

# TOP 10 WORKFLOW TIPS

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**ATKINSON**  
CONSULTING

Ten Best Practices to Run Your Decorated Apparel Shop Better.

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My mission is to guide decorated apparel shops through the process of strategic change. Simply put, the goal is to elevate performance, focus on the future, and provide solution-based direction.

My role is to act as a trusted advisor, providing objective and results-oriented analysis, solutions and implementation.

This mission is expressed in my company motto:

**Helping Shops Succeed**

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# TOP 10 WORKFLOW TIPS

Regardless of the size of your shop or how long you've been in business there's one thing that can be improved and that's your workflow.

How you get orders through your production pipeline matters more every day. There is tremendous pressure from consumers to shorten turn-times. Plus, keeping an accurate production schedule helps sales and customer service team members manage the expectations from your clients.

Let's take a look at my [Top 10 Best Workflow Tips](#) and see if they can make a difference in your shop.

1. Information.
2. Organization
3. Clear Expectations
4. Kit Packing
5. Downtime Management
6. Teamwork
7. Craftsmanship
8. Training
9. Tools
10. Eliminate Bottlenecks

How you work on these as improvement projects can transform your shop into something better. For each of these ten points, I'm going to discuss why these matter and give you a few tips on improving them for your company.

As always, if you get stuck or need some help be sure to reach out to me at [marshall@marshallatkinson.com](mailto:marshall@marshallatkinson.com).

Why struggle?

# INFORMATION



It all starts here. Lack of good information is the number one problem that causes delays for shops. Not just on the production floor either.

For example, it may be difficult to quote a customer if you don't have a system set-up to handle that quickly and accurately. [Can everyone in your shop that quotes customers come up with the same answers to the different quote riddles that pop up every day?](#)

Another challenge is with your creative team. How often are they revising the image before it is approved by the customer? Is this because they have left off something, or maybe due to the fact that their instructions were unclear? Remember, you are paying for the art changes.

Then of course, there are the production variables. From scheduling to simply understanding what to do on an order, information is the key to making good decisions.

# START WITH THIS

While every order may be completely different, there is one attribute that binds all decisions in your shop.

## **Your Ship Date.**

Every department is going to use this piece of information to detail and schedule their activity. When you start with the Ship Date, your crew can understand the “when” part of their work. This is going to help prioritize their tasks.

For a simple example, let’s say there are two orders. One ships next Wednesday and the other ships next Thursday. Which one do you start on first? Easy. The one that ships on Wednesday.

It doesn’t matter your department or task. Triaging your workload based on the ship date is the easiest way to stay on track. Put first things first.

# HELP OTHERS MINDSET

Next as part of our review on information, let’s discuss what we are doing with the information. When you or your customer fills out the fields on an order form each piece of information is going to be used in a specific way. The customer name, address, email address, etc. is all important information. Most folks understand what to do with that.

It’s the more loosely defined instructions where we get lost. What you want to do is clarify this information so others can make important decisions. The idea is for you to help them reach the right answers faster. Let’s take a look with a few examples:

*“Please make the main text blue.”* Ok, what color blue? All color information should use either a Pantone color designation, or a stock ink or thread color. Define this during the sales process, not at the creative level...or worse, on the production floor.

*“Front print.”* This is only part of the information. What size? How many inches from the collar? Another great trick is to standardize your print locations. A “Full Front” could mean that is is 12” wide and prints 3” down from the bottom of the collar. If you created shop standards for every print location this way, and trained your staff on what they mean you could instantly communicate a tremendous amount of information in a few words.

*“Tonal Image”* This is popular with corporate branding decorations where the logo is printed or sewn either a few shades lighter or darker than the garment. Want a faster workflow? Have your customer service or sales team guide the customer through this decision before the order is placed. On the Work Order, detail that decision with specific information so your creative and production teams can move faster. Don’t pass the buck.

*“Different Shirt Colors”* This happens often. For an order there is more than one shirt color for the image. However, when mocking it up the image is only shown on one. A common problem is that something with the art won’t show up correctly. This isn’t noticed until it hits the production floor. A better plan is to mock up all of the variations on the correct shirt colors. Have your customer approve these first. That way you won’t wonder why they want black text on a navy shirt.

So, that’s the idea. It is basically common sense. Think things through. You want to give all of the people in your shop the answers to the test. Good information will do that.

Here’s the key. If anyone ever asks, *“Hey what does this mean?”* It means you have some more work figuring out how to do it better.

