

TEXTILE RENTAL

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Partners in Innovation: Ecolab and BCHLS

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Teamwork helps a Canadian healthcare operator save energy and lower costs

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By Melissa Meinke

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It all started with a casual conversation between a vendor and his customer.

In January 2008, the management at Booth Centennial Healthcare Linen Services (BCHLS), Mississauga, Ontario, was looking for ways to minimize cost, conserve resources, increase employee safety and improve the performance of its 243,000-square-foot facility.

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Up to that point, the cooperative laundry operation with 23 Toronto-area member hospitals and long-term care facilities had been riding a wave of steady successes, thanks to a 2006 decision from the BCHLS' board of directors to infuse new management into its state-of-the-art facility.

In less than one year, new management headed by Crothall Services Group's Joe Grummel had realized a significant turnaround in profit, moving from a negative profit margin into a positive financial position. In fact, Grummel and his new senior management team quickly turned one success into another, including:

- Fill rates increased from an average of 93.6% to more than 99.2%
- Reduced deficiency ratio from 5% to less than 1%
- Achieved and maintained a rolling 24 months on-time delivery rate of 99%
- 26% reduction of repairs and maintenance expenses from fiscal 2006
- 43% reduction of operating supplies expenses from fiscal 2006
- 37% reduction in gas use from fiscal 2006
- 20% reduction in electricity use from fiscal 2006
- 45% reduction in water consumption from fiscal 2006
- 70% increase in PPOH (Pounds Per Operator Hour)
- 28% reduction in energy costs
- Significant improvements plant safety

Later, the increasing costs of labor, energy, water, effluent waste disposal and raw materials that began to rise dramatically in 2007 were beginning to affect the company's bottom line. In an attempt to regain some of the earlier cost savings, senior management began toying with ways to save energy, including shutting down the large steam tunnel when processing hospital scrubs.

Yet, without the steamer, how could the company maintain the wrinkle-free uniforms its healthcare customers were expecting from BCHLS? Turns out that answer was easier to come by than the company anticipated.

Synergy of a strong partnership

James Ewart, a territory manager from Ecolab Textile Care, heard about BCHLS's dilemma during a routine maintenance visit to the Canadian facility. He immediately thought about implementing a pilot program to try out the new Ecolab Fabric Relaxant.

"I'd learned about our new relaxant just a few months prior to my BCHLS visit,

while undergoing additional training in Ecolab's Tunnel Doctor Program," Ewart said. "Ecolab Fabric Relaxant is a laundry additive used in the sour wash step that helps relax cotton and cotton-blend garments to reduce wrinkling when the garments are run through a steam tunnel. I thought it would be an ideal solution for BCHLS' issue regarding its need for wrinkle-free scrubs."

At the time, BCHLS' process required scrub suits to go from the dryers to a hanging area where they were manually put on a hanger, run through the steam tunnel, sent by conveyor to another area, manually removed from hangers and folded. With the facility's high daily volume, five team members were required to process the scrubs. It was extremely labor intensive, according to Grummel, who serves as BCHLS' general manager.

"The idea that we could eliminate the use of our steam tunnel and, as a result, reallocate those employees and reduce our energy costs significantly were both key factors driving our desire to test the new product," Grummel added. "Plus, Ecolab Fabric Relaxant could potentially improve our infection-control processes by minimizing the manual handling associated with the existing scrub suit process. With all those potential benefits, how could we not try it out?"

Let the trails begin

So with Grummel's blessing, Ecolab Textile Care went to work conducting multiple tests to see which combination of factors contributed to the best end result for BCHLS and its customers.

First, Ewart ran some suits through the regular process using the steam tunnel. Then he ran another set of scrubs through a new process he designed to implement the use of Ecolab's newest product.

"Basically, we hooked the Ecolab Fabric Relaxant drum up to a tunnel washer utilizing the product during the softening part of the wash cycle, pre-treating the garments before drying," Ewart explained. "Those suits were placed in a regular dryer afterward. Both sets of scrubs were immediately folded at the end of each process.

"We found that the key to our product was in the end-customer's perception," he added. "We showed both the old process and new process suits to BCHLS' healthcare customer, told them how we treated the suits differently and asked them to pick which one was which. They couldn't tell the difference!"

It was easy to convince BCHLS to switch to Ecolab's Fabric Relaxant after that. "Treating scrubs with the new garment relaxant was 'as good' as treating the garments in a steam tunnel, according the end customer," Ewart said. "We convinced BCHLS that by partnering with Ecolab, the company could potentially tear down their entire steam tunnel."

Real world results

BCHLS did not tear down its steam tunnel, but the company was able to significantly reduce the time it operates in that portion of the plant from eight hours each day down to one hour per day on average. That change has resulted in the following positive outcomes:

- Eliminated the need for hangers
- Reduced staffing of the Garments Department by 35%, reallocating the four full-time employees to other areas in the plant
- Ecolab Fabric Relaxant minimized multiple handling of the scrubs and enhanced

the life/appearance of the garments

- Revised the staging process to enable a just-in-time fold instead of having the garments sit around, getting compression wrinkles and having to go through a rewash process

Additional innovative water- and energy-reduction strategies were developed with the senior management team at BCHLS, utilizing direct support from Ecolab. One of the most effective projects involved using BCHLS' over-supply of steam (600 hp) in its plant boilers. When this 'free' steam was utilized to heat the water in the plant instead of using the direct-fire hot water heaters, the plant energy/gas (therms) usage dropped by approximately 22%.

Ecolab then helped BCHLS introduce steam in all tunnels in the rinse zone to assist in heating the temperatures in the tunnels, as well as helping to utilize more steam in the extractors. This allowed the plant to drop the temperature of its hot water tank from 165° to 110° Fahrenheit, a temperature reduction of approximately 18% further lowering its energy consumption rate as less energy was used to heat the water.

Partners against grime

With those impressive results behind them, the Ecolab-BCHLS partnership was solidified. In an effort to boost further savings at the plant, Ecolab Textile Care continued to search for savings and suggested one final area prime for optimization—the plant's water usage.

That's when the Ecolab team decided to introduce Ecolab PERformance, a low-temperature oxygen bleach especially formulated for tunnel washers. With this product, Ewart and the BCHLS team achieved a reduction in water consumption from 1.6 gallons per lb. to 1.2 gallons per lb. Finally, a water re-use engineering system developed in-house, resulted in a further reduction of water for the plant from 1.2 gallons per lb. of laundry, to 1.0 gallon per lb. This proved to be an altogether impressive result for the partnership.

"BCHLS is not your average healthcare laundry operation," says Grummel. "We are consistently developing innovative programs and partnerships designed to help our clients succeed. That's one reason why many forward-thinking healthcare executives are turning to BCHLS. And our partnership with Ecolab further solidifies our commitment to success."

Ewart adds that, "It is such a fantastic feeling to know that you are able to help your customer succeed. If the positive results we see at BCHLS can carry over into plants all across the globe, we could soon see a significant reduction in the carbon footprint within our industry, as well as provide some truly significant savings for individual customers. That's a win-win for everyone." TR

Melissa Meinke is assistant marketing manager, Textile Care Div., Ecolab Inc., St. Paul, MN. Contact her at melissa.meinke@ecolab.com or 651/293-2940.