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Final ...

Pregnant women taken off AT&T chip production

By Mitchel Benson
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AT&T has become the nation's first semiconductor manufacturer to ban pregnant women from production lines because of concern about the employees' exposure to chemicals that might cause miscarriages.

Officials at American Telephone & Telegraph Co. implemented the policy last month after learning about a health study in Massachusetts that reported an increased rate of miscarriages among chip production workers.

The company has no chip plants in California. But the semiconductor industry is one of the Santa Clara Valley's largest employers, with almost 52,200 workers. Industry officials say roughly half are production workers, and the majority of them are women.

Most chip manufacturers have responded to the study — first reported by the Mercury News on Dec.

5 — by restating their existing policies of offering transfers to pregnant production workers, if other jobs are available. Some, like AT&T, have guaranteed other jobs. But several Santa Clara Valley firms, citing the weak economic condition of the industry, have not offered such guarantees.

No other company has gone as far as AT&T and banned pregnant workers from chip production lines, where an assortment of toxic gasses and liquids are used to etch microscopic circuits onto silicon wafers.

"It was just a matter of being safe rather than sorry," explained Lydia Whitefield, a spokeswoman for AT&T Technology Systems in Berkeley Heights, N.J. "There were a small number of employees affected, and there were open jobs for them to move into. It was safety, really. That was it."

Five plants

The company employs 4,000 production workers at five plants; half are women.

Industry officials say new policies might come out of a meeting later this month in Connecticut. That's when a special task force of the Cupertino-based Semiconductor Industry Association is scheduled to meet with the researchers from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who conducted the study. The task force will for the first time be able to review the final report and supporting data from the study of the Digital Equipment Corp. chip plant in Hudson, Mass.

AT&T is first to take pregnant workers

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Workers' rights advocates are supportive of efforts to protect workers, but some say the policies border on sex discrimination because in most cases only women are affected. In addition, they say the companies should be placing more emphasis on eliminating dangerous chemicals and processes — not the threatened workers — from the workplace.

More research.

But industry officials said they must learn more about the Digital Equipment study — and conduct follow-up research — before chip makers can make intelligent changes in work place conditions, processes and policies.

"Changes to personnel policies will be studied, based on the task force meeting with the University of Massachusetts and any additional information that comes out of Digital Equipment in their further study of their work place," said Steve Pedersen, director of environmental and occupational health and safety affairs for the SIA.

"So, we're not walking away at all from this study," Pedersen said. "We'll consider changes in ... safety practices and personnel policies as appropriate."

The semiconductor industry was shaken up by the results of the study, which was the first examination of the health of chip production workers in America. The university researchers found in its study of 770 people that women production workers at the Digital

Equipment plant suffered twice the miscarriage rate of other women there.

The study reported a higher rate of "general malaise" — headaches, nausea, dizziness — among chip production workers at the plant during the years 1980-1985. The study also showed that production workers showed no increased rate of a variety of health problems, including cancer, infertility and birth defects.

The study did not look for a cause for the higher rate of miscarriages and malaise problems,

and the researchers said follow-up studies throughout the industry are needed to address that question.

AT&T and Digital Equipment both are guaranteeing new jobs at comparable pay and benefits for any pregnant production workers. Digital Equipment also is guaranteeing jobs for women production workers of child-bearing age, offering free pregnancy tests for employees and offering special transfer consideration to production workers who plan to be fathers.

So far, 15 pregnant women at

AT&T's five plants in Pennsylvania, Missouri and Florida, been granted transfers. Non-transferable jobs were not granted. At Digital Equipment, two women of child-bearing age — not pregnant — have requested transfers.

These reassignment policies aren't enough for some workers' rights advocates.

"With the issue of reproductive hazards in general, we talk about cleaning up the work place for everyone, rather than removing anyone," said Nancy Lessin, a