Implementing in Mail Operations

By Mark Fallon

In a competitive environment, "good enough" isn't "good enough". Customer expectations continue to rise. They want to receive their documents with the correct information, and expect a printing job to be error-free. They want the right statement, with the right address, in the right envelope to be delivered at the right time.

The first step of introducing quality control into an operation is to document the existing process, including process maps displaying the individual steps and the hand-offs between teams and operators. Even if written procedures exist, it's important to validate the steps with the employees who do the actual work.

Using the process map, you need to identify key areas where errors can occur. Based on this information, you can formulate the objectives of your quality control program. Then, you must clearly state which errors will be reduced or eliminated through the implementation of quality control, and identify the factors required for success.

Reduce Opportunities for Error

The common errors that take place in mail operations include:

- addressing errors (external and internal)
- printing errors
- finishing/inserting errors
- delivery errors

In the mailing industry, the address is the keystone of the entire process. You may print a beautiful page with stunning colors, and finish the piece with an exquisite bind. However, if the address on the envelope is wrong, the intended recipient will never benefit from your hard work.

For external mailing addresses for customers, organizations must implement automated cleansing at every possible step. The best-trained customer service representatives may make a keying error. External customers may move without notifying their bank or insurance company. The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) will add and change ZIP Codes in different parts of the country.

Two tools that will improve your address management process are the Coding Accuracy Support System (CASS) and NCOA^{Link}. Created by the USPS, these products are used to standardize addresses (CASS) and detect changes of address (NCOA^{Link}). Vendors offer solutions that include installing this software on your computers or accessing the software via the Internet (a.k.a., "the cloud").

Using the process maps described earlier, managers can determine when addresses are accessed and how they can be updat-

ed. With the different solutions available, operations can implement address checks at any step:

- when addresses are entered by a customer service representative
- when a customer enters an address on a website
- on a scheduled batch basis (e.g., every 90 days)
- as part of the printing process

Mail operations that handle internal mail deliveries also must be concerned about addresses. Employees need to know their correct mail stop designations and provide the right address to people sending mail to them. Working with the Human Resources, Facilities Management and Information Technology departments, mail center managers need to develop processes for tracking employee moves and updating databases. Instead of quarterly or monthly updates, weekly updates are recommended.

Printing errors may occur due to programming, machine or operator errors. If data fields aren't properly mapped, the wrong information will appear on a bill or statement. If printers aren't properly maintained, the quality of output will degrade over time. And if an operator loads the wrong paper or forms, the results can be disastrous.

In most operations, quality control in printing is performed by an individual or team. These quality control specialists use a checklist to review specific areas of the document, including form type, logos, key fields, fonts and readability. Checks should occur multiple times — during programming and testing, randomly throughout the printing process, and before the printed output is handed off to the finishing department. Then, signed logs are completed and filed appropriately.

In many shops today, cameras enhance the quality control process. Using job information files, camera-based systems can check the output for correct stock, data fields, print quality and alignment. Additionally, the systems can track every page to ensure a job is completed accurately. These systems can increase your quality significantly, but physical checks by humans are still important.

Like printing, errors in the finishing and inserting processes can be caused by programming mistakes, machine faults and operator missteps. And like printing, a combination of reviews by people, cameras and software decreases the opportunity for error. These reviews are checks at the start of the job, during the job and at the completion of the job.

The best shops use work-order systems that include checklists — machine setup, envelope stock, test pieces, etc. Leads, supervisors or quality control staff review the checklist before the beginning of each phase. Integrating these checks into the entire process focuses your team on the importance of quality.

For external customers, delivery is usually handled by a third party (e.g., the USPS), and this is why address quality is so important at the start of the process. For valuable documents using manifested mail, the Intelligent Mail barcode (IMb) or Delivery Confirmation service adds a system check to the process. Operations should conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine which level of tracking is worth the cost.

For internal deliveries, a similar cost-benefit analysis is needed. Accountable mail and overnight packages should be tracked from receipt through delivery. At a minimum, physical logs with signatures should be maintained. Automated systems with barcodes and electronic signatures should be implemented, wherever possible. Most of these automated systems include a web-based interface, allowing users to create barcoded labels for interoffice deliveries.

Overcoming Roadblocks

When implementing a quality control system, managers may face resistance from within the organization. People may say they want quality, but aren't willing to take the steps necessary to support the process. Common excuses include:

- "Error-free isn't possible, so why try?"
- "Quality control costs too much."
- "Quality control slows down production."
- "Nobody really cares."

Many people think that defect-free products and services are not practical or economical, and that some level of defects is normal and acceptable. Quality is frequently associated with cost, meaning that high quality is synonymous with high cost. Organizations may be reluctant to spend on quality control, especially when they don't see an immediate payback.

Leaders can overcome roadblocks by explaining why quality control is important before directing how quality control will be implemented. Managers should explain the competitive environment for the organization and the department. Companies must demonstrate value and integrity to their customers, or lose their business. Similarly, internal mail operations must generate defect-free products and services, or lose their jobs to an outsourcing vendor.

Whenever possible, share direct feedback from customers — positive and negative. There may be more negative feedback, as most people don't say "thank you" when they receive their correct statement in the mail. However, by tying a complaint to a solution, managers can demonstrate the value of a new process.

Most employees want to perform their jobs well. People don't come to work thinking, "I want to screw up" or "I want to do poor quality work." In most operations, people want to do a good job. As managers, your role is to help employees do a good job. To give them the tools to do a good job. That's what you're doing when you implement quality control. You're giving your employees the tools to do a good job.

Achieving quality requires commitment and the establishment of an environment in which quality can flourish. Managers must dedicate the time and resources necessary to map out existing processes and identify where errors occur. Integrating quality review techniques with automated technology will provide the foundation of a system that will reduce errors. Demonstrating the benefits to employees will improve adoption of the new processes.

In an ever-competitive world, following these steps will help managers successfully implement a quality control program.

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