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Top Notch—Ready for Inspection

Laundry manager outlines the team effort behind preparations for HLAC plant certification

By Ed Arzuouian

Bates Troy Inc., Binghamton, NY, recently joined 25 other laundries across the United States in receiving certification from the Healthcare Linen Accreditation Council (HLAC). As a longstanding member of TRSA, Bates Troy was involved in the early discussions at TRSA that set forth the HLAC standards—so gaining accreditation was a proud moment for the company. Other stories in Textile Rental have addressed issues such as how HLAC accreditation benefits healthcare marketing efforts. This article will consider the hurdles involved in the certification process, and how Bates Troy brought this effort to a successful conclusion.

Laying the groundwork

Randy Widrick, sales and marketing director for Bates Troy, led the HLAC initiative. His first task was to review the 15 pages of program guidelines—including some 130 standards—and assign each of them to department managers as 'action items.' The accreditation team held one-hour meetings once a week for three months prior to the HLAC on-site inspection. The group included General Manager Tom Singe, Plant Manager Jim Rheinheimer, Assistant Plant Manager Mike Sipe, Accounting and Personnel Manager Chris Skojec, Chief Maintenance Engineer Jim Toy and Widrick. In addition to full-time staff working on the project, an outside consultant was hired for about 10 hours per week to review, update and consolidate the necessary documentation.

"The accreditation process was a worthwhile learning exercise in and of itself," said Singe. "Bates Troy's management took the process very seriously and provided the time and resources needed to get it done. It was a real team effort. All departments shared the burden and gave the process their full cooperation."

Accountability measures

One of the first things that quickly became apparent was that employees already were following most of the guidelines required in the accreditation process. However, the documentation wasn't necessarily formalized, or readily accessible to different departments in a compatible/verifiable format. For example, while part of the titration reports were provided to the plant manager and chief maintenance engineer, they weren't readily available to anyone else. Likewise, pest-control and fire-prevention programs were done, but they weren't always documented, or available for review. One department had the bills; another had contracts; a third had inspection results and work orders.

To simplify matters and make verification and inspection easier, copies of all documentation were gathered and inserted into one, large, three-ring binder that served as the "bible" for the inspection. An action item wasn't considered complete until all managers at the weekly meeting signed off on it. Then the consultant confirmed that he'd received it and inserted it in the bible. This verification system eliminated problems of interpretation. The collective agreement of the staff that an action item was completed helped Bates Troy to document a definitive response.

Learning curve

There were some unexpected byproducts and benefits of these roundtable discussions. Most important was the educational process for each department. The front office staff gained a greater understanding of the laundry process: from pickup to sorting to washing, processing and delivery. The plant staff gained a greater appreciation for the complexity of the paper trail that everything generates. They also learned the importance of delivering this material in a timely fashion.

We can demonstrate the value of a paper trail with the example of personnel training. While all new employees were trained on their equipment and procedures, formal written guidelines,

test sheets, grading systems and sign-off sheets weren't always used. During the accreditation process, it became clear that this was a prerequisite.

Backup plan

We also realized the need for redundancy and backups. The team soon determined that the performance of some functions fell to single individuals. No one else really was trained or in a position to complete certain tasks. We then required these particular individuals to document the tasks, so that they could gain awareness and knowledge of the process. These actions extended to a wide range of functions, from backing up computer tapes to calling in fire drills to the alarm company.

Update and store

Like many laundries, Bates Troy was in business long before the advent of computers. As a result, some documents were available only in hard copies. One example includes fire-evacuation routes posted around the plant. Some of these were dated and didn't include digital files. Also, certain personnel forms, such as some releases and reports, were available only on hard copy. While some documents were typed on a computer, employees couldn't always find these hand-written files. They needed to scan, rewrite and edit these documents to make them accessible to everyone. All files then were saved to a CD-ROM that was kept in the accreditation bible and shared on a server, thus facilitating team input.

Sign to remind

Plant signage proved to be an important requirement for the HLAC. Hand-washing stations were added and required new signage. The team had to remake traffic-flow patterns to make them clearer and more obvious. This was especially true in and around the soil room.

Rebuild with care

One of the bigger and more expensive "fixes" of the accreditation process was the construction of a linen storage room that met HLAC specifications for dust, temperature and security. This was a special challenge for Bates Troy because in the summer of 2007 we were preparing for the launch of a 12,000-square-foot expansion that included a new loading dock, soil room section and tunnel washer. The construction of the storage room took place amid the ongoing demolition work.

"The last couple of weeks leading up to the official inspection were hectic," said Rheinheimer, the plant manager. "We were already running the plant at full capacity, the guidelines added new hand wash stations, sinks and rooms. All the employee paperwork had to be ready, and we were beginning some demolition work for the new expansion. I'll admit, some nights, the mental lists running through my mind kept me up! The benefit to the average employee is tremendous. The accreditation process gave them a great sense of value for the job they do,"

Internal inspections

As the date for the HLAC on-site inspection drew closer, the Bates Troy team conducted in-house inspections about a month in advance. These were carried out first by Widrick in sales and marketing, Skojec in accounting and personnel and the outside consultant—without the presence of the plant manager and chief maintenance engineer. They tried to approach the inspection objectively, with the HLAC guidelines in hand. Their observations were documented and submitted to the plant manager and chief maintenance engineer, both of whom were given a few days to act on them. Then the inspection was repeated as a group.

During these internal inspections, the physical plant was not only reviewed, but employees also were randomly selected and questioned about their jobs, equipment and procedures, as well as on topics ranging from bloodborne pathogens to fire-evacuation routes. "HLAC was very forthcoming in what was to be expected in the real inspection," said Widrick. "We were told that the employees would be asked questions. We were even told that we should have translators available if that was necessary."

Obviously, this type of inspection requires staff preparation. Bates Troy found a way to make that more interesting for the employees. "We used lottery tickets!" Widrick added. "It was an inexpensive incentive that many of the plant personnel were happy about earning. It was a simple reward system that worked well."

Making the grade

By the day of the final HLAC inspection in August 2007, the team efforts and internal inspections paid off. Bates Troy scored 100% on both the "shall" and "must" guidelines. In the months following the accreditation, internal inspections have become routine. "Our laundry is better having been through the process," said Singe, the general manager. "Our clients are getting a better product as well—and now we can prove it." TR

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