

Improving Productivity in Your Organization During Lean Times

Mary Colak, CMC
2007

There may be some debate about the extent of the current economic downturn, but one trend is clear. In lean times, forward thinking consultants, employers, employees, customers and vendors look not only to survive, but to thrive afterwards.

Whether the current recession has affected your organization strongly, mildly, or not at all, now is a perfect time to tweak operations to make them more efficient and prepare for an upswing.

Most operations can benefit from several moves to ensure a bounce back with the economy. From an operational perspective, the key question is always how to minimize wasting resources. Waste not only impacts workflow and productivity, but also expenses.

So here are a few areas to consider to improve your operations and keep your business profitable:

Relationships—Nurture and improve existing relationships for profitability.

- Customers – Those who have a personal relationship with their customers, tend to keep their customers. This does not mean having them over for dinner every week, but knowing something about your customers goes a long way to maintaining that relationship (*read: money flowing in!*). Social media like Facebook and LinkedIn are valuable tools to help you to get to know your customer better.

- Vendors – Now is a great time to review pricing from all your vendors. For those you deal with frequently, don't be afraid to ask for a better price. This includes your office supplies vendor, phone and Internet provider, maintenance, computer services tech, etc. You may be surprised at how much you can save ... put your negotiating skills to work!
- Employees – Your employees or contractors help you deliver your product or service to customers, so treat them as your most valuable resource. The current economy is an equalizer and your employees will want to know how they can help you operate more efficiently. Talk to them, exchange ideas, and learn from them. If you're a seasoned executive, you may be surprised at how much more the younger employee/consultant knows about streamlining operations.
- Colleagues – Connect and re-connect with colleagues to discuss similar areas of concern. You may get some great ideas on how to improve your business operations to further save money.



Workflow Efficiency—Re-evaluate your internal processes to save time and money.

- Clutter – Starts and stops in your own physical workspace. Clutter wastes valuable physical space and interferes with mental processes. Set up an efficient workspace that is waste free. Divide your workspace into efficiency zones and ensure that you handle paperwork promptly and only once.
- Projects – Make sure current projects have clear objectives. If you aren't sure what you will accomplish with a project, scrap it. Use project management systems to help you better manage your project timeline, which results in savings.
- Products and Services – Streamline your processes for selling your products or services. Move your selling transactions online where it makes sense to do so. This will save you time and money.
- Outsource and Delegate – Ensure that you are focusing on your core competencies instead of trying to do it all. Outsource and delegate everything else. One area of great savings is in Information Technology. For smaller companies, outsourcing IT needs instead of keeping permanent IT staff will result in cost savings.



also shortens the development cycle for your projects.

- Image – Are you a small firm? Maybe an independent practitioner? Use technology to project an image of being a larger firm. Make your website work for you, not against you. What does it say about you? Is your website accessible? What about your own accessibility? Do you have different phone numbers for your office, cell phone and Blackberry? Streamline the services into one number so your customers can reach you anytime, anywhere.

- Upgrading – Don't upgrade your systems unless you can afford it. Test out a few applications before deciding on the best one for your business. If you are part of a small-to-medium sized operation, recycling older computers within the organization can save you money. Give senior executives older technology since they may not be heavy technology users (their support staff may benefit more from the newer technology).

And, finally, remember to stay active and healthy, so you can be a positive contributor to your business during this storm. All storms pass. This one will, too. ■

Technology—Use technology to improve your operations.

- Meetings – Conduct meetings online and reduce travel. Use the Internet, video and audio conferencing to hold virtual meetings. This saves time and money. It

