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OVERHEAD Crane Upkeep

Preventive maintenance programs bring savings for crane owners.

By PHIL BISHOP

BREAKDOWN OF A CRANE can bring an industrial plant to a halt, and such interruptions to productivity can prove very expensive. However, breakdowns usually can be prevented by implementing a systemized maintenance program.

The current trend is to outsource overhead crane maintenance, which is driven by several factors. For one, plant owners are finding they do not have the expertise in-house; old cranes require increasingly more attention and their replacement parts become harder to source; and new cranes are more sophisticated than their predecessors, calling for new skills to maintain them that most likely involve the use of a laptop rather than a wrench.

Encouraging this trend are the major crane manufacturers that have identified maintenance services as a progressively more important business center. It helps flatten out the peaks and troughs of demand for new cranes and develop closer relations with customers. In 2006, crane servicing activities accounted for 32 percent of Konecranes' global sales of around \$2 billion. For its biggest competitor, Demag Cranes and Components, service activities comprised 27 percent of total world sales in fiscal 2006-2007.

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Additionally, North American Industries, Woburn, Mass., reported that its service business has grown significantly over a 38-year period. "High levels of customer satisfaction with cranes and service result in almost 60 percent of crane business repeat customers," says Kristen Poirier, marketing associate for North American Industries.

These companies seek to convince their customers that outsourcing crane maintenance is an investment that produces savings. Dave Sinkhorn, president of Demag's service subsidiary, Crane America Service (CAS), Dayton, Ohio, says that often the biggest challenge



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is persuading customers of the benefits of outsourcing areas that are not part of their core competencies to experts in the field.

"As cranes age, they become more challenging to maintain, while new ones are more complicated due to technological advancements. Both types require unique skill sets to properly maintain," he says. "In addition, many cranes of yesterday are operating well outside designed duty cycles, resulting in higher maintenance and repair costs."

With discontinued apprenticeship programs and aging technicians, companies have fewer staff members to maintain their cranes. "Those that are left spend upwards of 90 percent of their time responding to emergency breakdowns, leaving little time for preventive maintenance on aging equipment," Sinkhorn says. "This results in a more reactive maintenance program and more costly breakdowns."

But a properly implemented preventive maintenance program, he adds, can bring a positive return on maintenance dollars invested. "The key is understanding what your true objective is prior to selecting a program," he notes. "Partnering with a company that understands this concept brings added value to the customer's operation."

According to Poirier, North American Industries' CRISP program – Crane Repair, Inspection & Safety Partners – is tailored to meet the crane owner's needs. Plans may include OSHA periodic safety inspections, preventive maintenance, repairs, safety training, load tests, recordkeeping, 24/7 hotline, spare parts, vendor-managed parts plans, and written records for files.

"The service options help customers address OSHA regulations, while saving them time and decreasing their costs," she says. Poirier adds that regular inspection and maintenance will ensure peak efficiency throughout the crane's life; address potential problems before they become more costly or inconvenient; reduce overhead costs associated with parts, lubricants, and tools; reduce downtime by scheduling when production will not be interrupted; and increase safety and reduce the chances of costly accidents, damage or injury.

"With OSHA requirements for regular inspections and the realization that a well-maintained crane saves time and money, a growing number of our customers are beginning to purchase our inspection and preventative maintenance package at the time they purchase new cranes," she says. ♦