

Two Key Principles of Productivity Improvement

Several years ago, when I was first contacted by Educational Testing Service (ETS), they told me they had been told by Booz Allen that I could improve productivity through training. I was more than a little taken aback, but I agreed to meet with them to discuss a project. And then I immediately called a fellow I knew at Booz Allen.¹ I asked him if he had any tips about productivity improvement, and he said it all boiled down to (1) looking for things that are being done twice and (2) things being done that shouldn't be done. I view his tips as two key principles of productivity improvement, and they have stood me in good stead ever since. Here are two examples from my early consulting days at ETS.

Principle # 1: Do It Once

In the course of starting my first project at ETS, I asked permission to go out on the floor where the reject resolution work was being done and look around. Permission was granted and I went out and looked around at various activities. One caught my eye. Every now and then, a fellow who was resolving errors on forms that had been rejected from computer processing reached for a three-ring binder on his workstation and looked through it then put it back and continued working on the form. After several such occurrences, I asked him what he was using the binder for. He informed me that the forms on which he was working could have been rejected for any number of reasons and, in order to resolve any errors, he had to find out which edit was the reason for rejecting the form. This was the case with most of the edits. The binder contained the edits that were run as part of computer processing and, when the edits failed, the form was rejected for manual resolution. The resolution clerk was re-running the computer edits; the forms were being edited twice, once by computer and once manually. At a subsequent kick-off meeting, the head of systems readily agreed that the reject notices accompanying the rejected forms could be modified to indicate the reason for reject and the resolution clerks would no longer have to rerun the edits. They could be told the reason for failure. Productivity quickly and dramatically improved and training the resolution clerks got a lot simpler.

Principle # 2: Don't Do It at All

While working on the project mentioned above, the head of the resolution department asked me to take a look at his correspondence unit. It handled written inquiries and complaints. Finding, training, and keeping good people for the unit was very difficult to do, and no one was happy with the way it performed. After poking around a bit, I recommended he shut down the unit. Instead of sending out written responses to inquiries or complaints that came in by mail, send the person a post-card asking them to call the 800 number on the postcard and speak with a customer service representative. In short, we converted written inquiries and complaints to telephone calls to the customer service unit. It was staffed with competent, knowledgeable service representatives. It also made clarifying and resolving the customer's inquiry or complaint much easier, faster and more likely to succeed. Productivity improved, and the need for training in the correspondence unit was eliminated.

¹ The fellow I called at Booz Allen was David Dean. He and I have been friends for years now, and I am forever in his debt for those two key principles of productivity improvement. The notion that I could improve productivity through training stemmed from some earlier training development work I did for David on a Booz Allen project involving health insurance claims examiners. There, the use of algorithmic job aids that I and my team developed as part of the training supporting the roll out of a new claims processing system, greatly simplified and shortened the training and increased the productivity of the claims examiners. Similar job aids were also developed and used in the resolution operation at ETS to similar effect. After the project at ETS concluded, the EVP of Operations at ETS invited me to lunch where he asked me why I went around pretending to be a trainer.