# 2

## ORGANIZATION

The next topic is your organizational skills. Look around your shop. Do you think you are highly organized? Are you satisfied with how it works?

One way to think about this is to utilize the concept that I call the [“Rock in the River”](#).

Imagine a river before you. It is beautiful with a fast moving current of clear, cold water. If we drop a huge boulder in the middle of the river, the water slows down and has to divert around the boulder to keep flowing downstream.

In your shop, all of the inefficiencies that happen on a daily basis due to not being organized are your boulders in the river. The more you eliminate these bottlenecks the faster your water current will flow.

Let’s take a look at a few:

## EVERYTHING HAS ITS PLACE

For starters do you have problems finding your tools? Maybe even your inventory?

Every time you have to stop and search to find that t-square, Pantone book or even the boxes for that order costs you time. Want to be able to have your crews move faster during the day? [Make it so that anything they need is only an arm's reach away.](#)

This might mean purchasing multiples of commonly used items for each work group. Tape guns, markers, Pantone books, scissors, masking tape, and other supplies are cheap compared to the labor you may be wasting by having your crews walk around the shop looking for something they need.

Ask your crew what they need? A simple, *[“What do you need to do your job better?”](#)* can go a long way.

## ELIMINATE STEPS

One good trick to see where your organization is lacking is by doing a study called a [“Spaghetti Diagram”](#).

This essentially maps out your the actual footwork for someone doing a task. You may think you know what they do, but observing them performing the work really helps. Here's how it works:

On a blank sheet of paper draw a simple sketch of their work area. This could be the screen room, receiving or even a press or embroidery machine. Then watch the person work. Every time they take a step, draw in a continuous line and track their movements on the paper with a line from your pen. Don't lift up the pen, just draw the squiggle.

Your end result may actually look like a plate of spaghetti.

What you'll find is that there will be times where the person wanders completely off the page. Maybe they keep going to one location over another.

Here's where you will find the simplest route to solving your workflow challenges. Can you move something closer? Better yet, can you have someone else bring whatever they are going to find to them? Why are they walking over there anyway?

What you want is less travel time by the worker. How can you arrange their space so that they complete their tasks, but with less motion?

## THOUGHT STARTERS

Another key to being organized is simply by thinking things through for a bit. Is the work you are actually doing adding value to the job? Or, is it “busy work”?

For example, a few years ago I was at a shop and they arranged their inventory for orders by the day of the week that the jobs would be produced. All the stuff for Monday, was in the Monday row. Tuesday was in the Tuesday row, and so forth.

The problem they had is that when they were backed up or off schedule, they actually spent time moving boxes from one day to the next so their crews would know where to find the inventory for production.

A better system is to use the last digit of the Work Order number, and stage the jobs in a similar way. Each box has the Work Order number and a few other pieces of information printed on a label and affixed to the carton. Instead of days of the week, everything that ends in a “1” is in the “1” row. Everything that ends in a “2” is in the “2” row, and so forth.

Now, anyone can find the inventory for the work as all they need is the Work Order number.

This carries over to other areas in the shop too. Produced work for customer pick up is arranged the same way. When a customer comes in to pick up their order, it only takes a moment to scan the “7” row and pick up the box. It is much faster.

# ONE CORRECT WAY

Another tool in your organization toolbox is the concept that there is only one “shop way” of doing something. The reason you want to set things up this way is that it allows you to train your staff on the appropriate method of doing something.

It doesn't matter what the task is, build your process so that it works for everyone and is easy to understand. This is in every detail.

From how you apply a label to a box, (place it neatly in the upper right corner of the small side of the box), to how you keep your ink buckets (lids closed, all excess ink wiped off). Literally, everything.

Shops that are organized this way can move faster as each staff member can be trained on the correct method. Actions become muscle memory.

So when you are finished with the production for a job, leftover supplies such as ink or thread is returned to the appropriate area. Produced goods are counted and marked in the system. A packing slip is printed and put in the shipping envelope on the outside of the box. The sealed boxes are then brought down to shipping, and staged neatly for your shipping staff to grab.

When you have every staff member trained on what to do, and also what the next step is with their action, your process will become much smoother.

But to get to this level, you have to map that out. What does it look like? If something takes five steps, how could you do it in three? How could you eliminate it completely with automation or technology?

## 3

# CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

I'm big on this one.

