

Getting Production on Track: Tracking Down the Bottlenecks

A medium sized component manufacturer is running a mostly automated plant producing plastic components. There are plant operators, mostly semi-skilled, and there is a maintenance and breakdown department which responds to call-outs and their priority is to keep the plant running.

One of the maintenance team has a reputation for being able to get things running quickly and is really enthusiastic, and that means he is usually the one called out. Being so busy, he doesn't have time to log what he's done, so it's a mystery to the rest of his team

In reality the same thing kept occurring, so he hadn't fixed the problem, only the symptoms.

The Plant Manager could see this, and had some idea of what was happening, but was reluctant to address this out of concern for offending a genuinely valuable employee, but he was aware that it was becoming frustrating for all.

This is their story:

"I have a nagging problem on my production lines which keep giving us downtime, and interrupts manufacture. It happens periodically but we can't see a pattern. When the plant faults, some of the product goes out of specification so we have to inspect a number of items from just before the stoppage in case they aren't acceptable quality.

"Jim on the maintenance shift knows how to get the plant running again, and as long as he isn't on a call-out elsewhere we can get operating within about 2 hours. Jim doesn't know what actually causes the problem and he doesn't have time to look at it during shutdowns as there are other maintenance jobs to do. We can't afford to shut down the plant to look at it properly as we need to maintain productivity.

"We wish there was a way of tracking down why this is happening and stop it altogether. Alternatively, knowing

when it will happen would mean that we could at least avoid having the quality failures, which takes time to sort and wastes materials. We know it will cost for someone outside of the company to help us, but we have costs to recover from the stoppages. However we are nervous about giving someone an open cheque book without having a valued return.



"The Director of one of our clients had heard that MAT specialise in identifying and planning how to make changes and thought it might be useful to bring in an external viewpoint to add clarity, but also some new views. He said MAT break things down into modules so you're not obliged to use them all the way, and it keeps cost under control.

"It sounded as if we could test whether this worked for us without having a blind long-term obligation, so I gave Peter Francis a call."

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The concern from the company was its loss of productivity and heavy reliance on one person. Jim was not wilfully holding back information and whilst it is gratifying to be the go-to person, after a while it became a real burden.

We found the reality was that the company was not keeping consistent records and the frequency at which the production lines were faulting was greater than reported. The company ethos for maintaining productivity and quality was very high, so production personnel were shortcutting the system and calling Jim in to get them running again and some had even worked out quick fixes for themselves.

When MATL were introduced, we showed the production team we were coming in with an honest and non-critical mindset to actually help them deliver improvements.

By using the production team to show us the process and talk us through where the faults occurred, we were able to identify a very simple mechanical misalignment as the cause of the actual failure, but that there were also some operational practices that had been introduced as part of a quality plan without consideration of the impact, an undocumented modification and an unwieldy reporting method, which had led to the lower level of awareness of the faults.



In addition, in discussing the plant with several of the more experienced operatives they had aired ideas that we could help them articulate into future proposals for improvement.

MAT knows that companies need to maintain good control over their costs but that their people are key to keeping productivity at its highest level.

If you recognise this scenario or just want to know more, contact MAT for advice on how your productivity hiccups can become part of a smooth process again.

A promotional graphic for MAT Ltd. It features a teal background with a large, stylized grey 'A' logo in the center. The text is arranged as follows: 'SOLUTIONS' at the top center, 'MAT Ltd' in large white letters on the left, contact information (Tel: +44 1905 888174, Web: matl.co.uk, e-mail: engineering@matl.co.uk) below it, 'HOW CAN WE HELP?' in white on the right, and 'NOT JUST ANSWERS' at the bottom center.

SOLUTIONS

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