

# Lean in the Office

Even in creative and variable work environments, standard work can reduce lead times and ensure quality *By Drew Locher*

**W**hile standard work is a foundation concept of Lean thinking, its actual development and practice remain elusive—particularly in office settings. The very concept often generates strong resistance. Why? The answer lies in a lack of understanding of what standard work is, and how it can benefit both people and the company.

## WHAT IS STANDARD WORK?

Standard work includes the desired sequence of steps, the time required to effectively and efficiently perform the steps, and other elements that ensure that an activity is performed in a consistent way over time. This ensures consistent quality of the output of the process, as well as the performance of the process itself. Standard work should be used in conjunction with, but not in place of, training.

Further, documentation of standard work must be simple and visual—something that can easily be posted in the area where the work is performed. One common misunderstanding is the belief that anyone should be able to pick up standard work documentation and be able to perform the activity that it covers.

Organizations often say, “We already have standard work.” What they really have is a detailed work procedure often referred to as a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). Such detailed procedures are helpful for new employees, or employees new to a particular activity or process. SOPs serve as good reference tools during the “learning curve.” However, an SOP is in no way a replacement for standard work. Standard work displays the “what to do” and to some degree the “how to do it,” but not typically at the level of detail that an SOP would.

Therein lies a challenge. How much



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detail is too much and how much is not enough? Can very specific steps be grouped together and described in such a way to remind people what to do?

For example, for an order entry process, there's no need to go into the level of detail of “log onto computer, go to screen ABC, enter field 1, go to field 2,” and so forth. A detailed procedure or SOP can provide such specifics and be referred to when needed. Determining the appropriate level of detail for standard work comes with practice. A better understanding of the purpose of standard work will help to determine the appropriate level of detail.

One intent of standard work is to drive continuous improvement—to identify when non-standard conditions arise that in turn triggers an action to improve. We cannot identify non-standard conditions if we do not have standards to begin with.

## Applying Standard Work

**STANDARD WORK** can be applied to any repetitive activity that any person performs in any department or function in any company. The key is to focus on the activities that people perform—not their titles. “Repetitive” is a relative term. It can refer to an activity that is performed once a year, such as the annual budgetary process (this too can and should be standardized). It can apply to sales and marketing, customer service, purchasing, scheduling, accounting—all support functions in manufacturers and non-manufacturers alike.

Non-standard conditions can include:

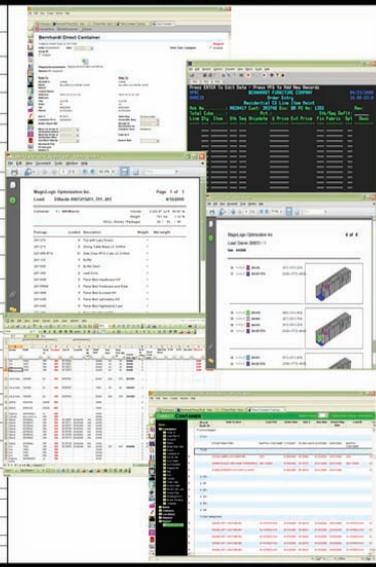
- Failure to perform an activity
- Failure to perform an activity at a required point in time
- Taking longer to perform an activity than it should
- Performing an activity in a way that will have a negative impact on some “downstream” process.

These situations must be quickly identified—they represent opportunities to return the process back to its desired standard condition. Ideally, the people performing the activity can identify these conditions, correct the process, and maintain standard work over time. Short of this ideal, others can observe to see if people are adhering to established standard work practices.

In a Lean Enterprise, it is the responsibility of leaders (supervisors and managers, for example) to insure that standard work is being practiced throughout their areas of responsibility. When people are not following established standard work

Standard Work - Direct Container Order Process			
Department: Order Entry Caseloads		Last Revision Date: 4/23/08	
Common Key Points: Process Times are provided as a guide and represent an average order of 13 lines items.		General Quality Standards:	
TASK INFORMATION			
No.	Description of Task	Time Symbol	Key Points
1	Enter to Direct Container database (Teresa)	3-1/2m	
1a	Receive all direct container orders, and enter into the Direct Container database	Q, E	Use Customer database for account #'s
1b	Email notification to Traffic		
1c	Print and join order		
1d	Forward order to Mainframe Entry	V	One order per folder, colored by day
2	Enter to Mainframe (Joi)	4-1/2m	
2a	Enter into Mainframe in pending state to reserve stock	Q, E	Use customer freight forwarder information
2b	Check stock status		
2c	Forward to Cube IQ	V	Keep in original folder
3	Process in Cube IQ (Denise)	10m	
3a	Run Cube IQ for load ability	Q	To insure Vendor loads correctly
3b	Finalize order	Q	Issues are to be communicated to Rep. and/or Customer. Return to #2 to change in Mainframe
3c	Forward to Edit	V	Keep in original folder / Rep = Pending Problem
4	Edit Order (Ann)	3m	
4a	Edit order	Q	Ensures order accuracy
4b	Take to Document Imaging	E	Take as a twice daily batch for processing
4c	Forward to Generate Load Plan OR Consolidate Load	V	Keep in original folder
5	Generate Load Plan (Teresa)	4m	
5a	Generate Load Plan, verify against Cube IQ load	Q	Ensures Load Plan accuracy
5b	Enter acknowledgment # & Load ID into Direct Container database		
5c	Email Load plan to Vendor	Q	Vendor needs load plan to ship order correctly
6	Transfer Consolidated Load (Julie)	20-40m	
	Wait for 1 day to 2 weeks		To Build Complete Container for Transfer

