



5S – Not Just for Manufacturing

By Ralph Yearick

When I learned that knowledge workers spend up to 40 percent of their time looking for things, like misplaced files, I was really concerned. Because that's what we're called in the public relations and advertising business. We process information to make it more glamorous for ads, more interesting for news releases, and more understandable for speeches, white papers, PowerPoint presentations and other marketing tools.

But I was really disturbed to learn that the nursing profession spends up to two-thirds of their time looking for things, leaving only one-third for actual patient care.

What a waste of time! And in our business, time is money. We essentially sell hours. As for healthcare, it's no wonder rates are so high if nurses are only productive a third of their time.

There is a lot of talk –and action—about going “lean,” a concept developed to eliminate waste or non value-added activities. Big manufacturing companies turned to programs like ISO standards, Six Sigma, and Lean Manufacturing to improve business performance by monitoring, measuring, controlling and improving their processes. It is a powerful method for continuous improvement. Benefits can include improved customer satisfaction, reduced costs, fewer mistakes, a more productive workforce and improved employee problem solving skills.

It's one thing to make tens of thousands of widgets with close to zero defects, and quite another to write the perfect speech in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Leave it to the Japanese to revolutionize manufacturing processes through quality programs, then apply the same concepts to organizing a shared workspace, such as a shop floor or an office space. They developed a process around five words, all beginning with the letter “S,” which targets three key areas: workplace morale, safety and efficiency.

The 5S's have since been translated to English. They are: sort through and sort out; set-in-order and set limits; shine and inspect through cleaning; standardize and share information; and sustain the gains. 5S is sometimes referred to as a housekeeping methodology, but it's really about workplace organization.

IT Became the Target

While our office isn't particularly messy -- well, the storage room is a wreck and some cubicles need attention -- the “standardize and share information” segment of the 5S concept caught my attention because of the tens of thousands of computer files we generate and store. A couple incidents confirmed a need for standardizing our IT (Information Technology) functions. I was copied on an email exchange with a client which mentions that someone in their company is editing an earlier version of a file that we had since updated. And, one client reported releasing

the wrong version of a news release we had prepared, so I know they need organization help, too. With a half-dozen employees working on multiple client accounts, we clearly needed a standardization system for our computer files so we would always be working on the latest version of a project, and months later we would be able to retrieve that same file and know without a doubt that it was the approved and FINAL version.

If a new employee joined the firm, the system would have to be fool-proof enough that a file could be located by anyone in a matter of seconds and they would be confident that they had the right file.

How to Get Started

Just Google “5S for office” and you’ll get more than 3 million results. So you have lots of options. We settled on a simple manual purchased through Amazon called *The 5S for the Office User’s Guide*. There is a whole industry out there selling high-priced solution packages for implementing 5S. We’re a small shop, so the simpler the better; not to mention that the manual was less than twenty dollars. Our manual sufficiently explained the process and provided the forms, worksheets and checklists necessary to ensure a well-planned 5S project, and ensure the program is sustainable.

We went through the initial steps: making a commitment to the program; identifying target areas, such as IT, storage and work stations; forming an implementation team; establishing a measurement system and collecting baseline data; photographing current conditions; applying the 5S scan checklist; and posting a project storyboard to communicate progress.

Commitment

Implementing the program takes a real commitment for a small firm like ours, where everyone has to be productive and billable. If we’re setting up processes and systems, that reduces billable hours for client work. But we recognize that ultimately this will help us do better work for our clients, in a neat and highly functioning workspace.

We started with a two-person team to address IT. They had one month to evaluate, measure and recommend a system. They have finished their work and their proposed solution has been circulated to all employees for their input. If everyone gives a nod, the new system will be implemented over the next few weeks. As with any new process, there is the typical resistance to change, so selling the benefits is important for success.

Next on the task list is the storage area. Collecting data will take some time, as we store thousands of pieces of customer literature and product samples that we regularly use in the course of business. From what I have seen from our IT exercise, I have no doubt the 5S process will produce a well-organized and safe storeroom where anyone can locate what they need in 30 seconds or less. In a business where time is money, that should go right to the bottom line. If you’re still thinking about that nursing dilemma, take heart. Pittsburgh-based Astorino, an architectural and design firm, is improving patient care by applying 5S to hospital layout. Their standardization of patient rooms is making it easier for staff to locate needed supplies, maximize useable space and improve patient flow into available rooms. Their bottom line results include reduced errors and improved efficiency.

If 5S can work in diverse businesses such as public relations and healthcare, there's likely a positive role for it in your business.