



ISSA Reports

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Boosting Worker Output

by Dawn Shoemaker

American employers have been struggling to cope with the longest and deepest recession since the 1930s. One way many have been addressing this crisis is to lay off workers. The result of this strategy is an unemployment rate in the United States that has risen from about 5 percent a few years ago to almost 10 percent today. And even though reports now indicate that things may be picking up, it is believed the hiring of new workers and a decrease in the unemployment rate will trail far behind other improvements in the economy. This means employers are looking for as many ways as possible to improve worker productivity among the still-employed.

And sure enough, worker productivity in the United States has been surging. In late December of last year, the U.S. Commerce Department reported that worker productivity was rising at an annual rate of 8.1 percent, based on the July-September (2009) period. This is the biggest jump since 2003 and has helped many companies improve their profits and economic outlooks.

Although the professional cleaning industry has not been as negatively impacted by the recession as, say, the automobile or real estate industries, the effect in some areas of the country and in some industry sectors has been bad. And this applies to educational facilities as well. When tax revenues decline, local and state governments must look for cutbacks, and when it comes to schools, scores of districts have seen their custodial budgets cut and cleaning workers laid off.

This means school districts are in the same boat as businesses across the land. They must find ways to get the most out of the staff they have. And increasing worker productivity can be especially challenging when it comes to restroom cleaning. As the "complaint centers" of most facilities, restrooms are often the last place administrators want custodial workers to speed up their work or, worse, cut corners. Fortunately, there are ways to improve worker productivity in restrooms and also ensure they are cleaned thoroughly, hygienically, and fast.

The Multitasking Dilemma

Some studies have reported that when people multitask, they are often less productive, and the quality of their work suffers. Further, personal safety may be jeopardized. Likely the worst and most dangerous example of this is when people drive and text-message at the same time.

However, the reality of today's world is that many people have to multitask and — depending on the tasks — have learned to do so relatively well. This includes cleaning professionals, who have been assisted by cleaning products and equipment that perform multiple tasks.

For example, multisurface restroom-cleaning chemicals are available that can help workers clean multiple fixtures, counters, and mirrors as well as metal areas without changing products or sprayers. And electrostatic dust cloths and dusters that help attract and trap dust can reduce high- and low-dusting times.

"These seem like small items, but for every step they save, worker productivity is improved," says Mike Sawchuk, vice president and

general manager of Enviro-Solutions, a leading manufacturer of green cleaning products. "And it means fewer chemicals, sprayers, and other cleaning tools are needed or must be refilled; fewer items must be restocked in janitorial closets or placed on janitorial carts; and typically, less training is necessary. These are all time savers."

The Big Time Savers

However, the time savers that can make the biggest impact on worker productivity involve much more than multitasking cleaning chemicals or cleaning cloths. According to Peter Sheldon, vice president of operations for Coverall, a leading janitorial franchise, the real savings come when facility service providers turn to technologies that automate cleaning tasks.

This is especially true when it comes to restroom cleaning because so many cleaning professionals use procedures that have changed little in decades.

"Worse, we found that many cleaning workers have used [restroom] cleaning tools and procedures for years without even inquiring if new methods, products, or equipment are available," says Sheldon.

To find out about new technologies, Sheldon encourages his staff and franchisees to read key industry publications; attend conferences and trade shows, such as the annual ISSA/INTERCLEAN® show; and develop a strong working relationship with an astute janitor distributor. "This is how our industry professionals get their ongoing education," he says.

Sheldon has also moved his company and franchisees away from conventional restroom-cleaning methods — mops, buckets, sprayers, cleaning cloths — to spray-and-vac cleaning systems. These machines automate the cleaning process by first applying a chemical solution to surfaces and fixtures to be cleaned, rinsing the same areas, and then removing the solution with a built-in wet/vac system.

"The big news is that ISSA's cleaning-times studies find that these systems are three times faster than conventional restroom-cleaning procedures," says Sheldon. "This time savings helps cut costs. And our own studies indicate that even this figure may be low."

Lesson Learned, the Hard Way

Clearly, for those who have lost their jobs and businesses that have been forced to shutter their doors, this recession has been bad news. But some good always comes out of a recession. For one, companies have been forced to learn how to improve worker productivity.

This has happened in scores of industries, including the professional cleaning industry, and the knowledge that has been gained regarding increasing worker productivity will likely make the American economy more efficient and competitive in years to come. "It's unfortunate that it takes a recession for this to happen and for our industry to investigate and adopt new cleaning technologies," says Sheldon. "But in the long run, our industry will be better off for it."

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