

# WORK WONDERS

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Boost efficiency and save yourself some time and stress by pledging to keep things simple.

**T**HE VALUE OF A “WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER” PHILOSOPHY certainly is easy to recognize and appreciate when applied in a school cafeteria and kitchen. Employees at all levels, from the dishroom worker to the cashier to the manager, must juggle many responsibilities under enormous time pressure. Day after day, you make it all come together—but at greater risk for mistakes and accidents in the short term and employee burnout over the long haul. How can you improve your own efficiency and that of your coworkers? The answers are simple—literally.

Well, that may be overstating (or is it understating?) the issue a little. While there are many simple steps that you can take to improve efficiency, they will be most effective when implemented in a thoughtful, pragmatic way that takes into account the entire operation. “Work simplification is a state of mind that takes time and a great deal of planning prior to implementation,” explains foodservice consultant and trainer Cyndie Story, PhD, RD, CC. “It is difficult to simplify your work in the middle of a firestorm of food production.”

## SNAPSHOT

- Review every step and procedure from receiving to serving.
- Start by clearing out the clutter. Toss, recycle and fix what's broken.
- It's helpful to group both the items you need and the tasks you perform.

Instead, Story recommends that supervisory staff at the district and site level take a methodical, sequential approach to reviewing every step and procedure from receiving to serving. Start after the menu cycle has been set, and you will have a reasonable idea for when you'll be working with recipes versus prepared items and a mix and so on. Using the menu as your guide, identify every area where fewer steps, simpler processes and more organized approaches could benefit the team; Story shares many suggestions throughout this article. Make a work simplification revamp part of an inservice training, such as just before the start of school—or midyear after the winter holidays.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The first step, before any assessment and any training, is for everyone on the team to recognize that such changes offer very real benefits.

### Why Try?

"We like our process just the way it is," scoff the know-it-all veterans. "It works. Kids are fed, the job gets done. We have a great team." No doubt! But could you be even better? Could the day be a little less stressful? Wouldn't it be nice to have more time for the projects that always get put on the backburner, like a fun promotion or a nutrition education lesson? Effective work simplification techniques may increase staff production between 20 and 50%, asserts Story. That's a pretty compelling statistic.

And maybe your team *isn't* working effectively. Maybe it feels like everyone is frazzled and barks impatiently at one another. Maybe you go home dead tired, dreaming of a big lottery win as your only ticket out of a daily grind. Some simple changes in processes and procedures might make a big difference—*isn't* it worth a try?

Work simplification has a very common sense foundation: It's all about finding easier and more organized ways to do things. Story suggests starting by asking yourself (and your team) some fundamental questions about various tasks and responsibilities:

- Can this job be improved?
- Are there unnecessary steps? What are they?
- Can parts of the job be combined?
- Are some of the steps being repeated or duplicated?
- Is the proper tool being used?

By yourself, you might not have the distance and proper perspective to determine the answers right off the bat. You've been doing things the same way all this time for a reason—it's what you know best. That's why it's helpful to work on this project with other people, who can share observations and suggestions. Indeed, Story advises that a supervisor watch, time and/or film employees completing daily task in order to analyze and identify ways to improve efficiency—and to do so together with employees. "Football coaches and players watch hours of videotape to improve performance," notes Story.

But only *you* can answer the most important question: *Am I willing to change and try something new?*

### Equipped for Success

Once you're ready to take a look at how to simplify work tasks, start by clearing out the clutter, asserts Story. "Stuff" accumulates over time, and if your kitchen operation has been chugging along for decades, it's likely that with a little attention and time, you could free up considerable work and organizational space—while also clearing your head!

Tackle drawers, shelves, pantries. You might be surprised at what can be tossed (or recycled), from pens that are out of ink to dusty decorations from an old promotion to smallwares that no longer match your menu preparation needs. There even may be some large equipment pieces—like fryers—that have become obsolete. Check with your state agency and local authorities about how to properly dispose of various materials and supplies.

Not everyone can adopt a "when in doubt, throw it out" philosophy, especially when items still work, even if they are not relevant to your current operation. If you can't part with it, be sure to separate it from essential items; you don't want to lose valuable time sorting through non-essential materials and supplies when searching for the proper tool.



