# Muda: Tackling admin process waste the Japanese way

*By Mark Northway, director,* **Deltic Training**

On the face of it, building a new car has very little in common with managing an administrative process. But if we peer beneath the surface, we can see that there are definite similarities: we want both to work first time without needing to be fixed every five minutes and we also want them to do what they are meant to do.

In short, it is about sorting out anything that might cause a problem because if potential issues can be removed, the only possibility left is that things work correctly. This was the theory of Japanese industrial engineer and businessman, *Taiichi Ohno* (1912-1990). He is said to be the father of the *Toyota Production System* (TPS), which subsequently also became known as *Lean Manufacturing* in the US and elsewhere.

In a nutshell, the approach is based on reducing cost and increasing quality by eliminating wasteful activities. As part of the wider TPS, Ohno devised the concept of the so-called "seven wastes" or "Muda", the Japanese term for waste. These seven Muda categories are:
1. Overproduction
2. Transportation
3. Unnecessary inventory (stock) on hand
4. Producing defective goods
5. Waiting time (idle or non-productive time)
6. Processing
7. Unnecessary motion.

Although originally applied to production systems, these Muda principles can also be applied to administrative systems and processes too in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Here is a translation from one world to the other of what this means in practice:

1. **Overproduction of information:** In relation to reports, this can relate to coming up with a first draft, amending it and then endlessly rewriting it. It can also include the production of too many emails or the creation of unnecessary paperwork and soft copy reports.

2. **Transportation:** Office design and layout should ensure that information is easily accessible in order to avoid unnecessary walking around or potentially dangerous movements such as stretching or reaching. The concept also relates to individuals commuting to and from the workplace when they could work from home. Transporting goods (or people) over long distances increases their risk of damage (or getting hurt).

3. **Unnecessary stock:** This term can refer to buying too many items such as paper and pens that end up cluttering store cupboards. The lesson here is to plan for what you need and introduce an effective system to manage re-ordering. Allow the person who uses the equipment to decide on how best to order. Just do not give them any space to hoard.

An even bigger challenge, however, relates to administrative information. It is worth exploring issues such as how large the hard drives on your computer need to be, how much space is taken up by files and how much information is printed off unnecessarily.

If you store too much digital information, it becomes more difficult to find and to lose, which can end up compromising data security. "File it, bin it, or act on it" applies as much to electronic data as it does to hardcopy. Remember also that cc:ing or bcc:ing emails only adds to the amount of information held by others.

4. **Producing defective goods:** In this instance, goods equate to information, which includes poorly presented reports that require re-printing; unclear emails that ▶

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need clarification or badly-written letters that reflect negatively on the organisation.

In order to provide high quality information, ensure that you are aware of the goal and how your message fits with the overall aims and objectives of the company. Be critical of existing ways of working and try to identify why defective goods may end up being produced.

What can help here is employing a standardised approach to producing information, for example, a checklist of regular activities. Ensure there is time to read the finished product through. When you are giving instructions, ensure they are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and have a timeframe (SMART).

5. **Waiting time:** This can result if you do not receive information or are unable to download documents immediately. But mapping information flows within the organisation can help you plan in order to ensure data is available when it should be.

For instance, ensure you know when licences, permits, insurance and the like are due to run out and create a spreadsheet to provide green/amber/red indicators. At the same time, embed electronic copies of these documents into your spreadsheet for easy access and upload it up into storage areas such as Dropbox or GoogleDrive so that everyone else can see it too.

Time spent chatting to colleagues should not always be considered unproductive however, as it can help in relationship-building and developing a positive organisational culture. But time spent looking for pens, staples and so on is frustrating, so it makes sense to organise your workspace and declutter. Also avoid banging your head against a brick wall - identify your work rhythms and adapt to them. Know when you work best, and do your best work then.

6. **Processing:** Consider whether your job can be performed more effectively or quickly by redesigning various processes – and, even more fundamentally, whether such processes are necessary in the first place. Replacing paper-based forms with online ones is a good example of this as it means information can be captured more quickly at source.

It is also worth considering whether your life could be made easier by making small alterations to processing activity prior to your involvement with it. Working with others to try and solve common or frequent problems is always worth doing because happy workers = happy place to work.

**7. Unnecessary motion:** This term could apply to either yourself or machines. Think about whether you really need to print everything out, for instance. Keep a log of your movements throughout a normal day and see if they could be reduced. Motion, which includes transportation, damages goods and increases the risk of human injury.

Also identify information that you access regularly and mark relevant files in a range of colours in order to differentiate between them. Content will become easier to find and the office will be a brighter environment to work in too. Everything else should be filed away and stored.
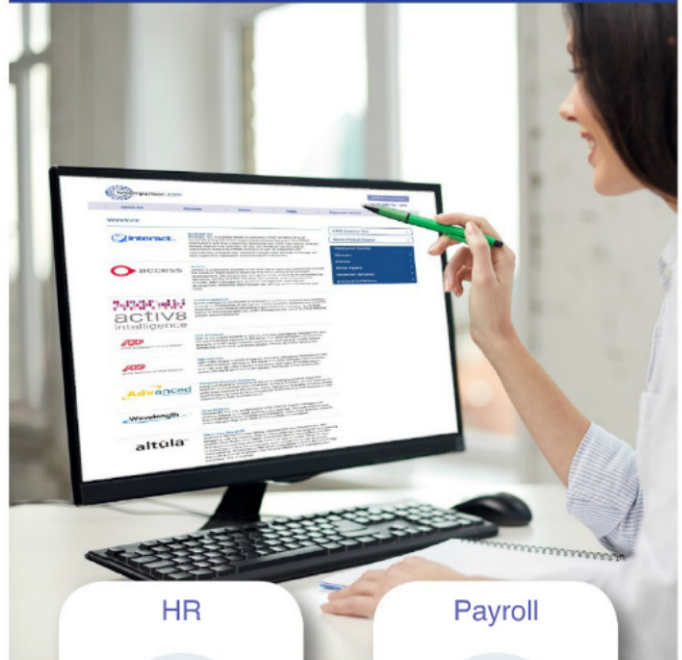
Improving how you undertake admin tasks by applying Muda techniques is challenging, but can greatly boost efficiency and effectiveness. For the best results, you will need a deep understanding of your organisation's aims and objectives as well as its systems and processes - and how your activities fit into all of this. It is also vital that you are able to communicate effectively with people across all levels of your 'information supply chain'. ■

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