There's nothing worse than ambiguity. [What does success look like in your shop?](#) Are you defining this?

This could be with your craftsmanship. It could be with how you build and work on your production schedule. Maybe even how you register a job on press.

Each step in your process needs to be defined.

When you leave it up to interpretation you are asking for mixed and varied results.

For example, when you hand a press operator a list of the jobs that his crew needs to complete today you are defining that expectation. Ideally, this list is built the previous day. All orders on that list are ready to go, and everything is staged for the crew to work on.

All they have to do is set-up, produce, take down. Rinse and repeat all day.

But when you give the press crew the list you are defining what you consider to be a success. When they complete the list and go on to running jobs for tomorrow, they are exceeding expectations. But when there are one or two jobs not completed at the end of the day, this needs to be viewed as not successful.

Why did that happen? Was there a problem with the press? The crew? Something with an order or two?

What caused the challenge that delayed the success? Then you can investigate that.

On the other hand, when you don't define the work you are going to "get what you get". For smaller shops that aren't running a lot of jobs this might work for a bit. But as they grow in size and complexity without a process or method of measuring success they will often find themselves behind on their work.

## PRODUCTION MEETINGS NOT NECESSARY

Also, one more thing. I know a lot of shops favor having a morning production meeting to kick off the day. This is held because usually there is so much work that the only way to prioritize what is going to happen for the day is to get everyone in a room and discuss it.

The problem with this type of meeting is that it is a crutch.

Plus, it's expensive. If you have this meeting do yourself a favor and calculate the cost of the meeting. A thirty minute meeting might run your shop several thousands of dollars a year in labor costs.

Better is to build your production schedule that is based on reality. What is your realistic capacity for production? When you are overbooked, what happens? Does production stay later? Do you move jobs on the schedule? Can you possibly farm out some work?

This should happen at order entry. Not the day the job is to be produced.

Setting this expectation for your shop can go a long way to making the production schedule more accurate. You want all of your canoes to be paddling in the same direction. This happens with strong leadership and setting the expectations on how things should work.

# KIT PACKING

# 4

This is another fantastic tip that is going to make your production immediately faster.

Kit Packing is gathering everything that is needed for a job and organizing it into the same area. This is completed the day before your production crew needs to start working on the job.

So if you need to begin production on an order on a Wednesday, that order is Kit Packed on Tuesday.

Getting it set up is fairly easy. Using the Work Order gather the inventory, the Work Order documents, any samples to match, the screens, and all of the ink.

Take the shirts out of the box. Lay them out on rolling carts, and organize by size. Stage everything by the appropriate press in the exact order you want your crews to produce the work.

For staging, arrange in this order: Rush, Late, Today, Tomorrow. Always do your Rush orders first thing in the morning, (or the day before if you can). Then, knock out any Late jobs. After that, start rocking and rolling with Today's work. When, and only then, all of that is finished...you can start on Tomorrow's work.

When you combine the ideas of Kit Packing, with the correct staging, and the power of Clear Expectations, your production work will go much smoother.

# DOWNTIME MANAGEMENT

# 5

Remember, your shop is only making money when it is decorating a shirt. Any other moment is lost opportunity.

That lost opportunity is called Downtime.

Right now do you know the percentage your production crews are operating on average? For example, on an eight hour day, how many hours do you think your crews are actually printing?

If you not are measuring this how can you know?

The trick to running an effective production team is understanding this concept. The more work you do to eliminate your Downtime the more efficient and cost effective your production will become.

It is a cumulative thing. There will be more opportunity to increase your efficiency in those hundred tiny little moments, than in that occasional big chunk of time waster.

Some of these ideas don't seem like much on the surface, but they add up. Here are a few to try on for size:

Before Kit Packing orders at your presses, have another team remove any shirts that are polybagged in the shipment. Your production crews should not be doing this. Ideally this is handled in receiving, or with other team members.

Sometimes having a "Floater" person in the shop can make a huge difference. This person adds more ink to screens, puts more shirts

on a table, helps box up orders, helps with set-up or breakdown, and generally any other chore. Ideally for shops that have multiple automatics churning out work simultaneously.

Try making the registration marks and screen names on the art within a 3" area. This will allow your production crews to tape them off with one small piece of tape. In reclaiming, this also reduces the work in that area as well.

If you are using tape on a screen, be sure to fold over one corner so it can easily be removed. There's nothing worse than picking at the corner of some inked up tape with your fingernail trying to get that sucker off the screen.