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Is it broken? Stop procrastinating and get it repaired! Group together like repairs; things you can handle (gluing a broken handle) versus jobs that require an expert. When was the last time you replaced the blades for vegetable cutters or produce sectionizers? And how long ago did you have your knives sharpened—or replaced altogether? “Dull blades ruin product quality and increase production time,” says Story. (And dull knives can increase your risk of injury!)

## Simple & Sensible

Work simplification goes beyond the tools you use and addresses how you move. The idea, says Story, is to use motion economy. “Both hands should be working at the same time, arms moving simultaneously in opposite directions,” she notes. “For example, when you are on the serving line, one arm and hand is reaching for a lunch tray, while the other arm and hand could be reaching for a serving utensil.”

In addition, can you reduce the number of steps you take by grouping tasks together? Sure, it might be good exercise, but it also adds time. For example, do you find yourself making multiple trips back and forth to storage areas in the process of prepping meals? Perhaps the use of a cart could help you gather most of the ingredients and supplies you need at one time and with one trip. Or maybe there are some items—certain shelf-stable ingredients, supplies, smallwares, utensils—that can be stored right at your work station.

Are there other ways to store items in sensible ways? “For example, parchment paper is commonly placed on sheet pans

prior to baking. Sheet pans are often stored on the bun pan racks,” observes Story. “Why not place the box of parchment on the top or bottom of the bun pan rack? So often I see it in the dry storage area and employees are walking back and forth to get a handful.”

Similarly, make sure that the directions for recipes are written in the order that ingredients are added. Then organize both food and tools in that same order.

## Start With the Blueprint

**M**aking wholesale design changes to an existing facility isn't always feasible. But if your district has plans to build new schools or make major renovations to existing buildings, be sure that the design team is considering work simplification principles when it comes to location of equipment and the flow of food through the workspace. Receiving areas should be near storage areas, which should lead to the prep area, which should be adjacent to the serving area. According to foodservice consultant Cyndie Story, the average foodservice employee takes 14,000 steps per day; it's no wonder you might be so tired at the end of the day!

Another area that is often overlooked is the continual transfer of water in a foodservice kitchen. It can be extremely time-consuming, notes Story. “Consider installation of overhead hoses or other water outlets near cooking and serving equipment,” she advises. And, “If your serving line wells are not equipped with drains, think about purchasing wet/dry vacs to remove water from the wells and discard at the end of each day.”

## The More the Merrier

Grouping commonly used items together is one simple, but effective, technique—grouping tasks together is another. Are there some tasks that would be more effective if performed in pairs or groups? Sandwich wraps have a reputation for being time consuming, so consider assigning two or three employees to make these sandwiches using an assembly line approach to speed things up, advises Story. It should go much faster than one employee working alone—and then the entire group can move on to other tasks.

And streamlining production tasks may improve food safety. A 2008 study published in the *Journal of Food Protection* found that within a single hour, the change from one foodservice task to another meant that foodservice employees should have stopped between each one to wash their hands a total of 11 times. That's a lot of time lost if employees followed appropriate procedures—and a lot of potential food safety risk if they didn't, warns Story. Changes in work schedules and processes could decrease the number of times that an employee changes tasks and the number of times they need to wash their hands.

## Sealed With a K.I.S.S.

These are just a few suggestions to improve efficiency through simplifying your work. Some may be steps you already take. Others might be inappropriate for your particular operation. The important takeaway, however, is that it's very likely that you can make some changes in how you and your team get the job done that can be improved. Be open to change, be creative—and be open to advice from others. But even a work smarter guru like Cyndie Story has a bottom line that should never be sacrificed to time management: quality, appearance and safety. Keep that in mind, while you keep it simple, sweetheart! **SN**

Cecily Walters and Patricia Fitzgerald are assistant editor and editor of SN. To learn more about work simplification techniques, visit [www.chefcyndie.com](http://www.chefcyndie.com). Illustrations by [iStockphoto/Jiunlimited.com](http://iStockphoto/Jiunlimited.com).

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