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When Honeywell Inc. announced last year that it would ban smoking at its Twin Cities facilities by January 1989, the policy was greeted quietly at corporate headquarters in south Minneapolis. But it met with protests at a suburban factory, where some workers showed their displeasure by blatantly smoking in nonsmoking areas.

This month Honeywell backed off. A memo said the company still believes that smoking is hazardous but that employees may keep their smoking lounges.

Honeywell's experience is hardly unique. Although workplace smoking bans have proliferated in recent years, health experts note with some puzzlement that blue-collar workers have resisted the quit-smoking message much more vigorously than their white-collar colleagues.

A report released last week by U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop confirmed the gap. Nearly four in 10 blue-collar workers are smokers, compared with fewer than three in 10 among the white-collar set. Moreover, white-collar workers cut their smoking rates by 29 percent between 1970 and 1985, compared with 20 percent for blue-collar workers.

(In Minnesota, the gap might be even wider. Smoking rates were 16.5 percent for professionals, 37 percent for skilled craft workers and nearly 39 percent for unskilled laborers, according to a 1987 survey by the Minnesota Health Department.)

Nobody knows the reasons with any certainty, but theories include peer pressure, labor-management relations, and the way people think about their health and their future.

One thing is clear to smoking researchers: There is a powerful correlation between education and smoking. Between 1965 and 1987, the percentage of college graduates who smoke dropped from 36 to 16 percent. Those without high school diplomas scarcely budged, from 37 to 36 percent.

To the extent that college graduates wind up in white-collar jobs, that effect probably carries through into workplace smoking patterns.

"Nobody's saying that people with more education know better what's good for them or acquire more facts that lead them to quit smoking," said Kenneth Warner, a University of Michigan economist who has studied smoking behavior.

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"But think about it this way: If you're in a privileged socioeconomic group, the future is an attractive place. You'll have a nice retirement someday and you have an incentive to make sure you'll be in good health when that day arrives.

"If you're living hand-to-mouth and you don't perceive the prospect of an attractive retirement, you don't have the incentive to invest in it."

Of course, many blue-collar workers earn handsome wages and look forward to comfortable retirements. So there might be other explanations.

Many companies launch their smoking bans at corporate headquarters, where pressure from peers and upper management can be powerful, then extend them to the factory floor later, according to Sandra Sandell, executive director of the Association for Nonsmokers-Minnesota.

The group's recent survey of 94 large Minnesota companies found that of those who enacted smoking bans, about one-fifth enacted the bans at corporate headquarters but left production plants and branches to set their own policies.

In addition, Sandell said, some companies fear running afoul of union contracts that might govern working conditions on the shop floor; others fear a backlash against management in cases where labor-management relations already are strained.

"In the office there seems to be more of a social movement to protect people's health, especially the health of nonsmokers," said Dr. Stuart Hanson, a lung specialist with Park Nicollet Medical Center.

A final explanation has to do with the snowball effect of peer pressure.

"If you have fewer positive role models among your peer group, which is probably true in the blue-collar group, you feel less pressure," said Eileen Rotman, a smoking consultant to Twin Cities businesses. "You've always got some buddies to go out and smoke with."

Rotman added, however, that it's dangerous to generalize about different groups of workers.

"You can find resistance in both areas and acceptance in both areas. It really seems to depend on the culture of the company and the support given by upper management."

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