



Safety Culture

Moldex PlugStation: Bringing Hearing Protection to the People

Vanessa Jo Roberts | Apr 23, 2020

How do you get your shop's crew to take hearing protection more seriously? One way is to make it a "call to action" and make earplugs easily accessible. We talk with an expert at Moldex-Metric to find out how to do that.

It's a simple truth that workers tend to view hearing loss as less of a concern than other job-related injuries, points out Bill Schubach, who has worked in the field of personal safety for more than three decades.

"That's because hearing loss is passive," explains Schubach, who is vice president of sales at **Moldex-Metric**, a manufacturer of hearing and respiratory protection equipment. "If you get something in your eye, your body reacts right away. If you hear a loud noise, your response might be, 'Big deal.'"

Hearing loss is a gradual process. Yet not wearing personal protective equipment can accelerate that loss, and exposure to consistent loud noises at work can cause permanent damage to your hearing. That's why the Occupational Safety and Health Administration requires hearing PPE in its noise exposure standard (*CFR 1910.95*).

"Bring the hearing protection to the people versus the people going to the plugs."

Bill Schubach

Vice President of Sales, Moldex-Metric

How to Select the Best Earplugs

When choosing earplugs for work crews at your facility, there are two questions that the safety team should consider.

What is the minimum noise reduction rating that you need?

There is no governmental testing protocol for hearing protection like there is for respiratory, so “we independently third-party test all of our noise reduction ratings,” says Bill Schubach of Moldex-Metric.

In the United States, people gravitate toward the highest rating when selecting earplugs, he adds.

Which earplugs are the most comfortable? (Translation: Which ones will your workers wear?)

“An earplug is the only personal protective device that you put inside your body—in the sense that you’re putting it in your ear canal,” Schubach notes. “Everything else is worn on the outside of your body, so comfort is really critical.”

Personal preference plays a role—as does color, he says. For instance, **Moldex Sparkplugs** are bright with swirls of color; small **Meteors** come in neon green with blue swirls; and **Softies** are two-tone safety orange.

“Color is effective. A lot of it is just to get people to wear them and wear them consistently so they are protecting their hearing.”

Why Earplug Dispensers Should Be Accessible

In order to encourage the use of protective hearing devices, Moldex strives to place its earplug dispensers where workers are located, Schubach says.

That’s really the whole concept behind **Moldex PlugStations**—dispensers that place earplugs right where you need them, melding conservation and compliance, he says: “They’re simply dispensing systems for both uncorded and corded disposable earplugs that allow you to bring the hearing protection to the people versus the people going to the plugs.”



Moldex is the only company that makes a dispenser for corded disposable earplugs, Schubach says.

The company developed its first earplug station about 20 years ago.

The concept for the original dispensers came from user feedback. “We were thinking about the challenges companies face in dispensing hearing protection,” Schubach says.

He likens the problem to a kid with his or her hand in a cookie jar: A user grabs five or six pairs of earplugs from a box, “stuffing them in a pocket, laundering four pairs that night and then the next day coming back and doing the same thing all over again.”

Moldex engineers wondered how they could address that problem—both to reduce consumption and to find ways to eliminate wasted time. That was the impetus behind the PlugStation.

Have a question about hearing protection? Ask an MSC safety specialist.

Pairing Earplug Dispensers with Inventory Management

Given that the use of earplug dispensers typically helps manage consumption, placing them with your tool vending machine makes sense.

With customers relying on vending solutions more, the PlugStation—mounted on the outside of the vending machine using a magnetic bracket—is “a great way to control consumption, and also increase compliance and cost savings,” notes Bill Schubach of Moldex-Metric.

The use of the earplug dispenser has a similar goal to an **inventory management solution**, he points out. But the inside of a tool vending machine is “very important real estate,” Schubach adds. “Putting in 10-cent earplugs and then having to fill up three or four rows is a lot of expense in terms of real estate in the vending machine.”

Hearing Protection ROI: The Benefits of Earplug Dispensers

When dispensing stations are not available, people generally leave the work area when they need earplugs. A company might store them at the nurse's office or the tool crib, for instance. "Then it's a 20-minute conversation about who won the game last night," Schubach says. "And for what? A couple of pairs of earplugs."

Because earplugs are fairly small and don't take up a lot of space, Moldex fashioned its stations after those of other companies dispensing items on the shop floor that workers need, such as first-aid kits and eyewash stations.

Since the earplugs are housed in hygiene-safe containers, the dispensers can be distributed throughout a plant—near machining stations or where workers congregate, such as next to lockers when they start their day and in break rooms.

When you crank the impeller, a PlugStation pops a pair of earplugs into the user's hand.



A PlugStation ensures that a user can quickly access only a single pair of earplugs at a time.

"It's not an exact science, but what people have told us is that their workers use fewer earplugs in general—25 to 30 percent fewer because you simply can't get as many earplugs out at one time," Schubach says.

Users also report that because the dispensers make ear protection convenient, it improves compliance.

"People don't wander into areas without their hearing protection," he says. "Each dispenser is a call to action. By putting the stations where the workers are, there's no excuse for them not having their hearing protection."

The EcoStation: A Greener Approach to Hearing Protection

Although Moldex produced its first dispenser two decades ago, it wasn't a one-and-done R&D effort. The company has continued to evolve and create a variety of stations for its earplugs.

The newest addition is the *EcoStation*.



The EcoStation is Moldex's green-friendly PlugStation.

"We realized as we've progressed as a society toward recycling, having less of an impact on the environmental footprint and achieving more sustainability, that throwing the plastic impellers away every time could be wasteful," Schubach says.

The EcoStation can be refilled by replacing the entire container of wrapper-free earplugs, instead of refilling the PlugStation container. The container has a foil peel-off. After removing it, you place the impeller on the opening and insert the entire container back into the mounted bracket, which can be either wall-mount or magnetic (another Moldex innovation).

"In less than 10 seconds you've refilled your PlugStation, and now the bottle you're throwing away is No. 1-rated recyclable. It's not mixed material," Schubach says. "You've eliminated waste in terms of plastic; you've reduced the overall cost of your earplug per pair; and you've kept the convenience of a PlugStation."

All of the other PlugStation containers are also recyclable, but they require mixed recycling.

In 2007, the company went 100 percent PVC-free in all its products and packaging. The leadership team realized that PVC products disposed of in landfills was not only wasteful, they also did not degrade in a positive way and could leach carcinogens into water supplies, Schubach says.

"We've always had a sensitivity to having less of an impact on our environment," he says. The removal of PVC was one way to do that, and now the EcoStations are another way—"not only economical, but ecologically friendly."

How do you manage hearing protection safety at your company?

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