequently reported body part experiencing
discomfort. Royal Stone employees reported more
exposures to risk factors than North Quarry employees.
Many of the reported exposures were associated with
seating issues in heavy equipment. The greater
reporting rate by Royal Stone employees could be a
result of several factors, such as cultural differences,
older equipment, or simply a better response to the
homework assignment.
Poor Posture
Repetitive Work
Vibrating Tools
Static Position
Forceful Grip
Heavy Shoveling

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The employees also had to twist and turn their neck and back to see as the truck pulled cord to open and close the bins. The employees also had to twist and turn their neck and back to see as the truck.

Interventions included:

- Problem: When metal was removed from large conveyor magnets, it was placed in large cans until the cans were full. To empty the cans they were manually handled. Solution: The metal is now placed in a basket that was designed to be moved with a forklift, which eliminates all manual handling of the cans. (Figure 6)

- Problem: Loader operator repeatedly twisted his neck and back when looking to the rear of the loader. Solution: Side mirrors were installed on the loader.

- Problem: Crusher operator twisted his neck and back when using a computer to set the speed on the feeder as he monitored the feeder, and he had to stand to see the feeder. Solution: A sitting workstation was installed on an elevated platform and the feeder controls were moved to reduce the amount of twisting. (Figure 5)

- Problem: Employees driving stock trucks under supply bins had to use a pull cord to open and close the bins. The employees also had to twist and turn their neck and back to see as the truck.

Figure 3. Percentage of report cards identifying exposures to specific risk factors. (More than one response permitted.)

Figure 4. Percentage of submitted reports cards identifying specific body parts with discomfort. (More than one response permitted.)

Figure 5. Sitting workstation installed for crusher operator.

Figure 6. Basket for storing metal scrap that can be moved with a forklift.
was loaded. To perform this task, the truck window had to be open, which increased exposures to dust and noise. **Solution:** Mirrors were installed for viewing the back of the truck as it is filling, and a remote control system is now used to open the bin.

- **Problem:** Employees had to pull large wash hoses up and down several levels of the screen towers. **Solution:** Valves and hoses were installed on all levels of the towers.

- **Problem:** When replacing a power converter on a haul truck, the power converter had to be lifted up onto the frame of the truck. The employee then had to climb onto the frame of the truck and carry the power converter down the frame of the truck. **Solution:** A working platform was built at the height of the power converter on the truck. Once the platform is placed with the hoist, the employee then uses the overhead hoist to lift the power converter in place, eliminating all manual handling.

- **Problem:** When operating the rubber-tire dozer in the stockpile area, which is a high traffic area, the driver had to turn his head and neck repeatedly to check blind spots before reversing direction. **Solution:** Installed a blind spot camera.

- **Problem:** Lab technician had to carry a five-gallon bucket of stone (approximately 80 lbs) down the conveyor and load it on his pickup truck to take it to the lab. **Solution:** An automatic belt sampler was installed that discharges the sample directly into a bucket located on a stand that is the same height as the pickup truck bed.

- **Problem:** The shop mechanic stood on concrete floors all day long. **Solution:** Anti-fatigue floor mats are now used at various locations in the shop and several different types of shoe insoles are being tested.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Applying ergonomic principles within the mining industry has been shown to be a viable approach for addressing exposures to risk factors by implementing task improvements. Vulcan was able to integrate ergonomics with its existing safety and health program and to establish a systematic process to resolve risk factor exposures and to implement task improvements. As the implementation process continues at the pilot sites, it is anticipated that the process will move from addressing risk factor exposures and musculoskeletal disorders to incorporating ergonomic principles in the design of future workstations and equipment specifications. Risk factor exposures will be proactively addressed in the design and planning stage.

As additional sites within Vulcan Materials Company apply ergonomic principles it is expected that the process will be modified to meet specific needs of each site, such as cultural and organizational issues; however, all sites will be following the basic framework established by the pilot sites:

- Assign a champion to promote and serve as an advocate and leader in applying ergonomic principles.
- Provide training to employees and organizational entities responsible for implementing the ergonomics process. The training should be customized to meet the roles each group plays in the implementation process.
- Develop a systematic process to identify and control risk factors that considers the method, tools, equipment, workstation and environment.
- Track and document progress to demonstrate the benefits of the process, share interventions and communicate lessons-learned across all Vulcan sites.
- Integrate ergonomics with other processes that affect worker safety and health, such as purchasing decisions, work schedules, modifications to existing facilities/equipment, and procedures. By doing this, costly re-engineering efforts to correct problems with risk factor exposures can be avoided.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions by the following individuals involved in the implementation of the Vulcan ergonomics process: Kelly Baron, Susan Moore, and Jeff Welsh of NIOSH; Bryan Moore, Truman Chidsey, Jeff Black, Dick Seago, Mike Junkerman, Andy Perkins, Tim Walston and Philip Phibbs of Vulcan Materials Company.

**Disclaimer**

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**REFERENCES**


