



Understanding work order prioritization

If a group of people is given a list of 10 activities that need to get done in a given day, chances are they will prioritize them differently. However, if they are all given the same set of criteria to evaluate that list of activities, most should follow a common theme and for the most part be fairly similar.

Backlog methodology

The same methodology should be used for managing backlog but the focus should lie both on the reasons why the work needs to get done and on the criteria for determining whether and when it will be done. An operator with 20 years' experience is unlikely to respond similarly to one who has been there for six months, regardless of who is correct. However, if easy to understand criteria are in place then both will evaluate the problem in the same way, leading to consistency and ultimately a better foundation for understanding what the backlog really consists of.

Comprehensible criteria

There are also a number of contrast-

ing ways of deriving criteria to determine work order prioritization but it is vital that, regardless of methodology, they are easy to differentiate and understand. Defining exactly what each criterion means and how it should be viewed is paramount.

One of the goals when defining the criteria should be taking as much subjectivity out of the equation as possible. Listing real life examples from operations can help clarify this even further, and it will ensure the operators referred to in the above example are capable of coming up with the same priority regardless of how long they've been in their positions.

Consistency is key

Consistency in prioritizing work that will go into the backlog should also lead to a reduction in potential financial losses for the organization. This is dependent upon the criteria that are used. For example, if a work order priority system consists of four categories one to four, with one being the highest priority and signaling work needs to be completed within a week, one of the factors used to justify

the work as highest priority could denote a 75-percent chance of a loss of throughput if the issue were to go unaddressed. If this is the case, the work should be planned and scheduled at the earliest possible time to ensure output remains stable. It's important to note the operator might not know what the possible outcomes of the issue actually are. Other resources such as engineering might need to get involved to help determine what the ramifications might be.

Another criterion could deal with safety. In this instance, there could be a pothole on the ground floor of an operating unit. This is a hazard but whether it deserves a priority one classification is debatable. Just because a hazard is safety related does not always mean it attains the most urgent classification. The question is really whether the hazard can be mitigated — for example, whether the area can be taped off so traffic will avoid it. If the answer is yes, perhaps the correct classification is really priority two or three, leaving the maintenance team to focus on items that are of great urgency instead.

Proper follow-up

Determining the priority of work that needs to be done is just one piece of work order management but it's a vital one. If work isn't prioritized correctly, it might not get planned right away. If it doesn't get planned, it can't get scheduled. If it's not on the schedule, it can't get fixed. Simply having a system to prioritize work doesn't guarantee it's going to be followed. Training must be conducted and those who use the system must have ownership and ensure there's a high level of integrity on a daily basis. Without it the system will fail and any sense of a stable work order management process will fail with it. However, if the above prioritization methods are followed, planners will be able to estimate both the equipment and resources needed for a fully functional maintenance operation more accurately. This, in turn, will reduce budget overruns, decrease waiting times and contribute to sustainable improvement.

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