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Full Circle

From roots in asbestos insulation, a Michigan firm builds a diverse cleaning business

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FULL CIRCLE

From its roots in installing asbestos insulation, MIS Corporation-Michigan develops a prosperous business in environmental and cleaning services

By Carol Brzozowski

The company known today as MIS Corporation-Michigan started as an asbestos installer. Today, the company's specialties include removing asbestos insulation.

The business, owned by John Krieger, also performs a wide range of other environmental cleaning services. It succeeds with a niche in emergency response and flawless maintenance service.

The company, based in Saginaw, Mich., concentrates on hiring quality employees and training them well. An average of 65 employees — up to 100 when larger projects are in progress — work in Saginaw and at two other dispatch locations. MIS serves clients in Michigan and Ohio. Its major clients include an automotive manufacturer and a pharmaceutical company.

abatement, and many other industrial cleaning services, including vacuuming and waterjetting.

While the company's dollar volume has grown since John took ownership, he recognizes that asbestos removal work will diminish over time. "So we've sought diversification with the industrial cleaning work," he notes.

Blasting off with water

One example of diversification is the company's hydroblasting services. MIS offers low-pressure, hot-water cleaning, 10,000 psi high-pressure jetting, line moleing, sewer and drain cleaning, and

The war years

MIS, or Midwest Industrial Services, can trace its roots to Willman Asbestos, which during World War II installed asbestos insulation on piping in ships at the Defoe shipyards in Saginaw Bay.

"This work was so important to the war effort that the workers received military deferments," says John. "But most of the men who worked on the ships ended up dying from asbestos exposure. They worked in confined space with poor ventilation, and the piping in the ships was like spaghetti. We have old pictures, and you can hardly see 15 feet for the dust in the air from cutting and fitting asbestos."

As the company matured, it changed ownership and names, and began offering environmental services. Asbestos removal service began in 1973. John, who had worked for the company for 21 years, purchased the environmental part of the business in 1998. Today, the company does asbestos, lead and mold

A technician removes a manhole cover in preparation for a cleaning job.



MIS services include the use of high-pressure water to clean surfaces. (Photos courtesy of MIS Corporation-Michigan)

PROFILE

MIS CORPORATION-MICHIGAN SAGINAW, MICH.



OWNER:	John Krieger
YEARS IN BUSINESS:	75
SERVICES:	High-pressure cleaning, hydroexcavation, industrial vacuuming, asbestos, lead and mold abatement
SERVICE AREA:	Michigan and Ohio
EMPLOYEES:	65
AFFILIATIONS:	Water Jet Technology Association (WJTA), Asbestos and Lead Abatement Contractors Association (ALACA), National Safety Council
WEB SITE:	www.misenv.com





Waterblasting is among numerous services MIS offers to a largely industrial client base. Other major offerings include asbestos abatement and industrial vacuuming.

Critical Challenge

MIS Corporation-Michigan has met many challenges, including a job at the University of Michigan, where the company does vacuum truck work.

The university needed to expose a fiber-optic cable, buried 16 to 22 feet deep, for inspection and modification. Its exact location was unknown. The cable runs into the university's hospital, one of the country's major medical centers.

MIS found the cable by hydroexcavating. "A failure on that job could have caused a shutdown of the hospital," says John Krieger, owner. "We did a lot of preparation and planning to make sure we completed the job properly and without incident. Although it wasn't a large job, it was a unique job, and one that we took very seriously."

"There are times we've dealt with floods in tunnels where all of the water was asbestos-contaminated. We had huge volumes of water we had to get out in a hurry. The water can't be dumped; it has to be filtered."

John Krieger

45,000 psi ultra-high pressure (UHP) liquidblasting.

The company usually rents equipment for that work, but its own workhorse is an NLB Corp. 10200D system operating at 10,000 psi/34 gpm. Typical waterblasting clients include automotive companies and utilities.

On a typical job, technicians use a Spin Jet floor and grate-cleaning tool from NLB Corp. attached to a high-pressure pump. The tool has nozzles mounted on an arm beneath the housing. The arm spins, covering an area 15 inches in diameter. Vacuum trucks follow and collect the removed material.

"We use this technology to clean really tough industrial surfaces, where there may be half an inch of impregnated grease and metal chips," says John. Technicians also use waterblasting to clean parts of boilers and furnaces, as well as pits and tanks. "That 10K is a heck of a power washer," John says. "It's what we also use for hydroexcavation."

Rapid, safe response

John's top concern in industrial vacuuming is doing the job safely, correctly and in a timely fashion. Clients proclaim the response time — usually under an hour — "phenomenal." The challenge in the work is not in the vacuuming but in the safety issues and other requirements that go with it.

"The vacuum truck is a tool we use to do part of the work," he says. "It's not the sum total of things." Yet there are consequences if the truck is not properly operated.

"There are times we've dealt with floods in tunnels where all of the water was asbestos-contaminated. We had huge volumes of water we had to get out in a hurry. The water can't be dumped; it has to be filtered. We have to use large pumps and filtration units. It calls for a special response, and not everybody would know how to handle that and do so as quickly as we can."

The vacuum work includes emergencies such as tunnel flooding and spills. "Generally, when vacuum trucks are called in, something is plugged up and it's stopping something critical, and they need the situation resolved," says John. "There are day-to-day maintenance jobs, but it seems more often than not, the job needs to be done in a hurry because the problem is preventing something from working."

