Written by Darrell Carmichael, Brady Corp.
Friday, 14 September 2012 12:29

***Filling the void when seasoned employees retire or move on from your operations calls for clarification, clarification, clarification. Here's where a picture may truly be worth a thousand words.***

Over the next few years, the demographics of your workforce are likely to change dramatically. The baby boomer generation is nearing retirement, and companies are facing significant workforce reductions— *up to 50% for some.*

When seasoned employees retire, there's going to be a staggering knowledge loss. The acquisition of knowledge simply cannot take place the way it has in the past. Workers no longer have years to get up to speed on the layout of the plant, the location of equipment and controls or the proper operational and maintenance procedures. The influx of young employees and contracted workers—*qualified as they may be*—will not have the on-the-job experience that is so vital to your organization's success.

Now more than ever, it's crucial to mine the valuable knowledge of experienced workers. This article focuses on how your organization can leverage the knowledge of seasoned employees, develop it and embed it into your workplace environment. Through the use of standardized, specific point-of-need visuals, you can transfer this knowledge to your new employees, ensuring that regardless of their skill levels, they all have the information they need—*exactly when and*

*where they need it*
.

**Who will do the work?**
A 2007 survey of a diverse group of 480 organizations entitled “The Real Talent Debate: Will Aging Boomers Deplete the Workforce” [Ref. 1] found that 42.2% of the respondents saw their aging workforce as a significant concern. Some industries, including those in the petro-chemical and power-generation sectors, are reporting retirement gluts of up to 50% of their workforce.

The lack of planning for the impending crisis is particularly alarming. The survey found that 42.7% of the responding companies have no organizational group responsible for the knowledge transfer involving their mature workers; 81% have no process to determine the future work intentions of their employees.

In short, companies are not presently capturing the knowledge of their seasoned workers. Even worse is the fact that the majority of them don’t know when they’re going to lose this knowledge.

Unfortunately, that’s not the only disturbing news. The problem lies as much—*if not more so*—with the skill level of those employees who will be replacing the retiring boomers. The retirement rates among skilled maintenance and manufacturing workers are accelerating, yet fewer young people are choosing to pursue a career in maintenance and manufacturing. According to *Maintenance Technology*
Contributing Editor Bob Williamson in his July 2010 “Uptime” column, this skills shortage is the eye of “the perfect storm.” Even if there are enough bodies to fill open positions, many of those new employees will not have the learned skills necessary to be effective. [Ref. 2]

**Creating a smooth transition for new employees**
Visual controls are one of the most effective and efficient ways to facilitate the knowledge transfer between employees, particularly when they are used in conjunction with conventional training methods. Dr. Gwendolyn Galsworth, a foremost authority on Visual Management, cites that companies have reduced training time by as much as 49% through the use of visual controls. [Ref. 3]

The concept behind visual controls is to place visually instructive information at the point of need—*not just in a binder or on a computer, but rather on or at the physical location of the task or hazard.* This information should serve one or more of three purposes:

- Safety awareness, such as indicating a hazardous situation or environment,
- Equipment identification and location information
- Task W+H information (What, Where, When, Who, How & How Much)

***Case in point: visual directions…***

You need to get to a specific location, but you're not sure how to get there. What are the different ways you can get the information you need to determine your route?

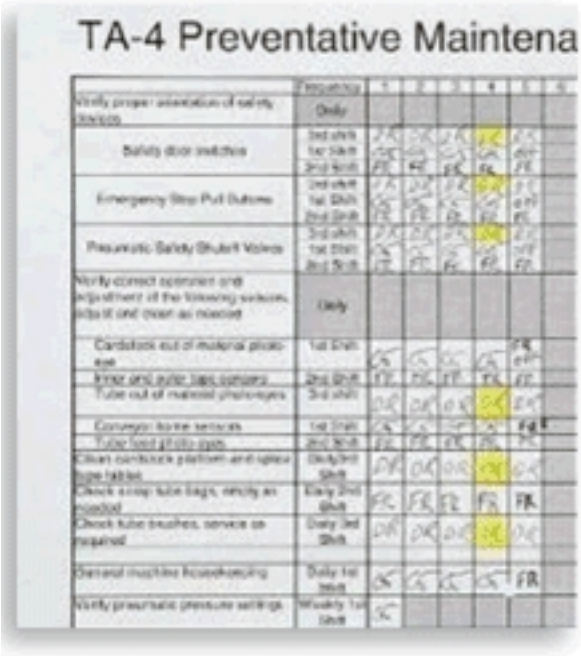
You could stop and ask someone for directions; however, this often leads to inaccuracies—*and the need to ask again*
.
You could use a map, but the map could have out-of-date information, and you'll have to spread it over your steering wheel, which could lead to safety risks and misguided turns. You could also use an electronic device and enter your destination prior to starting your trip. The device would then supply turn- by-turn instructions, which are usually the correct directions and the most efficient way of getting to your destination.

