

Ariens working through COVID-19 challenges

Staffing, safety and supply chain all on table

By Ed Byrne
The Brillion News

BRILLION – At noon last Friday, April 17, there was a lot of jumping going on at the two Ariens Company manufacturing plants in Brillion.

The jump-around was another sign that the company hasn't lost its spirit in the wake of the COVID-19 viral pandemic.

Ariens Company President and CEO Dan Ariens appeared in an internet broadcast on Friday morning. The webinar, titled "The Balance Between Lives and Livelihood," was hosted by Missy Hughes, the head of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.

"We are operating and it has been



Dan Ariens

a struggle," Ariens said. "It's nothing like anyone who's had to experience complete closure ... We are 61 percent attendance with our employees."

The other 39 percent of the Ariens

workforce opted to stay home after the state imposed Safer At Home restrictions. For some, it was to take care of children after schools and child care centers closed; for others, it was taking care of elderly family members; for others, it was because the employee felt at risk in the face of the virus.

Ariens responded by putting together a leave program for employees, with three options:

Employees could use their personal time off days; or take unpaid leave; or use a new "loaned hours" program.

The loan hours program was developed by an Ariens subsidiary in the United Kingdom. Of the 39 percent of Ariens employees staying at home, the largest percentage took the "loaned hours" option.

"They can take up to four weeks of paid leave – they stay on our insurance and benefits," Ariens said. "They bank those hours, but they continue to stay

home and then, when they come back, they pay back five hours per week ... That's worked pretty well. We'll see how it goes as we move forward."

Ariens said he looks forward to COVID-19 restrictions ending and his entire workforce coming back.

"I hate hearing 'new normal' because I want to go back to 'plain old normal,'" he said.

The company's employees in the U.K. and Norway had options similar to those in effect in Brillion.

Ariens said the feedback from employees has been very favorable.

"Mostly, our employees are glad they have a choice to come to work, and they have a choice to take care of their families if there's a risk of any exposure if they are at work," Ariens said. "We've been as liberal and flexible with our employees as we can."

(ARIENS/page 6)

ARIENS (from page 1)

One thing that's happening in the two plants, each with about 450 employees working per shift, is constant sanitary spraying.

"We began in the middle of March spraying down with a disinfectant," Ariens said. "It will kill any virus that's left on the tools."

Every machine and tool is sprayed several times per day

The company also scrambled to get thermometers to screen workers for fevers – a telltale sign of COVID-19 infection. Workers have brought in their own masks, many home-made.

In mid-March, Ariens placed an order for industrial masks. They just arrived last week, and every employee was given the option of wearing one. It was not made mandatory, and Ariens said about 10 to 15 percent of employees are choosing to wear masks.

The extension of Governor Evers' SaferAtHome order is a problem for Ariens.

"As this order gets extended, it just

gets more and more difficult to afford this," Ariens said.

The benefits allowing employees to stay home are costing Ariens about million dollars per week.

"It becomes a more and more difficult decision," Ariens said.

While the company isn't happy with the social isolation and business shutdown orders, Ariens said his employees have concerns too.

"[They are] our safety and our health," he said. "The one thing I'm starting to hear now is sort of an American thing – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We want to have our lives; we want to live a healthy life. We don't want to give up too many more liberties because we're starting to feel cooped up, and we need to find out what our normal looks like."

He described the employee concerns as a big box called "anxiety, anticipation and uncertainty."

The company expected the state to ease restrictions next Monday, on April 27. Then the governor announced he would be extending them a month.

"We don't know what we're going to do," Ariens said. He and his staff

were meeting last Friday to craft a letter to employees.

He said it would likely mean keeping current company COVID-19 policies in place – that means family and health coming before work.

To continue the current leave policies, Ariens said, will be very expensive.

He hopes that more workplaces will be allowed to open up soon, but gradually "in a smart and safe way."

"I keep calling it 'walking and chewing gum at the same time,'" Ariens said. "We've got to figure out how to do that – to be safe and get back to work."

One of the reasons that Ariens is still manufacturing products is early intelligence about the coming of COVID-19.

"As a team, when we started to hear things from our supply chain in Asia – which was back in December and January – we started to get very aggressive ... We didn't know if [COVID-19] was going to become an issue in the United States, but we pulled ahead very hard on our supply chains."

In fact, Ariens ordered materials

from Asian suppliers 90 days ahead of schedule and got necessary parts in stock in Brillion in January.

The company also has suppliers in Canada, Indian and Mexico.

"We pulled ahead on those 60 to 30 days," Ariens said.

The company currently has concerns about two suppliers – one in the U.S. and the other in Mexico – meeting delivery expectations.

"We're dealing with that right now," he said. "We could run out of a couple of these key components. May 5 is our drop dead date on both components so we're scrambling."

If that flow stops, the Ariens Company has contingent plans.

"We're committed to our employees 'We're going to find work to keep you working,'" Ariens said. "We think the most important thing we can do to relieve the anxiety of our team is to keep them working."

The other panelists in the webinar were Dr. John Raymond, President/CEO of the Medical College of Wisconsin, and Greg Frank, vice-president of the Food Fight Restaurant Group in Madison.