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Classifieds

Simplifying safety

MC Technologies new approach to hazardous materials management

By Nate Searing

Inside Tucson Business

From small offices to manufacturing facilities with hundreds of workers, every workplace must track how it uses and stores hazardous chemicals to protect its employees and the environment.

Manufacturers of the materials create material safety data sheets, or MSDS, detailing the dangers, make-up and other pertinent information associated with a hazardous material found in a cleaner, solvent or other chemical compound that can be found in a workplace.

Every chemical product that poses a potential hazard to a worker, from cleaning supplies to solvents, must be documented with a material safety data sheet, according to regulations from the Occupational Health and Safety Administration.

With sheets ranging in size from two to 16 pages, a company that uses a large number of hazardous chemicals, such as a hospital, could potentially have volumes of the sheets, which are required to be updated and maintained annually.

The result, said John Rooney of MC Technologies, is a situation where few companies are updating their MSDS sheets, and if they are, the data is too confusing and bulky to provide any real assistance in an emergency situation.

"In an emergency situation, no one says 'quick, get the MSDS,' and even if they did, it takes too long to decipher the material and put it use," he said.

That's because most of the information listed on the sheets provides complex explanations of the chemical compounds and statistical information.

While the information is useful, it is hardly helpful in an emergency situation, Rooney said.

So instead, MC Technologies developed a new way of managing MSDS around a simple concept that safety information should be understood by every employee, “not just chemists and lawyers,” Rooney said.

The result is MAXCOM, an electronic database system that organizes the sheets and helps train employees on how to quickly access critical information, all in a format designed to be easy to search and easier to read, said Matt Russell, a spokesman for the company.

In general, the MAXCOM system distills material safety data sheets into a more manageable system that is updated as needed by MC Technologies’ staff.

Billing itself as a hazardous chemicals management company, MC Technologies assesses, organizes and updates its customer databases on an ongoing basis. The company also train employees to operate the system, and provide safety warnings, labels and cleanup instructions for each of the hazardous chemicals in a company’s use.

“There are a lot of companies that can provide an electronic version of the MSDS,” Rooney said. “But when the sheets themselves are the problem, all you have then is a problem on disk rather than a problem on paper.”

For Bozeman Deaconess Hospital, in Bozeman, Mont., the MAXCOM system has helped prevent a variety of smaller chemical spills from turning into significant exposure risks for its 800 employees and patients.

“We got involved with MAXCOM basically because of the housekeeping department,” said Facilities Manager Phil Sparks. “They (housekeeping) are in every laboratory with every nasty chemical and just didn’t have the knowledge they needed in case of a spill.”

Recounting how one janitor spilled a highly hazardous chemical agent in the lab and cleaned it up with bare hands and paper towels before getting MAXCOM, Sparks said more recent spills have been effectively controlled by employees of all types being able to read the Safe Use Guides and knowing how and where to dispose of hazardous chemicals.

“We’re pretty lucky that it hasn’t ever gotten to a life and death mistake with some of these chemicals, but they (MC Technologies) help stay as

far away from that line as possible,” said Sparks, whose hospital uses about 1,800 hazardous chemicals each year.

In addition to praise from its customers, MC Technologies also garnered the attention of the U.S. Senate, where the Subcommittee on Employment, Safety and Training, chaired by Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., who has explored ways to simplify the MSDS reporting process.

MC Technologies provided written testimony to the subcommittee in March after a handful of clients in Wyoming contacted Enzi earlier this year and suggested he look at the system.

The company moved to Tucson about a year ago, expanding in that time from only two employees to six. They work out of an office at Valencia and Palo Verde roads.

Rooney said MAXCOM is on the verge of becoming commonplace at Tucson hospitals, with a variety of the medical centers considering the management system to consolidate their more than 2,500 hazardous chemicals.

“July is the start of the budget process for a lot of them,” Rooney said. “And I think 5 or 6 six, knock on wood, are really interested in taking advantage of our system.”

OSHA estimates that the average material safety data sheet costs about \$16 each year to maintain. Since each chemical requires its own sheet, hospitals can spend upwards of \$40,000 on their listings.

The MAXCOM system, which includes year-round maintenance and updating, comes at a cost of about \$2,000 a month for businesses—or a 37 percent cost savings—with about 2,500 chemicals, Rooney said.

For now, MC Technologies is positioning itself for growth by expanding its base of sales staff nationwide in an effort to capitalize on the interest in MAXCOM generated by inquiries from the Senate and OSHA.

The goal, Rooney said, is to target businesses with more than 100 hazardous chemicals in their workplace at any given time.

“That’s really the point at which a company needs to hire a ‘safety officer’ to manage the system,” Rooney said. “That’s the point where we can come in and show them how much money they could be saving.”

Nate Searing may be contacted at nsearing@azbiz.com or (520) 295-4238.

