

Walking at Work is Waste

Continuous Improvement, also known as Kaizen in the Toyota Production System (TPS), involves the identification and elimination waste. In the U.S. this improvement process is called Lean Manufacturing but the benefits of the improvement process apply equally to the service industry and to all types of work activity, even to chores performed at home.

A wasteful activity consumes resources without adding value for the customer. So for example at a restaurant when the waiter makes your salad in the kitchen he is performing a value added service. However, walking between the kitchen and your table to deliver the salad is waste. That is a non-value added activity. The greater the distance between the table and the kitchen and the more trips the waiter makes to complete the entire meal process then the greater the waste.

Books on TPS usually define seven forms of waste but the most common form that we all observe going on everywhere, every day, is wasted motion. And that wasted motion we observe is frequently in the form of walking. Walking may be good for your heart but it doesn't add value to the goods manufactured or services provided by an employer.

A Kaizen improvement event involves the formation of a small team. The team closely observes, or even video tapes, all of the activity of employees as they perform certain tasks at work. The team then studies the process again and they separate all activity into value added versus non-value added types. Then suggestions are made so that the time spent on wasteful activities can be significantly reduced or eliminated.

This Kaizen process usually results in at least a 30 percent efficiency improvement the first time it is applied to repetitive tasks at work; and the improvements can often be implemented for little or no out-of-pocket cost. How efficient are your employees as they perform work related tasks? Think about the amount of wasteful walking you observe watching employees perform the following types of service:

- Restaurant – How many trips and how many steps does the average waiter take to fully service a 4-top table?
- Hotel – How many steps does the average housekeeping staff member take to change the linen and fully clean a two-bed room with bath?
- Retail – In a classic shoe store where the stock is located in the back room, how many steps does the sales person take to service the typical customer who is undecided between color, size, style, and comfort?

- Construction – Count the number of steps made by all workers involved in the start-to-finish construction of a new deck. What about the construction of an entire new home?
- Marine yard or auto repair shop – Count the number of steps taken by mechanics and other employees to service, repair, and/or winterize a twin engine 35' plus yacht, or even a smaller land or water vehicle.

Unless those employees are also working with both hands on some value added activity (like playing an instrument as a member of a marching band), then the time spent walking is all wasted motion. You may not have an idea yet on how to eliminate that walking but it is still a non-value added activity; and the employer should be able to shorten the distance or reduce the number of trips made each hour by those employees.

If you own or manage a business and your employees do a lot of walking then you have an opportunity to eliminate waste, improve your efficiency and the bottom line. That waste can also be in the form of other wasted body motion (bending, lifting, etc.), the waste of waiting, excess inventory waste, excess conveyance, and several other types.

If you would like some help on how to get started on this continuous improvement journey please contact SCORE by placing a call to the Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce office.