Reasonable Expectation (RE) = 25 minutes per average order, not including consolidating  
SYMBOL KEY:



An example of standard work order process. A detailed procedure or SOP can provide such specifics and be referred to when needed.



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## Standardizing Creative Work: Marketing and Sales

AT A COMPANY THAT CREATES marketing campaigns for consumer products, the argument was made that standard work, and Lean principles in general, don't apply due to the creative nature of the process. However, a value stream mapping exercise demonstrated that up to 90 percent of what the company does is really a process—a process that they very consistently followed, but failed to recognize. Market research, which is very process-oriented and lends itself well to standardization, identifies the potential buyers of the products (for example males ages 18 to 49), as well as what media these specific buyers frequent (radio and magazines). The only truly creative portion was the development of the radio spot itself, which accounted for approximately 15 percent of the total process time, and 10 percent of the total lead time for the overall process.

Once the company recognized this fact, staff went forward in earnest to apply standard work to all non-creative processes.

As a result, the company realized an overall lead-time reduction of 40 percent and a process time reduction of 25 percent. The newly freed-up capacity and improved customer service allowed the company to become more responsive to the ever-changing needs of its customers.

Still another example is in the sales function where people use the same argument of the creative nature of the sales activity, saying, "Everyone sells differently. Every customer is different. You can't have standard work for selling." People often confuse standard work with

what might better be called "style." We can still have a standard selling *process*, while sales staff utilize different styles that they feel are appropriate. The process step may be identified as "Establishing Rapport." One salesperson may choose to do this by asking questions about the family, while another engages in friendly banter about local sports.



practices, it represents an opportunity for the leader to effect process improvement. For example, the leader may provide training so that a specific activity can be performed in the expected time. However, if everyone is allowed to perform activities in substantially different ways, there will forever be variability. It will be nearly impossible to determine what should and should not be acted upon. In fact, much of the variability observed in an office or service environment is due to a lack of standard work. And it is often the presence of variability that is used as a reason why "lean does not work in the office or service environment."

### WHAT, HOW & WHY

Defining what tasks are to be performed is part of standard work. Specific steps will need to be grouped and described, and those groupings listed in a sequence that has proven to be the most effective and efficient way to accomplish the tasks. As we begin to get into the "how," we cross over into the key points, which describe how to perform a step.

To determine an appropriate level of detail, see whether a person who has not performed the task in a reasonable period of time can pick up the standard work doc-

umentation, quickly re-familiarize himself or herself with the task, and then perform the task in an effective way, providing the correct output. The person may need a few iterations to do it efficiently. But the correct output should be expected on the first try.

Key points tend to relate to quality, efficiency, and safety. While safety considerations are primarily applicable to production processes, quality and efficiency certainly apply to office and service processes as well. Details are provided to make sure that an acceptable-quality result will occur. Details regarding the fastest way to perform a task (while assuring quality) are provided. For an Order Entry activity, a key point for a particular step may be to "Input all fields identified as required." Otherwise, the order will not be able to be accurately processed. This begins to provide a "why"—an important element of standard work.

So why do people tend to drift away from standard work procedures over time? One common cause is that people will make changes that they perceive will help themselves. For example, a person may make a change in his or her procedure in order to complete the related task more quickly. However, this well-intended change in procedure might cause quality-related

problems for a downstream process.

The "why" explains the logic behind the defined tasks, how they are sequenced, and the manner in which they should be performed. People are more likely to maintain standard work if they understand the reason behind it.

Included in all standard work is the expected time to complete a task or group of tasks. This provides the person performing the task with an understanding of the amount of time it should take to complete it. Let's say that the expected time for entering an order is five minutes. If a person is regularly taking 15 minutes, a non-standard condition is occurring. Potential causes include lack of training or unforeseen circumstances that may have crept into the process.

Often there is a reluctance to include expected process time. Sometimes people are concerned with the response that they will receive if they do not meet the expected time—some form of punitive response. This is a valid concern in traditional work environments. However, in a lean enterprise, this must be viewed as an opportunity for improvement. Expected process times can be expressed as an acceptable range to accommodate the vari-

ability that does exist in office and service processes—times outside of that range would identify a non-standard condition that possibly should be acted on.

Important in an office and service process very often is the “timing” that a task is performed—the specific time of the day or day of the week that a task must be completed to ensure that other tasks can be performed by other departments or functions in a timely and/or accurate manner. This type of detail is often lost over time as people change roles and responsibilities, so include it in standard work when appropriate.

