



Jordan James and Bill Nash, employees at Beckville Woodcrafts in Maple Ridge, work at hydraulic lift tables.

It's not the what, but the why

By Ryan Parton

Sometimes innovation isn't about what you do but why.

When Frank Beck, owner of Beckville Woodcrafts in Maple Ridge, began a six-year process of replacing his employees' workbenches with more ergonomic, height-adjustable hydraulic lifts, he wasn't doing it to save money. Nor was he doing it to reduce time-loss claims, even though his workplace had previously experienced a claim. Instead, his reason was much more altruistic.

"I don't want my guys lifting materials if they don't have to," he says matter-of-factly. "There's no reason for it. Ever."

Beck's initiatives earned his company the Architectural Woodwork Manufacturers Association of Canada (AWMAC) WorkSafeBC Safety Innovation Award, presented for the first time in October 2015.

Beckville's story dates back to 2010, when Beck installed three hydraulic lift tables — at a cost of approximately \$3,500 apiece — to help his team load boards onto the company's cutting and pressing equipment. Instead of manually lifting 40-kilogram sheets of plywood or fibreboard, workers could now raise up to 1,800 kilograms of material with the push of a button.

In Beck's words, "It turned a two-man, back-breaking job into a no-effort, one-person job."

But it wasn't until two years later that a casual observation led to true innovation at Beckville.

"My dad [Beckville Woodcrafts founder Neil Beck] used to come in and do all the maintenance on the equipment," explains Beck. "The funny thing is, he'd always go to one of the lift tables and use that as his workbench. That's when the light bulb lit up in both our heads. I said, 'Dad, every time you do something

you're doing it on one of those lifts.' He said, 'It's great, I can adjust it to whatever height I need.' And that was the light bulb."

By the end of 2012, Beck had replaced seven workbenches with hydraulic lift tables, outfitting each with a power receptacle and two-inch top made of solid maple. By 2015, he was adding his eleventh hydraulic lift table (for his finishing department) as well as a 900-kilogram vacuum lift for raising panels effortlessly onto the beam saw, known as a CNC (computer numerical control) machine.

While Beckville's near-pristine safety record was not the motivator for the introduction of the new workbenches, the success of these initiatives can certainly be measured by the lack of day-end grumblings. Beck says complaints of aches and pains among his workers — once common — have completely disappeared from the workplace.

"It was money well spent," he says. "Since [installing the equipment] we haven't had any issues at all."

Putting workers first

Between 2011 and 2015, 30 percent of WorkSafeBC claims made by woodworking and carpentry shops were due to overexertion injuries, which typically happen when workers are assembling, installing, stacking, lifting, or carrying heavy or awkward items.

Though Beckville Woodcrafts hasn't had any such claims in the last decade, its workers are not immune to overexertion.

Peter Goyert, WorkSafeBC's senior ergonomist, visited Beckville's workshop last fall. He says Beck's innovations represent a positive step in minimizing the potential for back and other musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs).

"The lift tables are certainly good ways to minimize the risks associated with those particular tasks," he says. "Having people being able to work at a height that's appropriate to them is perfect.

"That's the whole essence of ergonomics — making the workplace fit the workers rather than the worker fit the workplace," Goyert continues. "From my perspective, they've certainly done a good job implementing those things that could have potentially caused a risk."

Across all industries, MSIs account for about one-third of all injury claims in British Columbia. After the common cold, back injuries are the second-most common reason for missed work.

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—Frank Beck, owner
Beckville Woodcrafts

"This is a high-end woodworking shop and their workers are highly skilled tradesmen who are not easy to replace," notes Goyert. "So I guess Frank thought, 'What can I do to make life easier for them while they work?' There was no involvement from WorkSafeBC, and nobody saying he had to do it. It's really what we'd like to see all employers do."

As much as the actions he took, it was Beck's proactive approach that caught the attention of the AWMAC's award selection committee and others in the industry.

"I've had a tonne of people phoning me about this now," says Beck. "It's pretty great getting a little recognition for something you're passionate about.

"I think it's important for workers to be safe at work," he adds. "Some people think [of WorkSafeBC] as the bad guy. I don't. If we're doing something wrong, tell us about it and we'll work through it. It's all for the safety of our employees."

That, says Rose McDonald, a WorkSafeBC manufacturing and retail industry specialist, is an attitude worth emulating.

"It's not complicated," she says. "[Beck] didn't do this based on any direction from a health and safety officer, or because it was an industry safety requirement, but because he saw a way to make his workplace better for his workers," adding, "Sometimes, being proactive about safety isn't about checking a particular box, but doing something simply because it feels right for your workers — and your business." ☺