Use some blue painters tape and wrap it around the handle of your Polywhite ink bucket. From across the room, you will be able to identify the one you need. White ink buckets look identical from a distance, and this helps you find the right one quickly.

Use carts as much as you can. Some shops are space limited, so this can be a challenge. However, moving a lot of stuff around with wheels is so much faster than carrying it by hand. If you are handy, you can build them yourself. If not, a lot of shops buy them from Uline.

## MEASURING

Peter Drucker famously said *"You can't manage what you don't measure."* And believe it or not, you are a manufacturer.

You take a shirt, add something to it, and then ship it. That is no different than what they do at any big industrial plant.

So all of those manufacturing theories about efficiency and work apply to you too. Including Mr. Drucker's famous quote.

So, are you measuring your production? This is the key to understanding a wealth of information about your operation. And it all starts with a simple tool called a Production Log. This isn't anything fancy, and if you want you can simply use a yellow legal pad.

The important thing is that you are writing down your performance factors. There are three things you should be measuring. Every day. For every press.

**Your Set-Up Time.** This is the duration of the event to get that job set up and ready to go. From the moment you start, until you are ready to start production. If you need to get an artist or manager approval, that time is included. Your goal is to get to 5 minutes per screen or less as an average.

**Your Production Time.** This is the time it takes you to run the job. From the first shirt to the last.

**Your Downtime.** These are all the moments you had to stop running the job. What counts? Everything. When you add ink to the underbase screen. Or when you stop to go to the bathroom. Maybe the screen ripped or you had a pinhole. Whatever it is, write it down and also the amount of time it took to solve that challenge.

Understanding these three factors can be a huge win for your operational efficiency. When you start to track these you will find that what you “thought” you were doing doesn’t correlate to the reality. When I speak to shop owners that start measuring they are usually shocked at how long things are actually taking.

It’s ok. Remember, as my friend Greg Kitson is always saying *“You don’t know what you don’t know.”*

The goal is simply to improve. Start by taking a realistic snapshot of where you are now. That’s the first step in the process.

# TEAMWORK

# 6

As shops grow sometimes so does the dysfunction. I've been to a lot of shops, and sometimes there is some outward mistrust with other departments. Other times staff members feel that it is faster to do it themselves, than ask for help.

The truly effective shops though all have a great teamwork culture.

They help others downstream from them by making things easier. This is sometimes by design with workflow processes, other times it is just when they have a free minute.

There is an old saying, "[Many hands make light work](#)". When we all pitch in together we can get more accomplished than if we just did something alone.

So, be honest here. How is the teamwork factor in your shop? Is that on display every day?

Yes? Fantastic?

No? Ok, let's work to improve that. Here are some ideas:

# LEADERSHIP

First, it all starts at the top.

As the owner or manager of your team your crew is looking to you for guidance. When you walk around the production floor with a coffee while everyone is working that says a completely different message than when you have your sleeves up and are pitching in to get the order out.

Yeah, I know. You are the boss.

But what's more important? Coffee is great, but I'd rather have orders shipped.

Set an example first. When you are out on the floor, help at least one person with their job every time you are out there. Maybe it's just two or three minutes loading some shirts on a cart. It could be a half an hour helping receiving count in some shirts. It doesn't matter.

[Daily you are setting the tone for your shop.](#)

Leaders lead.

# PUBLICLY PRAISE

I'm sure you have company or team meetings every once in awhile. A birthday celebration. Maybe a cookout. On Friday's to celebrate the great week that everyone just had.

That's the time to recognize the rock stars on your team.

*"Hey, I just want to take a minute to recognize Sally, Billy and Fred for their outstanding teamwork this past week. Here's how they helped..."*

When you do that on an ongoing basis you are setting the stage for others to understand what is valued in your shop. Sally, Billy and Fred all love hearing their names and having you recognize their efforts. This will make them want to continue that behavior.

Other team members will see how you publicly praised them, and they will want to hear their names too. This is one of the first steps in creating that teamwork culture.

Of course, you have to pay attention to what's going on. Also, it's up to you if you want to add something to the mix such as a gift card, bonus or raise. That can have a positive effect too.

Start with just saying **Thank You**.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE

One more thing. Not everyone is a team player.

If you have been in any group for any length of time you know this. There are always some folks that naturally will do all the heavy lifting and make everything shine. In the middle are the people that work, and occasionally hit a home run. At the bottom is the group that you spend all your time managing.