### VISUALLY DISPLAYING STANDARD WORK

The general rule is that standard work for a process or a particular operation within a process should be described on one page so that it can be visually posted. Sometimes this may turn into two pages, but the goal must be to avoid books of procedures. A format that has been used successfully is shown at right (figure 1).

All of the key elements of standard work are present in this example—identification of the task, an area to note the key points that relate to a task, as well as the expected time or timing of the task. In addition, there is an area in this format for visual references that can be used to clarify tasks and/or key points. Visual references can add detail that people feel is important without adding complexity to the documentation. For example, screen saves can be included in the document.

Another format that has proven effective in a multitasking environment is shown at right (figure 2).

This example shows the list of tasks that a person in a customer service role performs, along with the time required to perform the task, and the desired timing. Key points are added to clarify the purpose of the task. This format can be easily expanded to provide clarification of how to perform the task, including visual references. If properly created, the document shows any person expected to fulfill the role of customer service what tasks are to be performed and when, how long it should take to perform each

STANDARD WORK INSTRUCTION			
Process: ORDER PROCESSING		Operation: ORDER ENTRY	
Task	Key Points	Time / Timing	Visual References
1. Enter Order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enter header first, then each line item for efficiency</li> <li>All required fields must be input to insure accuracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5-10 mins per order</li> <li>Enter within day of receipt</li> </ul>	

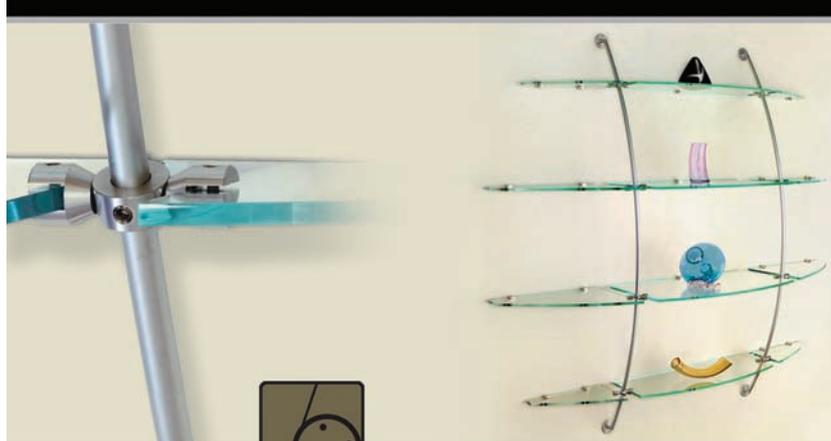
STANDARD WORK DAILY MANAGEMENT				
Role: CUSTOMER SERVICE				
Task (with key points)	Time	Frequency		
		Daily	Weekly	Monthly
1. Enter Orders within day of receipt to insure that published lead times can be met	5-10 minutes per order	Throughout day		
2. Generate weekly order input reports to monitor current demand	5 minutes		Fridays by 3:00 p.m.	
3. Generate monthly reports for management to monitor sales performance	10 minutes			Last Friday of month

Figure 1 (top): An example of a one-page format to describe standard work for a process or an operation that can be visually posted. Figure 2 (bottom): Another format proven effective in a multitasking environment.

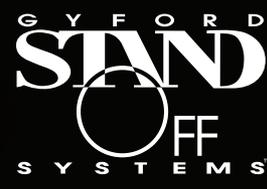
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one, and some guidance as to how and why to perform each task. The person would still need training in performing each task, but most managers can see the important benefits of having such a document to support training.

**BENEFITS OF STANDARD WORK**

The benefits of the application of standard work to office and service processes are becoming more and more apparent:

- Reduced learning curves by up to 75 percent
- Productivity or efficiency improvements of 10 to 25 percent
- Greater flexibility—to respond to changes in demand and to better accommodate staffing changes (for example, absenteeism or turnover), even for “creative work” such as marketing or design
- All accomplished while maintaining and even improving customer service and satisfaction

When coupled with the time-tested teaching technique of Job Instruction (JI), the reduction in learning curve attributed to the application of standard work is up to 75 percent. The productivity or efficiency improvement is a result of the collaborative effort to identify the best practices that become the defined standard work. Streamlining current activities is a part of the process of developing standard work—it’s not simply a documentation effort.

There is a substantial increase in flexibility as learning curves are reduced and work is simplified. This is particularly true of what has been called “creative work” such as that found in design, engineering, and marketing activities. A frequent argument is that standard work can’t be developed for creative work. However, creative work processes involve mostly information flow—identifying what information is needed, where to obtain it, and what to do with it. What this repre-

sents is a process—and all processes lend themselves to standard work. The truly creative portion typically represents a small percentage (less than 15 percent) of the work content. So this argument is largely unfounded.

The foundation concept of standard work is achievable in an office and service environment. The benefits can even exceed those experienced in manufacturing. All that is required is the willingness to apply this critical concept, and to not allow the traditional arguments to prevail. 🌱

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