

Hooked on safety

Looking to reduce injuries on the factory floor, Everett crane team finds solution—crane chain carts

By Deborah Feldman and photos by Bob Ferguson

For a team that many people associate with huge parts gliding effortlessly high above the factory floor, the Everett Overhead Crane Operations Group has had its share of hard knocks down on the ground.

For years, reports of injuries were all too common, said Bill Fletcher, first-line crane manager.

“Probably a couple times in a week we could have reported injuries of shoulder strains or back injuries,” he said, adding that the culprit was clear. “They’re from people lifting and carrying sliding chains.”

Cranes need bundles of thick, metal chains to lift and carry massive airplane parts all over the Everett, Wash., factory. Just the first few links on some of the larger chains can weigh upwards of 75 pounds (34 kilograms).

“When we took them off the hooks, we’d have to put them on the ground,” crane operator Troy Labrum explained. “You’ve got to bend over to do that since you don’t want to drop them or throw them down. Then, to pick them back up, you had to get back down and you had to be really careful. A lot of guys just weren’t careful and got hurt.”

Late last year, Scott Westby, the senior manager of Overhead Cranes in Everett, decided something had to change.

“Let’s face it,” Westby said. “We’ve got an average age of about 50 years old on this team, so we are slower to heal, so to speak!”

Westby challenged his management team to figure out a way to cut back on injuries. To brainstorm for solutions, they gathered all three shifts, from crane operators to administrative assistants. The group quickly realized that the fewer times an employee actually touches the chains, the better.

Their solution is an ergonomically friendly “crane chain cart”

“There’s no stress at all. No straining. You don’t have to worry about getting hurt.”

— Troy Labrum, crane operator

PHOTO: Administrative assistant Jill Canniff observes as lead hook tender Troy Labrum guides a set of chains into a new crane cart. Both were on the team that created the Crane Carts.

that Tooling helped turn into reality. Chains are now placed into simple carts that can hold up to half a ton and can be rolled around the factory. They are crafted to allow the top chain link to rest at an angle so that a hook tender lowered from the overhead crane can easily snag and lift the chains.

Administrative assistant Jill Canniff helped facilitate the project and was impressed by how quickly the team came up with a solution.

"It was special to our group," she said. "No one else has thought of this."

Westby said his group has seen a 47 percent reduction in injuries year to year. Labrum, the crane operator, believes the carts are the reason.

"They are really nice," Labrum said. "There's no stress at all. No straining. You don't have to worry about getting hurt."

The carts are still evolving, with tweaks being made all the time. "And in the future, they might even go through another change," Fletcher said. "Because we're not just going to accept one pattern. Our needs might be different in the future so we'll adjust for that."

The Everett crew hopes the carts now will be used by Overhead Crane teams across Boeing. Westby is working with Boeing crews in Charleston, S.C., so they can use the new tools when final assembly begins there of 787 Dreamliners.

"This cart," he said with a proud smile, "is just the best thing since sliced bread." ■

deborah.s.feldman@boeing.com

PHOTO: Crane operator Bob Soltesz lowers the hoist from inside the crane cab. While ear protection is not mandated, Soltesz chooses to take the extra precaution.