Do yourself a favor and run your shop by two rules:

*"Hire for attitude, train for skill".*

*"Hire slow, fire fast."*

You want the right mix of people on your team. Don't waste time with anyone that is not contributing and pulling their weight.

It just brings down the team and hampers your workflow.

Want more work produced each day? Be careful with who is working on it. Your equipment doesn't run itself. It takes people.

Help them. Train them. Support them.

But recognize that if someone is a burden you need to cull them out of the group. Replace them and don't look back.

Be strong.

## CRAFTSMANSHIP & QUALITY CONTROL

# 7

Let's talk baseball.

Specifically how a baseball team practices. How many times do you think a baseball team practices the double play? The ball is hit, it shoots between second and third base. The shortstop catches it and whips it to second base. The second-baseman is already there. He has his foot on the bag, and when he catches the ball he fires it to the first-baseman.

One play. Two outs.

When perfected it is a thing of beauty. That's why they practice.

*"Practice isn't the thing you do once you are good. It's the thing you do that makes you good."* - Malcolm Gladwell.

A double play in baseball looks almost effortless. But in reality that grace comes with hours upon hours of practice.

It is the same for anything in your shop. To achieve that level of effortless grace, you need a lot of practice. That's how you learn to do things right.

Craftsmanship lives in the details. Think about the mechanics of a print stroke.

The best prints will have a specific combination of screen tension, perfect stencil making, and off contact. The squeegee has to be the right durometer, with a sharp edge, set at just the right angle, and it has to travel across the screen with just enough pressure to shear the ink through the screen and down onto the shirt.

Whether that happens manually or with an automatic press it is still the same. Repeated thousands upon thousands of times a day.

But craftsmanship in your shop is more than just how you print. It's how you enter an order. How you create the artwork. Coat a screen with emulsion. Mix the ink. Even putting a label on a box.

Craftsmanship in every department adds up to quality throughout the order.

How can you spot craftsmanship challenges? For starters anytime you have to do something over.

When one of your artists wants to reburn a screen because they aren't happy with the underbase. How did that happen?

Maybe you can't find that third box of goods for an order. It was checked in, but now it's lost on the floor somewhere? Craftsmanship lives in organization too.

What about the time the stock was staged on a cart upside down, and the printer didn't notice. They ran a cycle of shirts with the print on the wrong side of the shirt. Yep, craftsmanship lives in these details.

Craftsmanship has its own speed. Sometimes it may seem a tad slower than you might like. [However, it will always be faster than doing something over.](#)

Like in baseball. The throw might be in time on that double play. But if the foot is off the base, it won't count.

It pays to do things the right way. Make sure your staff understands the details of their work, and how to throw to another player with their foot on the plate.

## TRAINING

# 8

One of the core concepts that I coach shops with for staff is something I call the *"Rule of 3"*. This is a simple idea that states that for every core task in your shop you need at least three people that can handle that chore effectively.

Here's the reason.

Fred is your main printer. When he is out sick or on vacation, you've trained Steve to step in for him. But what happens when Steve can't make it in? You can't shut down completely.

That's why having a third person in that chain works best. Even if they are not working at the same rate as your main person, it's better than zero.

To get that set up, just plan the training sessions. These folks could be in other areas of your shop, and this could be a cross training initiative.

Do this early! You can't wait until there's an issue to effectively handle it.

Like money in the bank, it's better to have it when you need it.

## **BUILD YOUR PROGRAM**

Building your training program starts with a few simple ideas.

The first is to understand where your employee is on their learning journey. Are they completely new to the position, or do they have some basic skills?

One way to determine this is to write down the key concepts that each core task uses. Don't get into the high detail, but instead focus on the big picture thinking for the job.

Then, measure your employees understanding of each with a skills assessment. This can be just a verbal conversation, or them proving they have that skill with a test.

After that, start training on what's missing.

## BREAK INTO CHUNKS

In a shop setting I've found what works best is to break the learning down into chunks of thirty minute lessons. This can be easily scheduled and doesn't take up so much time that the original job that the employee normally handles will be ok.

The best way to do this is to put this time allocation on a calendar.

This allows everyone to plan in advance and know what's going on. If you can, train more than one person at a time to maximize your effectiveness.

## TOOLS

# 9

A few years ago I was taught a very valuable lesson regarding tools.

