

HOW CAN YOU MAKE YOUR EMPLOYEES HAPPIER AND RETAIN THEM LONGER?

START BY REDUCING NOISE, DRAFTS AND MOISTURE IN THEIR WORKING ENVIRONMENTS.

Have you ever stood outside on a fifty degree day in the springtime, when the sun is shining? How about when it's fifty degrees, damp, and breezy in the fall?

Fifty degrees is fifty degrees, but if you were wearing the same light jacket in damp weather, chances are you'd be shivering and looking for a way to get out of the cold. Subtle changes in the conditions can make a big difference, whether you're an outdoor enthusiast or working in a manufacturing plant.

Often, in a hurry to deliver market- or cost-driven projects, manufacturers overlook sensory issues that can make working in these plants difficult or even objectionable for employees. In the past, the large, available work force allowed you to find staff, even if the working conditions were less than pleasant. That is changing as fewer people are available or willing to work in uncomfortable environments. Today, many plants have difficulty with staff turnover or simply getting enough labor to show up every day.

It's hard to fault employees for not wanting to show up when the environment they



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work in is unpleasant. Several common causes (noise, temperature, smell, wetness, etc.) may contribute to this. Fortunately, with a little creative engineering, there are often simple fixes manufacturers can explore to mitigate the unpleasant, but necessary, aspects of a particular production environment and control other factors that contribute to the overall employee experience.

COLD

While we were visiting a plant on a project assignment, managers mentioned to us that they were having a difficult time keeping employees in their refrigerated packaging room. The number one complaint the employees had was about the air temperature: it was so COLD in there. We put our heads together and decided to install fabric duct socks to help diffuse the air entering the room and reduce overall air movement. Sure enough, the complaints all but disappeared and turnover was reduced dramatically. The temperature in the room wasn't

actually the problem; instead, it was the draft that was bothering people. It makes sense: we use a fan in a hot room, not to cool the air (in fact the motor running actually warms the room), but rather to create air movement that feels good in a hot environment. In a cold room, we don't want air flowing across our skin; we want an undisturbed layer of air that our body has already warmed to be our protective bubble.

If we think about this in advance when designing a processing or packaging room, we can help mitigate potential temperature-related issues. *Do we need the air moving or not? It's easy to install an HVAC system and only consider air turns and temperature. Would a diffuser help? What about a hood or spot cooling?* In some places these may be good ideas, in others, they may be a poor choice. A good design firm should ask these questions and help you consider these types of “creature comforts.”



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manufacturing industry for processes of all types. While his expertise extends from plant operations to engineering and integration, he has more than 25 years' experience specializing in packaging lines. Over the course of his career, John has visited dozens of production plants and has had the opportunity to experience numerous uncomfortable work environments first-hand. He currently leads POWER's team of more than 200 food and beverage specialists who provide comprehensive facility design services to the industry's leading manufacturers.

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MOISTURE

Dampness is another potential contributor to employee discomfort. Many process plants have water either running across or standing on the floor. This can make a cold or a warm room feel worse than it would otherwise feel if conditions were dry. Moisture levels are an important consideration for manufacturing teams as they design (or re-design) their facilities. Keeping moisture under control is critical to good sanitation practice, but it also makes a difference to your employees.

Think about where water is moving in your plants and adjust your designs accordingly. *Can you install catch pans under wet conveyors? Can you get water into hub drains quickly and directly? Water on the floor creates slip and fall hazards. Would a different floor coating help with traction (special consideration should be taken for oily environments and elevated platforms)?* If your staff is worried about a fall each time they move, they are not going to be as happy, they will be mentally distracted, and it may cause physical fatigue as they restrict their movements. Water also ruins shoes and pant legs that many of your employees pay for themselves.

Dry the environment out if you can; if you cannot, look for ways to manage and contain the water. Again, a good engineering firm will design a working environment that is as dry and employee-friendly as possible.

NOISE

Noise in any room can be unpleasant and unnerving. Vacuum pumps, compressed air systems, conveyors and other mechanical systems all contribute. *Can you place a vacuum pump in an adjacent enclosed area? What types of conveyors do you have?* Live roller conveyors can be ordered with high quality bearings and even sound baffles inside the steel tubes

that can cut the noise to near zero – you won't even be able to tell if they are running. Wear strips and return rollers also contribute to noise on many tabletop and mat-top conveyors – are they worn out? Replace them. If you can live without the return rollers, that's even better. Some bottling or canning plants create a tremendous noise as the bottles and cans accumulate on a conveyor. Take a look at where this accumulation activity occurs. *Is there another location where this can take place away from your staff?* Consider isolating the noise with a cover, or add smarter control systems that bring the cans together more gently with lower velocity. If you can design around lift trucks in your production rooms, you'll save your employees from that annoying and ever-present back-up beeping that the lift trucks make. You'll also eliminate their fear of being run over and increase their awareness of what that sound means when they do hear it.

If you've read this far, then I'll bet you're getting the hang of it: one or two small modifications can help change an objectionable workplace into a relatively comfortable one. Ideas like these should be considered each time you design a line or a new plant. Your engineering team should plan for employee comfort and safety from the beginning of the project and then work with your plant staff to review the environments regularly. Your plant will operate better and more smoothly and you will have happier employees and experience less turnover.