Benchmarking

Determine your measuring standards for effective benchmarking.
By Ralph H. Rice

Benchmarking began as a way to improve the productivity of manufacturing operations. Work on benchmarking at manufacturing operations such as Xerox and Kodak proved that it could increase productivity and decreasing manufacturing costs. But early attempts at benchmarking in service industries confronted the fact that there is a fundamental difference between the delivery of products and services.

A manufacturing operation produces a tangible product that can be handled and measured. Most products do something; whether they are designed to hold hot beverages or inject fuel into the combustion chamber of a jet engine, their manufacturing specifications and functions can be defined.

When it comes to housekeeping, the definitions can get a little muddled. Most everyone agrees that housekeeping is supposed to keep a facility clean, but the definition of "clean" can be very subjective.

Product specifications are dictated by the use of the product and there is seldom confusion about whether the product was manufactured correctly for its use. Housekeeping specifications are, many times, dictated by people who have little understanding of the cleaning function and have only a certain amount of budget money to spend on that function. Sometimes, housekeeping specifications have simply evolved over time in response to demands placed on the cleaning department. What was lacking was a service level definition.

COUNTING EVERY MAN-HOUR

A service level definition of cleaning involves describing the services and man-hours being provided to every space within your jurisdiction. This process may sound tedious and time-consuming, and it can be, but it may well be the most important work you ever produce.

A well-prepared service level definition is a document that can effectively communicate to administration exactly what the housekeeping department does. It is also a document that can be the in-house manager's most effective defense against a contractor.

Frequently, facility directors describe the service level or definition of service in their facilities as "We do what's necessary," or "We clean everything, every day." Those are fine statements and they may be true, but they don't define what the department is doing.

A service level definition is the first step in benchmarking and it is an accounting of every man-hour used by the department. The best method for developing a service level definition is to record -- in a spreadsheet or computer database -- what each person is doing (policing,
cleaning, projects or supervision), where it's being done, how long it takes in fractions of hours and the time it is being done. Don't forget non-cleaning tasks, such as trash removal, clerical work, set-up and put-away time, and breaks.

Also, don't assume that you know what your people are doing. Ask them, and you will probably be surprised at how much time they're spending in one area and how little they're spending in other areas. Most of your people know what is going on in their areas and they respond to changing conditions pretty quickly.

THE REALITIES OF CLEANING

With a benchmarking document in hand, it's easier to separate cleaning time from non-cleaning time or policing from cleaning, among other time and work standards. You can tell how much time is being spent cleaning public restrooms as opposed to policing the same areas. You can tell that your staff spends more time cleaning the science building because the professors set a fire in the lab every other day, compared with the music building, whose occupants never even track in dirt.

A service level definition is a statement or documentation of what the cleaning department is currently doing. It is not a statement of what the department should be doing.

If you have building occupants who are complaining that they don't receive enough service from the housekeeping department, the service level definition may be justification for adding that service. On the other hand, the documentation may also point out that there are too many resources that go to service one area compared to some other area.

Benchmarking can be used to justify departmental productivity levels. For example, if you are currently cleaning offices on a daily basis, your service level definition will state this fact.

When your supervisor compares your productivity with another facility that is cleaning offices only once a week, the other facility will appear more productive because they are cleaning less in offices areas. However, you can point out that the two service levels are different, so the productivity levels cannot be compared.

THE CONTRACTOR'S PITCH

Benchmarking can also be used to defend against the sales pitch of a contractor. In one

case where an in-house housekeeping organization was being approached by a cleaning contractor, the service level definition was used to ask questions concerning the contractor's staffing intentions in certain areas:

The contractor was intending to police public restrooms twice a day. That service level was good, but the in-house service level definition showed that public restrooms were currently being policed five times a day.

The contractor was also planning to put one full-time person in the operating rooms. The in-house service level definition showed that there were approximately four full-time people currently assigned to that area.

The in-house department had one person assigned to attend to exterior grounds and the contractor did not even bid on performing grounds care.

In short, the contractor was planning on providing a legitimate level of service; however, it was not at all comparable to what was currently being provided by the in-house department. When the contractor eventually matched the service level of the in-house department in it's bid, it's costs were significantly higher than the in-house operation. To the people making the
decision concerning a contract service, the bottom line is the most important number.

Many times, there is an assumption that the service level to be provided by the contractor will be the same or better. An in-house service level definition can make a strong defense against a contractor.

A word of warning is in order here. If you do a service level analysis of your operation, don't just turn that document over to a contractor to help them prepare a competing bid.

MEASURABLE UNITS

The next step in looking at your own operation is to define your measurable units. These measurements may be in square footage, student enrollment, patient days or some other unit that you can measure your productivity against. Find out how your facility currently measures its productivity. A good place to look for this information is in the physical plant department,
or ask the facilities director.

Square footage is a common measurable unit of productivity measurement. Research which method your facility uses to calculate square footage:

Total or gross square footage may include mechanical rooms and vertical penetrations such as elevator shafts and vertical ductwork.

Usable square footage usually excludes restrooms, corridors and mechanical rooms.

Rentable square footage excludes stairs and elevators.

All of these measurement methods exclude any exterior space such as exterior portions of entrances, sidewalks and patios.

If you are using patient days as measurements, how will you account for your department's increasing activity when patient days are falling? What about variable work loads in areas that are unaffected by patient days, such as emergency rooms, outpatient areas and operating rooms?

As you begin to understand what you're doing, how often you're doing it (service level definition) and where you're doing it (measurable units), you will probably want to compare your operation with published comparative studies before visiting other facilities.

Comparable Data

Many professional groups, such as the Cleaning Management Institute (CMI), International Facility Management Association (IFMA), Volunteer Hospital Association (VHA), Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA), International Sanitary Supply Association (ISSA) and National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), publish data relating to custodial costs. Just as you need to fully understand how you should define measurable units,
make certain that you understand how these organizations define custodial costs.

Does their definition include departmental management personnel, clerical personnel and other non-cleaning or cleaning supported activities? What about tasks that are traditionally outside the realm of housekeeping? Are these tasks included in the published data for whatever professional organization's statistics you decide to compare your operation against?

IFMA's definition of janitorial costs uses rentable square footage and excludes tasks, such as regular trash removal, biohazard trash removal, recycling time, furniture moves and set-ups, exterior grounds care and all project work. Make certain that you factor out of your operation any of the tasks or area types not included in your comparative data so you can get a true picture to compare your operation with.

Once you have performed a service level definition for your operation and have researched the available comparative data relating to custodial costs from various professional organizations, you will be ready to visit other facilities and compare operations.

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