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AT&T: Pregnant worker can't be a chipmaker

By John Flinn
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

American Telephone & Telegraph Co. has banned pregnant workers from semiconductor assembly lines in response to fears about exposure to toxic chemicals, but industry officials said Wednesday that Silicon Valley firms wouldn't follow AT&T's lead.

Local chipmakers are reaffirming their policies of offering to transfer pregnant workers off the assembly line when possible. However, few companies guarantee workers non-production jobs at comparable pay.

"We do our darndest to accommodate pregnant workers who feel they need to be transferred, but we don't have an absolute guarantee we can do it," said John Greenagle, a spokesman for Advanced Micro Devices in Sunnyvale. "Things are tough in this industry right now."

AT&T became the nation's first semiconductor manufacturer to prohibit pregnant workers from chip-production lines. In its announcement Tuesday, the company cited concern that exposure to toxic chemicals might cause birth defects.

The company, which has 4,000 production workers at four plants in Pennsylvania, Missouri and Florida, was responding to a University of Massachusetts study of workers at a Digital Equipment Corp. plant in Hudson, Mass.

Looking at 770 workers from 1980 to 1985, the study found that women on chip-production lines suffered twice the miscarriage rate of other women at the plant. It did not suggest a cause for the miscarriages.

The study also found a higher rate of "general malaise" — headaches, nausea and dizziness — among chip-production workers of both sexes than among other workers, but no increase in cancer, infertility or birth defects.

Three days after AT&T received the results of the study in early December, company officials transferred 15 pregnant workers to jobs with comparable salaries in other departments, according to spokeswoman Lydia Whitefield.

AT&T's plants are the only unionized semiconductor assembly facilities in the nation, but Whitefield said that had no bearing on the company's decision.

"It's purely and simply a matter of concern by the management for the safety of the employees," she said.

In Santa Clara County, about 25,000 production workers — about half of them women of child-bearing age — work in plants where a variety of toxic gases and liquids are used to etch microcircuitry on silicon wafers.

At Intel Corp. in Santa Clara, pregnant workers are given a list of exposure levels to various workplace chemicals and asked to consult the company's medical specialist and doctor.

Among the few companies that guarantee job transfers at comparable salary for pregnant assembly workers is National Semiconductor Corp. in Santa Clara. Since the study of Digital Equipment workers was released, National Semiconductor employee has been transferred, spokesman Gray Allen said. Occupational safety advocates said AT&T's policy was a step in the right direction, but added that it didn't go far enough.

"One problem is that these dangerous chemicals pose the greatest threat to women in the first few weeks of pregnancy, before they even know they're pregnant," said Amanda Hayes, a San Jose attorney who has handled about a dozen cases involving pregnant Silicon Valley workers.

Meta Mendel-Reyes of the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health said: "What these firms should be doing is removing the toxic substances — not the workers — from the work place."

But it is unrealistic to think semiconductor manufacturers will rid themselves of toxic chemicals in the near future, said Steve Pederson, director of environmental and occupational health and safety affairs for the Cupertino-based Semiconductor Industry Association.

"Right now we have to deal with the fact that those substances are used to make chips," he said. "It's the job of the company to eliminate the hazard."

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