Quality Qorner

Working Around Workarounds

DOI: 10.1309/8WO187UADDY2P2P2

"*Workaround:* a term generated by the software industry to describe a clumsy or inelegant solution to a problem used to bypass, mask or otherwise avoid a misfeature in some system. Theoretically, workarounds are always replaced by fixes; in practice, people often find themselves living with workarounds for long periods of time." (www.dictionary.com; accessed: September 15, 2007.)

I spent several weeks this past summer with a torn right shoulder rotator cuff tendon that eventually required surgical repair and subsequent arm immobilization for 6 weeks. Gone were yoga classes and Rocky Mountain hiking, replaced with inventing new and creative ways to work around a forced left-handedness in my right-handed world. And, oh-so-many workarounds there were! Imagine, if you will, eating food and brushing your teeth with your other hand, putting on eye makeup or a pair of socks with one hand (pantyhose were beyond any workaround I could muster), and the ultimate workaround: shifting my 5-speed car with my left hand!

One problem with these workarounds was that so much more time was needed to accomplish each task. Another was that the quality of the end result was often less than desired. Whereas I did manage to drive the car smoothly and safely, I never was able to tie both tennis shoes or close a back-button blouse—and flipflops and sweats would not be acceptable attire at the many professional meetings I needed to attend. Therefore, wardrobe workarounds were essential but doubled the time to get dressed.

Your laboratory abounds with workarounds—both within and outside your computer systems—in every process and for myriads of reasons. Some days, it may feel like everything you do is to work around some type of problem: an unexpected computer downtime, borrowing a reagent from another laboratory due to a missing shipment, turnaround times exceeded due to slow sample accessioning, and so on, simply because the original process was not functioning as needed.

I'm sure that each of you could describe at least one workaround you face each day—probably more than one, from what I've seen staffs have to endure in laboratories I've visited. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were some magic bullet that would remove the time waste and sub par quality these workarounds represent?

Quality tools exist that will help you identify and remove workarounds in your laboratory's work processes. The following paragraphs describe a few simple tools, taken from Lean philosophy, that don't require special software or consultation.

The first is a simple process flowchart. When people get together to document a given work process, the question inevitably asked is, "Why are we doing *that*?" An unsatisfactory answer should generate a discussion to encourage ideas for faster, better, and less-expensive actions to achieve the desired end result. When there exists a common understanding and documentation of a work process and its respective procedures, the need for a workaround often vanishes.

A second useful tool is 5S (see *Quality Qorner*, February 2007). Having a place for everything and everything in its place removes workarounds needed when one is not able to locate a needed office item, laboratory supply, reagent, or document.

A third important tool is to draw a simple workspace floor plan and trace the movement of people, paper, and samples to see the workarounds caused by an inefficient layout. Some workarounds may be removed simply by rearranging the workspace. One laboratory's "spaghetti map" showed that a fax machine used for printing add-on test orders was inconveniently placed such that staff had to get up from their chairs and walk to the machine every time a fax came in. The inappropriate workaround was that staff got up far less often because it interrupted routine sample accessioning, therefore delaying the entry and processing of the additional test orders.

A fourth tool is the "kan-ban" system that uses colored cards or stickers as visual signals to trigger or control the inventory flow of reagents and supplies. Gone will be the workaround of what to do when the laboratory is out of a reagent or supply because an order was forgotten or placed too late.

Lean tools are useful in identifying and removing unwanted workarounds from contributing inefficiency and lower quality to laboratory operations. However, the most comprehensive tool for removing many undesirable workarounds is to have a functioning quality management system. Its documented policies, processes, and procedures for both management activities and technical operations surpass Lean tools alone and also identify opportunities other than workarounds to improve the laboratory's contribution to patient care and safety.

So, what's the solution for my inefficient left-handed workaround world? I must do my physical therapy every day without fail—and refuse to ever again tackle a double black diamond ski run with killer moguls!

This Month's Quality Quote:

"Simplify, simplify."
—Henry David Thoreau

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