

Ruffled Feathers at Hubbard Poultry Company

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ABSTRACT

This case has a labor law and product liability focus and is suited for a human resource, employment or business law class at the undergraduate level. This case is based on an actual incident; the names of the workers and company have been changed.

INTRODUCTION

John Remington looked around in wonder at the large pieces of machinery before him. He had worked at the Hubbard Poultry Company in Urville for about 14 days and was still amazed at the many powerful machines that were used inside the plant. John was proud of his new employment. Hubbard Poultry Company was one of the largest poultry companies in the United States with \$1.1 billion in sales the previous year. Hubbard employed approximately 10,000 people nationwide, and the plant in Urville employed about 200 people. The Urville facility was one of 12 poultry processing plants the company operated throughout the United States. Hubbard's customer base included primarily retail and foodservice customers in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

JOHN REMINGTON'S STORY

After two weeks on the job, John still could not believe his good luck in having obtained employment at Hubbard Poultry as a floor worker. John had really needed this job; his wife had just had a baby, and the pay at this job was several dollars more an hour than he had ever made. Urville was a relatively small, blue-collar town and there were few jobs available and none had the pay and

benefits of Hubbard Poultry Company. Many applicants waited months to be hired on at Hubbard; John knew he had been fortunate to be hired quickly.

John had completed all of his classroom employment training a few days earlier and was now ready to begin his job as a floor worker. The safety training had been tedious and boring, and his supervisor, Mark Blackney, had given him a safety manual to read at home. The manual was long, with references to OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and other agencies he had never heard of. With a new baby at home, he had been too tired to read much of it after work.

Each floor worker in the Urville plant had his/her own job on a machine, and John's job was to work at the poultry grinding machine. It was a tall, cylindrical machine, similar to the one in Figure 1, which ground up poultry parts used to make cutlets, nuggets, and other products. The process for John's machine was as follows; the poultry parts were carried to the top of the grinder by a conveyor belt which dropped the poultry pieces into the top of the grinder. The parts were then ground and extruded from the bottom of the machine into a waiting metal bin. A button on the side of the grinder could start and stop the conveyor

belt and the grinder. Mark Blackney, the floor supervisor, had shown him how to operate the grinder machine. Mark had also told him to ask questions of other employees in his sector when needed.

FIGURE 1: Example Grinding Machine



MARK BLACKNEY AND THE HUBBARD POULTRY COMPANY

Mark had been employed at Hubbard Poultry Company for 15 years. Mark had been promoted to floor supervisor 5 years ago. During his five years as a supervisor Mark had discovered that there were always personnel issues, but most employees were content to have a stable job with good benefits in this predominantly blue collar town. He certainly never had a problem filling positions when an employee was terminated. Mark's responsibilities included managing the floor at the processing plant

and employee safety training. He was OSHA certified. Mark often wished there were more time to train employees on OSHA safety rules and regulations; however his boss did not see the need to stop the processing machines and cut into profits just to add additional safety training. Consequently, Mark held brief safety training sessions when new employees were hired, had them read on their own time the extensive safety manual (the company had used it for many years), and sign a form stating that they read and understood all of the provisions contained in the manual. The past five years had gone smoothly for Mark, and he had encountered no serious employee problems as a supervisor.

THE INCIDENT

John arrived at work on time and excited to begin his new job of monitoring the grinding machine. To monitor the machine, John stood on the floor near the bottom of the machine and watched to make sure that the poultry went through the grinder properly before being extruded into the metal bin. He had been at his station only a short time before the grinder made a loud noise and then stopped. John quickly realized that the grinder had stopped working entirely; he pressed the grinder switch, located near his station, several times, but the grinder appeared to be stuck. He looked around, but no other workers or supervisors were within sight. John wanted to make a good impression at the start of his employment and did not want to be the cause of a slow down in production; seeing no one close by to help, John decided to attempt to solve the problem himself.

John decided to climb up the nearby steps onto a platform which overlooked the top of the grinder. Clearly affixed to the top of the

grinder cylinder was a sign which read in black and red letters, "CAUTION! DO NOT PUT ANY OBJECTS OR BODY PARTS INTO GRINDER. SEVERE INJURIES MAY RESULT." John looked into the grinder and determined that something must have jammed the grinder. He searched around the top of the platform but could not find any object to use to loosen the grinder the blades. Since he could not find an object to loosen the jam, John reached his arm into the top of the grinder and carefully wiggled the poultry pieces on the top of the machine. Nothing happened. He then applied a little more force to the interior of the grinder. The force cleared the jam and the grinder began moving again; almost instantaneously John's arm was pulled into the grinder. John screamed for help as his hand lodged in the grinder. An employee rushed over and pushed the power button located at bottom of the machine. The grinder blades stopped turning, but John's hand was badly mangled.

MARK BLACKNEY'S DILEMMA

Mark had just left his office and entered the floor when he heard employees yell that John had been badly injured. Mark rushed

over to see what had happened. Mark had an employee drive John to the hospital, while he remained at the plant to try to determine what had happened and why the accident had occurred. As Mark surveyed the incident scene he asked himself, how could this have happened? Mark was not prepared for this kind of catastrophe. What did he need to do now? Where should he start?

REFERENCES

Hollymatic 190 Automatic Feed Grinder. Retrieved November 18, 2007, from http://www.hollymatic.com/190.asp?pr_id=190

Teaching Note/Instructor Manual available from the Journal of Business Cases and Applications.