

The Eighth Waste: Interruptions

By Rick Pay

The basic foundation of process improvement is the elimination of waste. Henry Ford first mentioned it in the 1920s, saying, “If it doesn’t add value, its waste.” As Toyota refined the Toyota Production System through continuous process improvement, they eventually identified seven wastes – over production, waiting, transportation, processing, inventory, motion, and defects. Over the years I have heard of an eighth waste, typically defined as either the waste of unused knowledge, or the waste of unnecessary complexity. However, as I work with manufacturers, distributors and even in office environments, I see an even greater waste: interruptions.

How often have you seen the boss come in to an office and tell someone to drop everything and work on something “more important”? Have you seen sales

people stop preparation of one order to process another, supposedly more important, order? These situations can cause many of the standard seven wastes. For example, interrupted orders get set aside, causing a build-up of work in process, increased inventory, inefficient use of space and sometimes defects. How about answering phone calls, or email, or spending time on social networking sites? Studies show that when a person’s thought process is interrupted, it takes up to 20 minutes to become productive again! There is even a term for this, context switching, coined by computer designers to indicate the process of saving and restoring data in an operating system. Designers try to minimize these context switches because of how time-consuming they are.

So, if an interruption is a waste, how do you respond to

opportunities as they come up? I propose that you always be ready for them, that is, be agile! Be so good at the disciplines of process and productivity improvement that you can respond to almost any request in a very short time and thus be attentive to the

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Rick Pay is president of The R. PAY COMPANY, LCC, a Portland-based management consulting firm that helps manufacturers and distributors achieve peak operational performance.

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customer's needs. Companies commonly focus on one or two of the process improvement tools contained in Lean, Six Sigma, Theory of Constraints and other methods. One company I recently toured focused almost exclusively on set-up time reduction. As I walked around, I noticed a shortage of floor space and lots of unused junk scattered throughout the facility. It was so bad, they couldn't find room to receive product. If you want to become agile, you cannot focus on one or a few of the tools, you must do them all.

While there may be instances where the customer needs a response immediately, in most cases, if they can be next in line that is sufficient, especially if the line is short. Three things will help you keep the line short.

First, make sure everything you are doing is important. Activities should be planned, focused, and timely. Planned suggests that they are scheduled and meet a preset objective. Focused means well-designed activities, usually done subject to standard work or other process discipline. Timely suggests that the step is relatively short and is done just before it is needed.

Second, abide by operations discipline. Good process discipline occurs when people follow the rules and avoid tasks that are not compliant with prescribed process or instructions. Standard work is one approach that can help in this regard. Good process discipline derives from "do it right the first time," which is basic to high quality.

Third, think speed! Speed comes from small batch sizes or even flow, which are both vital for Just-In-Time operations. There is an entire process emerging called QRM for Quick Response Manufacturing, which focuses on cycle time reduction. In many businesses, speed is the key to operations improvement. Eliminating the speed bumps that slow down process cycle time in manufacturing, distribution and even service operations can greatly enhance operations excellence and customer service.

Reducing interruptions will significantly boost productivity, customer service and profitability. Eliminate this waste in all aspects of your operations and you will be pleasantly surprised at the improvements.

Contact The R. PAY COMPANY, LLC:

Phone: 503-780-2014

Email: rickp@rpaycompany.com

Web: www.rpaycompany.com

Blog: <http://operationspayoff.wordpress.com>