This same logic can also be applied to equipment identification and, more importantly, to the processes and procedures employed in a plant. When developing lockout/tagout, TPM, 5S or other procedures, you have a choice between creating:

- Basic text documents (usually left in a binder in the Safety or Maintenance office, which often entails finding someone to ask questions of or gain access to the binder from).
- CAD style drawings that show a "representation" of the equipment, but still require employees to determine exactly where things are and how to accomplish the task.
- Photograph-based, step-by-step (turn-by-turn) instructions that match what the worker is seeing in real-time. *(This is the most effective and efficient option.)*

***Examples of effective real-plant visual controls…***

**Lubrication Schedule:** As the following graphics show, a detailed lubrication schedule can be converted into simple visuals that even novice employees can understand and properly perform.




**Needed information is somewhere on the list**

**At Point of Need:**
**What type lube?**
**How often?**
**How much?**

**At Point of Need:**
**Quickly answers all the questions.**

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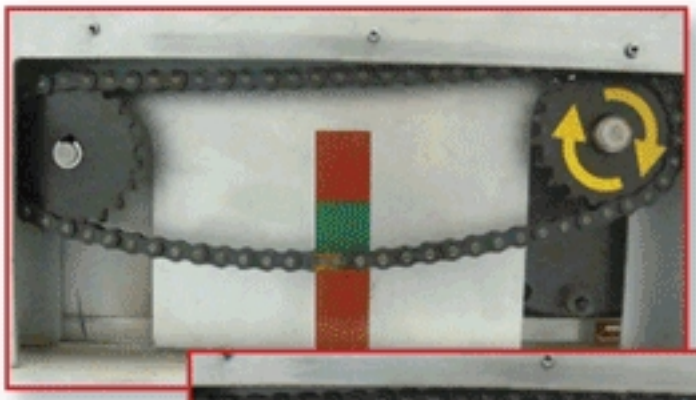

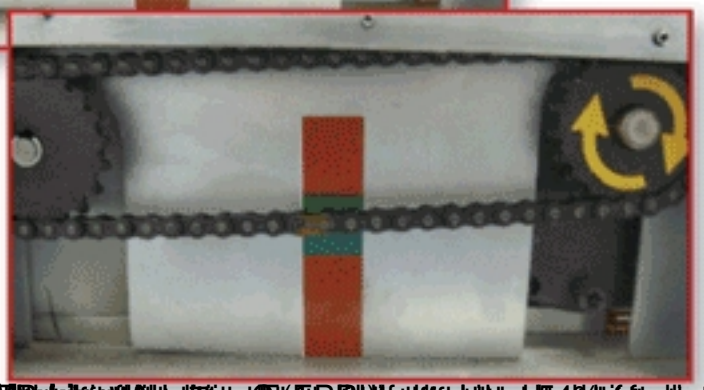

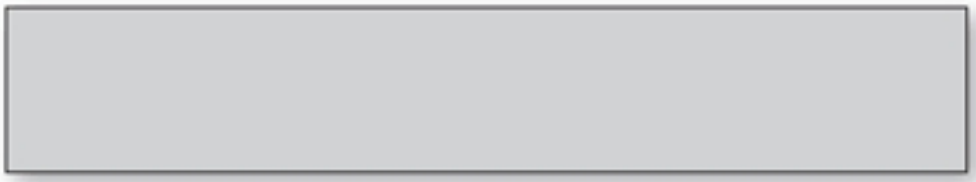

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Specific Information:
Reduces search time and enhances safety.

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