

MSDS Technology Made Simple

3E is doing a lot to make sure the information customers are looking for is there when they need it.

by Valerie Weadock

As if it weren't hard enough keeping business flowing smoothly and clients and employees safe and happy, you must also keep up with the latest technology. While it may not be important to have the latest and "greatest" computer system, technology aimed at making your business run more efficiently could save you money, and thus deserves a look.

Many companies have turned to computer technology for compliance solutions, particularly in the area of maintaining Material Safety Data Sheets. Internet and software programs for this task are numerous; the trick is finding one that doesn't create more work or require an extensive orientation to operate.

A Simple Search

3E Company's Healthcare MSDS Database™ is technology made simple. To access more than 10,000 MSDSs specific to the medical industry, subscribers simply enter their user name and password and click on the Healthcare MSDS Database™ link on the system's homepage.

Unlike other Internet- or CD-ROM-based MSDS managers, the database can search for an MSDS by not only the manufacturer or product name, but also CAS number, chemical name, or an internal number. If a user is unsure of the spelling, the exact name, or remembers only that the chemical's name started with "D," search criteria modifiers "greater than," "less than," "contains," "starts with" (and more) make sure the employee still finds the necessary MSDS quickly. This task is much harder, if not impossible, with three-ring binder or file MSDS storage/management systems.

After an employee enters search criteria, the system returns a list of the MSDSs that meet the search requirements. The list includes the names of the product and manufacturer, the date the MSDS on file was last revised, and product and identification num-

bers, which are unique identifiers that allow 3E to answer customer inquiries faster.

MSDSs are viewed using Adobe Acrobat® by simply clicking on the desired product on the search results list. (Every page within the database features a link for downloading the free Adobe program.) A specific MSDS can be viewed, printed, e-mailed, or saved. The save feature allows organizations to create their own library or file of products in use in their facilities and save the file to a network location accessible to specific individuals or all employees.

Users can view an ingredient list to review the chemical names, CAS numbers, and the minimum and maximum percentages of all hazardous ingredients. While it takes a little longer to load, a summary link opens a separate window that includes an overview of the information on the MSDS in a format that's easier to read and understand.

Customer Support

The major advantage to Internet or electronic MSDS management systems is that someone else assumes the responsibility for maintaining the database, freeing up personnel and resources within your company. These systems are likely to be more accurate and up-to-date because they don't rely on an employee's replacing outdated MSDSs with the latest one received with an order.

3E updates Healthcare MSDS Database™ monthly, based on customer requests. If a particular product is not available in the database, customers can notify 3E and the company will obtain the MSDS from the manufacturer. A status link on the search results page informs users if a product's MSDS has been requested but is not yet available. 3E also ensures MSDSs in the database are the most current available.

In addition to these standard features, a subscription to the database includes up to 50 calls for MSDS fax requests or application technical support calls, up to two calls

for chemical spill assistance, and two calls related to poison control situations.

Still, if the idea of navigating an automated answering system is less than thrilling, why not have them call you? Every page within the database features an Insta-Call button, where users can specify in a small form that they'd like a 3E representative to call them directly.

There When You Need It

OSHA's Hazard Communication Standard (29 CFR 1910.1200) requires MSDSs to be readily accessible to employees in their work areas. The standard specifies that employees must have access to the actual MSDS, not relying on a phone-based or similar system. However, Internet-based systems meet compliance requirements as long as employees have easy access to both a computer terminal and the Web site at all times.

Unfortunately, computers, networks, servers, and Web sites are known for failing when you need them the most. This unreliability often necessitates maintenance of an alternative MSDS system in order to ensure compliance, ultimately creating a lot more work. This is where 3E goes the extra mile.

To ensure business continuity and their clients' safety and compliance, 3E's data and operations centers are equipped with backup batteries and power generators, multiple telephone connections and redundant telecom providers, and multiple connections through redundant Internet Service Providers. Backup data is extracted daily and data is replicated in real time to an off-site facility.

What You Need

To access and run Healthcare MSDS Database™, you need a computer with at least a Pentium II processor, a Windows 98 operating system, and 32MB of memory. The database also demands at least a 56K dial-up modem Internet connection and Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0 or Netscape 4.76 or higher.

The price of this service depends on the type of customer and its specific needs. 3E says Healthcare MSDS Database™ is intended to provide a basic, centralized MSDS database for the health care industry at a competitive price. Because of its ease of use, strong search capabilities, accompanying customer support, and the headaches it could spare you, the service is probably worth the cost. ■

Valerie Weadock is Associate Editor of Occupational Health & Safety.