

What to Ask When Shopping for Ergonomic and Safety Equipment

BY JEAN FEINGOLD

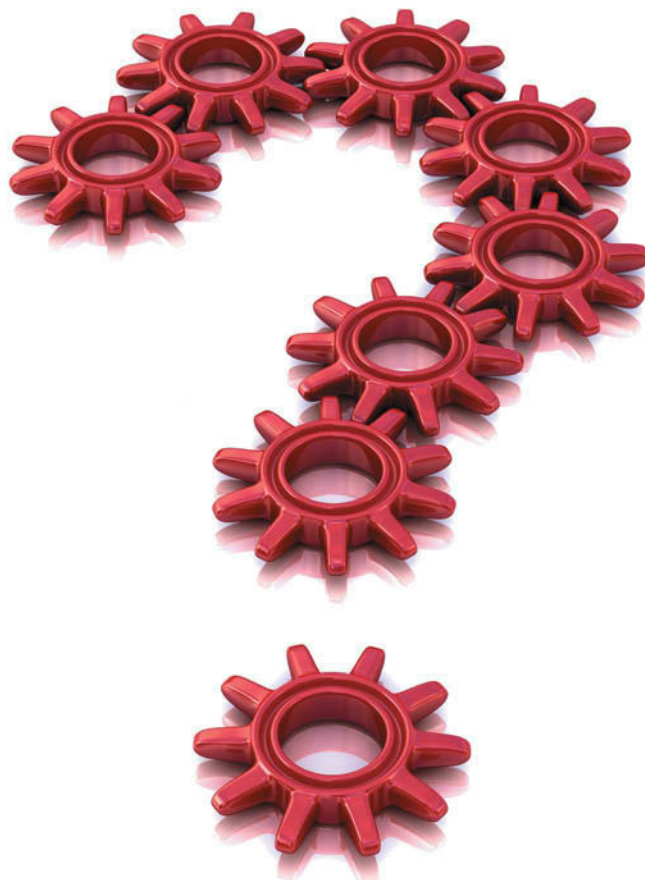
When there are ergonomic issues in a plant, there are most likely production bottlenecks, waste or even lost time injuries. Since there is usually more than one way to solve a material handling (MH) problem, finding the best ergonomic solution and/or safety equipment is an investigative process. Here are some simple steps to start that process:

- 1. Ask yourself, “In a perfect world, what do I really want?”** advised MHI’s EASE Council Chairman Jim Galante of MHI Member Southworth Products. “Taking the time to evaluate what you really want helps get to the root of the problem instead of just fixing something on the surface.”
- 2. Do I really understand the problem and all of the issues involved?** Talk to the people who are doing the task. Ask them what slows them down, what wastes their time and what bothers them. Ask them what hurts or feels sore at the end of their shift or their workweek. Knowing what problems they have while doing their jobs is essential in finding effective solutions.
- 3. What are the disrupters and how do I mitigate them?** Disrupters are things that waste workers’ time by interfering with the flow of material or the flow of work. They can be physical, like poorly positioned material at an assembly station, material that is stacked too high (or too low), awkward to handle components or a need to remove excess packaging. Other disrupters can be subtle. Examples of these are the height of a work bench, excess reaching or bending by workers to obtain good access to parts or assemblies or inadequate lighting.
- 4. What is my budget?** “One criterion customers must set early in the solution discovery process is a realistic budget,” Galante said. “Money drives many decisions and knowing the cost of the problem—what the production bottleneck is really costing the company—is a fundamental element in determining how much money should be invested to achieve the solution.” Often management will buy into solutions that will produce a quick return on investment (ROI). A payback of the solution’s cost within six months or else makes a compelling argument, but even a ROI of one year can be attractive if the problem is serious. Improving the ergonomics and reducing the risk of injury to workers adds additional positive emphasis to the solution’s benefits.
- 5. Who can provide the help I need?** Consulting with a MH solution provider is often a good choice. Their veteran salespeople have been in hundreds of plants and have seen and been directly involved in solving a litany of MH problems. This person is an excellent resource for information and

ideas and will have access to a wide variety of products that may offer the best solutions.

Another option is hiring an independent expert consultant. “You must think about who can best assist you when there are complex issues that will entail changes in the manufacturing process,” said Galante. “A consultant would be best for getting an unbiased opinion and defining what is really needed. They will do research to determine the best solutions to the problem. They can be expensive, but their services are valuable. If the issues and the possible solutions are less complex, a salesperson for a MH solution provider can suggest appropriate products they are familiar with.

“The material handling industry is unique because providing consultation on appropriate applications to solve problems is almost always done free of charge by both the product manufacturers and their distributors,” he added. “You can get the information you need without any financial risk to your company.”



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6. What will happen after my purchase? A common customer mistake is buying equipment based on a consultant's or distributor's recommendation and failing to arrange continuing assistance. “The purchase agreement needs to include providing installation information, training for employees in the equipment's proper use and instructions for maintenance,” stressed Galante. “It

should also include a recommended preventive maintenance program to ensure a long, trouble-free service life. All of this information should be included in the initial proposal, especially for complicated machines. The purchaser must be clear about their expectations and include them up front.”

If all of the buyer's expectations are clear and are met, then evaluating a

solution's price becomes easy, Galante pointed out. When comparing two machines with the same specs, it's fine to decide based on price. “But for items with unique components, assemblies or solutions, the seller must fully understand the function, the use and, most importantly, the desired outcome,” he said.

Having a clear and concise definition of your expectations is the key to buying the best solutions to solve your problem. Visit mhi.org/EASE for information on ergonomic solutions, the elimination of waste and productivity improvements. ●



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