

## Lean in the Office: 8 Wastes

### Executive Summary:

In the office environment, the 8 classic waste types of the Lean methodology manifest in different ways than we see on the factory floor. Learn to identify waste in the office so you can eliminate it and improve your business performance and your work environment.

### The Rest of the Story:

In the Lean methodology, there are generally 8 categories of waste we learn to look for and eliminate. For the most part, we all learn to identify and reduce these wastes in workspaces such as factory floors, assembly lines, test laboratories, or hospital rooms.

Next, if we are progressive, we will reduce waste in highly repeatable business processes such as taking orders from customers, delivering reports to customers or regulatory agencies, and other processes where it is easy to both map and measure the process and its waste. What about the other office programs, ones that aren't so easy to map or measure? Can't we get the waste out of them too?

It might be less straightforward to identify and remove waste from processes that drive projects, or that are used during projects, but it can, and should be done. A challenge that must be overcome, however, is learning how to identify the waste in the office.

On the factory or workroom floor, we learned to look for the waste. It is most obvious in the following forms, which are easy clues that a process is not performing efficiently.

- Inventory – parts stacked up before, in, or at the end of a process – is a waste by itself, but also a manifestation of other wastes such as transportation, defects, and overproduction
- Motion – people moving around a lot – is a waste and also a manifestation of over processing or transportation

In short we quickly learn to spot inventory and motion as two key indicators of waste.

What about at your desk in the office? You know the waste is there. You feel it. It's harder to see, though. The reason is that your workspace is inside your computer. Inventory exists, but it's in your e-mail box, not on your desktop. Motion takes place, but it's not in the hallways, it's also inside your computer network.

To identify and eliminate the waste that plagues your office, learn to identify the 8 wastes in their digital, virtual manifestations. Here is a list of the 8 common wastes of Lean, and some ideas about how they manifest in the office environment.

**Transportation** = movement of the work. Manifestations include handoffs where the work is transferred from one person to another. Transportation of electronic files is particularly insidious because it frequently results in multiple, varying copies of the work, which must eventually be reconciled. It leads to other wastes such as defects, overproduction, and processing. Transportation is also an opportunity for a defect when the work goes to the wrong person or fails to get to the right person.

**Inventory** = work that is waiting to be processed. Inventory is a common result of multi-tasking and otherwise un-balanced workloads. Inventory can be found in e-mail or work order in-boxes, to-do lists, product development pipelines, and resource assignment charts. If a person has three tasks to complete, it is guaranteed that two of them are waiting (in inventory) while that person performs the third. If you want

to be able to see inventory like you do on the factory floor, you must make the lists, in-boxes, resource assignments, and project pipelines visible in your workspace.

**Motion** = people moving or working without producing. Meetings are motion in the sense that they are work without producing, unless a decision is made or information is produced during the meeting. The motion you see of people moving from conference room to conference room and back to their desks is indeed wasted motion, but it's probably not the waste to target first. Motion shows up as people search for files they can't find, in phone calls to track down information, or from unnecessary button clicks to get to the bottom of a work order to update the to-do list. Most un-productive work takes place inside the electronic system while the person is sitting at his/her desk or while they are sitting in a meeting.

**Waiting** = people waiting for information in order to do work. This is another common result of multi-tasking, and also the primary cause of multi-tasking. People work on other things while they wait for one thing to be processed and made ready. Unfortunately, when the one thing finally becomes ready, we tend to finish what we started before getting back to it. Because of multi-tasking, waiting is difficult to observe. You must ask questions to discover it, or identify it yourself when you run into it. It's perhaps the most common and wasteful waste of them all in the office.

**Overproduction** = producing unnecessary work or deliverables. Overproduction shows up in multiple copies of information, producing reports that aren't read, writing formal documents or content where only the table is read, reply all, working on deliverables that aren't important, and delivering the same information in multiple deliverables or formats. Overproduction frequently shows up when managers ask underlings to do things that make the manager's life easier.

**Over Processing** = unnecessary effort to get the work done. Over Processing shows up in additional signature approvals, data entry or data format changes, frequently revising documents or information, or complex forms or databases that require information to be entered repeatedly. Over Processing often results from the creation of multiple versions of a piece of work, that now must be reconciled into the true work.

**Defects** = any work that did not accomplish its purpose or was not correct the first time. Defects include late work, incorrect information, conflicting information, *instructions that must be clarified*, insufficient information, partially complete work or information, miss-named files, lost files or information, and anything that must be reworked. Rework is the pain that results from defects. Find the re-work and you will find the Defect waste.

**Underutilized Skills, Ideas** = capabilities of people that are not used or leveraged. This happens frequently in large organizations where the skills and backgrounds of everyone are not common knowledge. This can vary from not capturing ideas that employees might have for new products or innovations, to the six-figure salary executive correcting data entry errors in a financial spreadsheet. The biggest crime in this category is not empowering or enabling the people most intimate with a process to improve the process.

Hopefully, the short descriptions above give you some translation between wastes on factory, assembly, or laboratory spaces, and the virtual workspace of the office environment. Look around. Observe the work you do today and see how much work is in your inventory waiting for you to get around to it, and how often you are waiting for someone or something in order to get started.

Here's the big one. Do your meetings produce value by producing new information or making decisions, or do they fall in the category of waste? If you are sitting around sharing existing information, then the meeting is waste. Sharing information may be necessary and important, but is there a less time-consuming way to achieve the same result?

Above, I wrote that it is difficult to see the waste in the office, but we know it's there because we can feel it. My best advice for finding and eliminating waste in the office is to chase the pain. Hunt down the rework, the overtime, the stress and frustration, and you will quickly begin putting your fingers on the waste and its causes.

Address the causes of the waste. Eliminate them. In doing so, you will not only make your business more productive, but it will be a much less painful place to work.