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## Costly conveyor mistakes

BY THOMAS E. BETTS

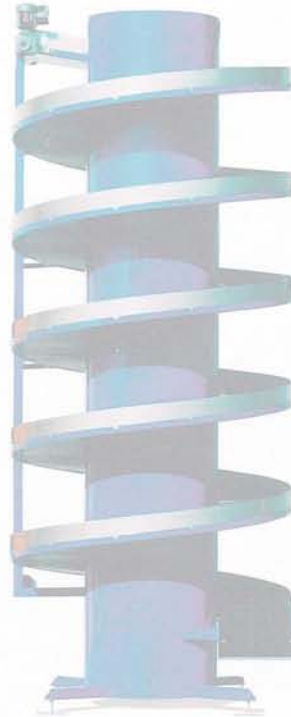
**E**ven though they depend on them, many companies don't give much thought to conveyor systems — until there's a breakdown. Here are 12 of the most common material handling system maintenance mistakes and how to avoid them:

- 1. Lack of regular inspections.** If you have a belt conveyor, check the floor area underneath the conveyor while it's operating for dust-like shavings. When you see them, it's a sign that the belt is out of alignment, isn't tracking properly and is wearing unnecessarily and will eventually be damaged. Be aware of squeaks. They aren't normal; they're signals that something needs attention.
- 2. Missing maintenance records.** A maintenance log kept on or near the system with information on what maintenance has been performed and the date, along with anything that should be watched can be particularly useful in facilities where there are several shifts. Most importantly, it helps document the history of the equipment. If there is ever an issue with a manufacturer, for example, a maintenance record can support your case.
- 3. Failing to take the temperature of motors and reducers.** Motors can overheat. A temperature spike indicates that something is causing an overload. In some cases, a conveyor is being used for materials for which it was not designed or an inappropriate conveyor has been pressed into service.
- 4. Not adhering to OSHA standards.** Because of the constant pressure in a production environment, it's easy to neglect equipment safety. When reviewing facilities, it is easy to spot missing chain guards on conveyors, for example. More often than not, everyone is busy and safety equipment is not reinstalled after being removed.
- 5. Lack of adequate maintenance coverage.** To reduce overhead expenses, fewer maintenance personnel are on the job. A cost-effective solution is having an experienced and certified conveyor service person make periodic inspections and be available when in-house coverage isn't available.
- 6. Inadequate parts inventory.** As many learn, often too late, certain parts may not be readily available when there's a breakdown. While it's not appropriate to inventory every part, there are certain key components such as motors, couplings for line shafts, bearings and photo eyes that should be kept on hand.
- 7. Not learning from repeated breakdowns.** An ongoing pattern of breakdowns is a message that something is wrong. Having to replace a coupling on a line shaft conveyor, for example, should be an alert that there is a problem that needs to be investigated and resolved. Failing to do this only results in more downtime incidents, additional costs and employee frustration.
- 8. "If it isn't broken, just let it go and don't worry about it."** It's common for a forklift to hit conveyor legs. Someone pushes them back in place, but the damage is done. The conveyor is out of alignment and begins to wear. It's another expensive repair bill in the making. Waiting to make repairs until a conveyor system breaks down is a costly mistake.
- 9. Failing to care for the controls.** As systems have become more technological sophisticated, ignoring their maintenance can be disastrous. Here are two examples. First, switching scanners without recognizing that each one is programmed for a particular divert can create chaos. Also, lightning strikes can knock out a control's programming; the result of not having surge protection.
- 10. Using a conveyor in ways it wasn't intended.** A need arises and a conveyor system is pressed into service without consideration of its capabilities. One of the most common examples is placing larger, heavier cartons on a narrow conveyor. When this happens, there is stress and wear on the entire conveyor, which will eventually result in a breakdown.
- 11. Avoiding those difficult places.** Wherever there's equipment, there are difficult places to get to, sometimes up high or around in back. These are the breeding ground for expensive repairs and operational issues. It's these places that are rarely lubricated. This is where you find loose chains and sprocket set screws, which are an emergency waiting to happen.
- 12. Failing to train employees in the operation of conveyors.** By knowing how conveyors operate, how to avoid their misuse and how to spot maintenance issues, employees become the first line of defense for minimizing problems and reducing costs.

*Thomas E. Betts is installation and service manager at TriFactor, a material handling systems integrator, in Lakeland, Fla. Betts has had more than 20 years of experience in working with conveyor systems.*

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