

Beyond Hard Hats and Goggles

BY GEOFF WEISENBERGER

AISC's Safety Committee is working hard to keep fab shop safety high on the priority list.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT SAFETY LATELY? Either way, it's safe to say that it's an area that often gets overlooked. Fabricators are currently very busy, and in situations where business is good and production is the number one goal, unfortunately, the frequency of hazards can increase as shops fill with work, often calling for the addition of new workers.

However, he AISC Safety Committee offers some resources to help keep safety a top priority. The Committee's stated mission is to:

- Serve as a major advocate of loss prevention and control within the steel fabricating industry.
- Assist AISC members in achieving the economic and morale benefits that can result from effective management controls in lost workday injury prevention and the prevention of other incidents that adversely affect operations.

More than Equipment

Evaluation of processes is key, says Lawrence Kruth, P.E., engineering and safety manager with Douglas Steel Fabricating Corporation, Lansing, Mich., and Chair of the Safety Committee. He explains that in Michigan, for example, every person in the fabrication shop is required to undergo a personal equipment evaluation based on what job they perform. "If performed properly, you can reduce the risk of injuries," he says.

"An evaluation of incidents indicates that we need to pay attention to what happens at the beginning and end of tasks, and we need to take fresh looks at existing conditions to see hazards we have seen often enough we inadvertently accept," says AISC's Tom Schlafly, Committee Secretary.

Eye safety is an especially important consideration. According to another Committee member, David Sailing, manager of operations for Zalk Joseph Fabricators, Stoughton, Wisc., there are

1,000 eye injuries every day in U.S. manufacturing. But oftentimes, the problem isn't so obvious. It's more about improper eye protection and practices, not a lack of equipment. In fact, eye injuries can occur even when work isn't being performed and/or when eye protection is in place. For example, he notes, grinding, welding, and painting can project elements into the eye, which of course, is what face shields and safety goggles are for. However, if a worker removes his face shield during a break in his work, and debris has accumulated on his safety goggles, it can fall into his eyes.

Scenarios such as this, Sailing says, are what require going beyond merely requiring safety goggles; it's a constant battle to change customary and comfortable practices. But that's not always easy. Perhaps one of the most difficult safety "givens" to combat is the notion of a hard hat as an end all-be all safety device. Sailing recalls visiting a fabrication facility where small particles were flying through the air. Everyone had a hard hat on, but no one

was wearing safety glasses. "The danger wasn't to the head, it was to the eyes," he says. "There needs to be a proper hazard assessment of every operation in the shop, as every one is different."

In another example, Kruth mentions a facility where a pinch point in a heavy machinery area had gone virtually unnoticed for several years—until a new employee got his foot caught in it and sustained an injury. Conventional wisdom might suggest that the accident occurred because the employee was new and unaware of his surroundings. But that's the wrong attitude, says Kruth. The area should have been labeled properly in the first place. It's situations like this that should be addressed in a fabrication shop's safety plan.

Safety Begins at the Top

As with any industry, Sailing says, management needs to lead by example, and that includes proper safety practices; the culture of safety needs to work from the top down. But he notes that the top 10 most cited safety issues seem to make the list every year, so it's clear that companies need to keep looking for new ways to solve existing hazards.

According to Kruth, the Safety Committee is hoping to assist fabricators with this by providing them with more information. He emphasizes the wealth of information in the Safety section of AISC's web site (www.aisc.org/safety), including publications such as *Sample Safety Program Elements for Structural Steel Fabrication Shops* and *General Safety Rules for Structural Steel Fabricators*, a small handbook for employees to use as a reference. The safety link also contains reviews of safety training products, links to other safety resources, articles published by AISC concerning safety, and "Safety Details," a link to safety talks that can be use in a fabrication shop.



The AISC Safety Committee is interested in your feedback and ideas. Please contact Tom Schlafly at schlafly@aisc.org.