Day-to-day jobs include cleaning pits and flumes, picking up spills and cleaning plugged piping. The company also vacuums fly ash from electric power plants.



Members of the MIS team include, from left, Craig Kostus, vice president of operations; John Krieger, president; Brandi Gross, accounting assistant; Milt Cottrell, warehouse staff; Jeff Cain, superintendent of labor and estimator; Patty Wolff, receptionist/secretary; Sharon Theile, accounting manager; Anne Schultz, senior estimator and sales representative; Keith Anderson, safety director; and Brian Claus, warehouse manager.

Care with asbestos

For asbestos abatement, MIS carries specialized equipment, including air filtration devices and respiratory protection for workers. The vacuum trucks are used for evacuating water contaminated with asbestos.

For asbestos-contaminated ash, the company uses its trailer-mounted Hurricane cyclone vacuum, with a capacity of 27 inches Hg, to extract the material and drop it directly into sealed-bladder bags without emissions to the

surrounding air. The bladder bags are then buried at the landfill. The process prevents employee exposure to asbestos. The exhaust air on the cyclone vacuum is HEPA-filtered.

"It's a lot easier to decontaminate that way," says John. "We do not vacuum hazardous materials into our big wet/dry vac trucks because of decontamination issues."

MIS operates three vacuum trucks. Two are 19-cubic-yard Supersucker wet/dry units, manufactured by Super

Products LLC, with a vacuum capability of 28 inches Hg and 6,500 cfm tri-lobe pumps. One has a high-dump option that enables emptying directly into a container. The other is a liquid-only unit with a stainless steel 3,100-gallon tank from Wastequip Cusco, built with a new tank and pump on a rebuilt chassis.

Trained in skills and safety

Jobs that require extraordinary skill and focus on detail demand well-trained employees. Employee turnover at MIS is among the lowest for Michigan contractors, according to the records of unions

“We know how to deal efficiently with emergencies, and they comprise a fairly substantial portion of our business.”

John Krieger

whose members the company hires. John attributes that to consistent, full-time work, union wages and benefits.

“If you are not getting much, when something better comes along, you jump ship very quickly,” John observes. “When we train, that training becomes more usable to us because employees stay with us.”

Training helps employees become acclimated to the industrial environment and results in fewer errors. “They know what to do, they’ve been there before, and it shows,” John notes. Since MIS workers are union members, MIS taps into the training that unions provide. The company tracks all employee training in a database.

“There are a lot of leadership qualities, training and know-how a person has to have with the specializations we do,” John says. Most employees get 80 hours of HAZWOPER training and permit-required, confined-space training through the Laborers Training & Apprenticeship Institute. Employees also

receive 40 hours of asbestos removal training, and all are trained in OSHA requirements for lead abatement. Right-to-Know training is also included. All employees are drug-tested.

MIS also requires equipment-specific training before an employee can operate or work around a given device in the field. “We fulfill OSHA requirements, but we formalize the training and issue training certificates or cards to be sure there’s something to validate that the training is in place,” John says.

Another form of training is the MUST (previously Safe2Work) program, a computerized training program that covers basic safety with 20 modules. All this adds up to well-trained employees, ready to meet a range of industrial cleaning challenges.

Welcomes scrutiny

William Breitenborn, MIS project manager, points out that workers who have removed asbestos make better industrial cleaners because they are accustomed to stringent work requirements. “There are more pages of regulations for asbestos than there are for nuclear waste,” says John. “It is highly regulated and highly scrutinized. There’s a third-party monitoring firm there with you, so you’re always being watched for quality assurance.”

Most MIS employees are cross-trained, but the company also has specialists in tasks such as hydroblasting. “You’ve got to find the right person,” John says. “The more they do it, the better they get, and then they pass it on to the younger workers.”

The company encourages employees to get a variety of training so that they can perform many tasks and have the best assurance of full-time work. “If they are cross-trained, they can go from asbestos abatement to an industrial cleaning job,” John says.

Looking ahead, John says MIS is positioning itself to respond more quickly over a larger customer base. While he is looking to buy more equipment, he



The MIS industrial vacuum fleet includes this Supersucker unit from Super Products LLC with high-dump capability.

pressure on their management to curb spending,” John says.

Each year, MIS performs many large emergency jobs. In one case, an explosion at a power plant caused injuries and fatalities and required a major cleanup in which MIS employees worked around the clock for a month. “We can’t foresee emergencies and we wouldn’t wish them on anyone,” John says. “We know how to deal efficiently with emergencies, and they comprise a fairly substantial portion of our business.”

MIS also picks up jobs where other contractors fail. “We will be called in to clean up the mess,” John says. “Every year a portion of our business comes from projects that we bid and lost, and that another firm was unable or unwilling to finish.”

John says that as long as there is industry, there will be a need for industrial vacuuming and cleaning. “If the owners want it done safely and want a quality job done at a competitive price, there’s a future in delivering that,” he says. ■

plans to proceed with care. He watches the cash flow and keeps an eye on how major clients are doing.

In recent years, the sluggish economy, which has led to many plant shutdowns, has created more work for MIS in decommissioning the old plants. Record losses in Detroit’s automotive companies have hurt. “In that type of work, there’s a bit of a slowdown where they are not doing some things they might otherwise be doing, because there is constant