

## WORKPLACE MATTERS

# 'Lean office' ideas can boost clerical efficiency

**What are some examples of "waste" in the office? Unnecessary paperwork, waiting for signatures and duplicated operations.**

Every business handles a multitude of administrative tasks. Most people have felt frustrated more than once with how much time that work takes and how prone to errors it can be.



**Robin Onaclea**

Bureaucratic practices often get passed from worker to worker. The current worker may not know why a procedure is done the way that it is, only that it "has always been done this way."

Manufacturers have translated "lean manufacturing" strategies into their office environments for years, resulting in streamlined administrative processes. The concept of "lean office" now has captured the attention of local nonmanufacturing businesses, including banks, insurance companies, social services, and government agencies. The concept is particularly attractive during a time of economic distress, because it promises a higher level of efficiency.

The Springfield Department of Human Services is involved in a pilot project to introduce lean processes in its Food Stamp Program.

Stephanie Primacio, a manager at the Springfield office says, "The timing for our lean project is perfect. We are dealing with budget cuts and, at the same time, the demand for our services is very high due to the economy. We have to do more with less. We have worked hard to review our current processes, identify waste, and implement strategies to become more efficient."

After only two months, the Springfield office is already seeing positive changes. People used to wait four to seven days for a food stamp intake; now they are seen the same day. The no-show rate for appointments has dropped from 28 percent to 8 percent in one month, with more improvement expected as additional strategies are implemented.

Oregon Community Credit Union is also in the early stages of introducing lean concepts. It created a new position — product development/process improvement manager — and started to identify opportunities to improve current processes.

"We are using our conversion to a new core computer processing system as a real-time learning lab to better understand how process thinking works and how we can use it to improve service for our members," said Chris Whittaker, the new product development manager. "We expect this focus on process improvement to become more and more important in coming months and years."

So, what are some examples of "waste" in the office environment? Unnecessary paperwork, waiting for signatures and duplicated operations are a few. Using a lean office methodology, this waste is identified, and streamlined processes are developed.

Some specific examples of how a lean office process can help companies prevent mistakes, reduce costs, and improve their systems are:

- ◆ Improving how incoming calls, e-mails, and postal mail are received, answered and transferred.

- ◆ Redesigning the office layout to better allow for processes to flow faster and reduce complications.

- ◆ Streamlining interpersonal communication. The typical hierarchical organizational chart is transformed in a circular multidirectional chart, so all the employees know each other's functions and know who to talk with when they need some immediate help.

Recommended books include "Lean Office Demystified" by Don Tapping and Anne Dunn, 2006, and "Flow in the Office: Implementing and Sustaining Lean Improvements" by Carlos Venegas, 2007.

The Oregon Manufacturing Extension Partnership provides lean office training and implementation assistance. Tom Wright Hay, manufacturing consultant with OMEP says he's seen lead time reduced by half, information quality doubled, and cost savings of 10 to 30 percent in lean office projects. For more information about OMEP's services, contact Gerry Snell at (503) 725-2666 or Tom Wright Hay at (541) 554-0199.

Because of the high interest in office and administrative applications of lean strategies, the Lane Workforce Partnership will host a business roundtable on the topic on Feb. 4 at noon. Please RSVP to [robino@laneworkforce.org](mailto:robino@laneworkforce.org) by Jan. 30 to confirm attendance.

*If you have questions about training your work force, contact Robin Onaclea, business service coordinator at Lane Workforce Partnership, at [robino@laneworkforce.org](mailto:robino@laneworkforce.org) or (541) 682-7224.*