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More on people and processes

By Paperitalo Staff

When I talked about people and processes a few weeks ago, 100% of the respondents to our weekly quiz said people make more of a difference than processes. Interestingly, however, in many mills the focus is predominately on capital expenditures, that is processes, instead of people. This occurs even in mills that confess people are the source of opportunity.

This week, let's turn around and look at this from another direction. In paper mills, our job is to take relatively low value fiber and turn it into a high value finished product. Along the way, we manipulate the fiber through discreet processes, add chemicals to it, wet it, dry it and roll it up (or sheet it).

Have you ever given any thought to how long your mill performs an activity on a given fiber? I am not talking about the time it might be in vessels or a warehouse awaiting processing. Nor am I talking about the time it might be waiting in a surge tank intraprocess. Yes, I am not talking about the time it sits in a finished goods warehouse, either. I am talking about the time your facility actually does something to it.

Give up? The answer, depending on your grade, is usually less than five minutes (this is highly dependent on how you wish to measure the winding function, I am taking a narrow view of that activity). Thought of another way, that soft drink carton, that roll of tissue that corrugated container, that magazine, is made up of fibers that took less than five minutes to convert from raw materials to what you hold in your hand.

So, think of our mills. They consist of large infrastructure, vast machinery and legions of people, only to work on discreet fibers for around five minutes of the time they spend on your site.

Think of the meetings, expenditures, personnel issues, and costs expended to make this possible. It is mind-boggling when you look at it this way.

Now, back in the fifties and sixties, when my family farmed, we had mostly junk equipment. It was not competitive, primarily because it took too many operator hours and too much overall schedule time to perform a given task. That was a mistake.

Likewise, it is true you can have non-competitive equipment in your mill, too. Much of the time, however, in my experience mills are not experiencing a shortage of competitive

equipment. Notice, I did not say it was always well-maintained: maintenance, for the purposes of this column, is a people issue.

Yes, people still make the most difference and you would be wise to focus on them. I had a client recently pass on a great story that illustrates what I see in mills every day. Purportedly, a scientist put five monkeys in a very large cage, a cage which had stairs to the top and at the top of which was a banana. One monkey started to climb the stairs to the banana. The remaining monkeys were sprayed down with cold water. The monkeys quickly learned to grab any monkey that headed for the banana and beat the daylight out of them. After this behavior was learned by all, a monkey was traded out for a new monkey. The exercise continued with the cold water.

Subsequently, all the monkeys were traded out one at a time and the cold water baths continued. Finally, a monkey was traded out, but the cold water was omitted. The other four monkeys still beat up the one headed for the banana. One at a time, the monkeys again were traded out and, again, the cold water was omitted. Finally, all the monkeys had been traded out, and none of the current cage occupants had been hit with cold water. Still, none of them would go for the banana. Why? *Because they had always done it that way.*

If your mill is over a month old, you have this problem everywhere, played out many times each day. We will talk about solutions in occasional future columns. In the meantime, look for this behavior in your mill, and think about how long you actually do something to a fiber. How can you reduce all the effort and costs necessary to transform that fiber into a high value finished product? It could be the key to your success in 2013.

For safety this week, how many of your safety habits are in the category, "we have always done it this way?" Might be time to examine them closely.

Be safe and we will talk next week.##