There was a huge storm and a tree fell on my house. A friend of mine was a tree surgeon, and I called him for help. He agreed to give me a big discount if I helped him. I was eager to save money, but also to learn how he operated too.

He pulled up in his truck and assessed the situation. Then he reached into the bed of his pick up and pulled out a long shaft with a slingshot attached to it. *“Here, hold this”*, he said.

He placed a fishing weight with some twine attached to it in the cradle of the slingshot. He pulled back ten or fifteen feet with the rubber tubing he used with the slingshot and aimed high up into a neighboring oak tree.

The weight rocketed up over a stout limb and came back down. The twine was tied to a hefty hawser rope that he tied off around the tree trunk. With a smooth and practised effort with his chainsaw the leaning tree was cut at the base and swung away from my house in one motion.

It was magic.

The lesson was clear. Instead of scrambling up the tree like a monkey to secure the tree, he used some practical wisdom to make the job effortless.

That is the importance of using the right tool for the job. It wasn't even that expensive.

## TOOLS FOR YOUR SHOP

[That being said, are you sure you have the right tools for your shop?](#)

The right tool can save you a ton of effort. Or mistakes. Maybe downtime. Even some headaches.

Some tools, like that slingshot are relatively easy to purchase or construct. Others like that chainsaw, are dedicated for that particular task.

So here's a list of the ten “must haves” for any shop, in no particular order. Sure, you've got scoop coaters, screens, tape measures

and squeegees. I know that.

But I wanted to list some items that many shops don't use or frequently forget they even have them.

**A Calculator** for each person that has numbers as part of their job. Not just for the front office folks, but you should be using these in Receiving, in Production, in the Ink Room, and in Shipping. Essentially anywhere your staff has to do some math. These days you can buy calculators really inexpensively. Get each person one for their workstation. Demand that they use them. Your math has to always be correct.

**A Hygrometer** for the screen room. Emulsion has to dry to be usable for the screen-printing process. What is the relative humidity in your drying room for screens? Ideally it is at 40%. Check with your emulsion manufacturer for details.

**A Tension Meter** to measure the Newtons for your screens. Screen tension is the number one reason that causes delays, registration and ink issues on press. Are you managing this effectively? Ideally you are using screens with tensions above 25Ncm, but anything above 20Ncm is acceptable. Below 20Ncm? Scrap it for static screens, retension for roller frames. Measure the tension with a tension meter and write the current tension in the lower left hand corner of the screen with a Sharpie. Over time, you'll see the tension drop. For shops that have tension meters, why is it dusty on that shelf? **By the way, noboy on this planet can thump a screen with their finger and tell if the tension is ok. Sorry, but magic fingers don't exist. Use the right tool.**

**A Donut Probe** to measure the temperature of the ink in the dryer. Sure, your dryer settings indicate that the equipment is hot. But what's going on inside that chamber? Use this probe and find out. Also, good preventative maintenance for your dryer should have you reading the temperature at least once a week. Make sheets with several tic-tac-toe squares on them. These are the nine zones inside your dryer chamber. Record the temperature in each zone.

**A really good Digital Scale.** This is for mixing ink. It needs to read to .01. The surface should be stainless steel for easy clean up. Make sure you can zero out with a Tare button. Coupled with an ink mixing system, you can custom make your own color recipes or match any Pantone color in a few minutes.

**Hand carts or dollies.** Yes, I know your shop is small. But it's more efficient to bring three boxes over to your press with a hand cart than going back three times.

**Utility Carts.** Whether you DIY make these yourself or just buy the standard gray ones from Uline, get a bunch of these. Stage shirts

on the carts, ready to print before your press crew needs them. For big orders, segregate sizes per cart. If you are printing multiple locations have the catcher load the cart for the other side, and just wheel it back up for the new print. If you ask me, you can never have enough of these.

**Pantone Books for production.** Don't just lock these away in the art department. Buy a few for the floor too!

**More computer workstations in production.** Ideally, your staff can find their own answers or mark tasks complete faster. Think about having one every 10-20 steps from your crew members. If you can swing using tablets all around the shop, do that. The faster your staff can have access or input information the better. Keep these up to date. Have an IT person help with the networking and infrastructure. If you ever get to the point where multiple people need access at the same time, and you have to start logging other people out for your staff to function...please upgrade. The time and frustration that this causes isn't worth the money you are "saving".

**A solid industrial label printer.** Every single box that comes into your shop for inventory needs to be labeled with the Order Number, Customer Name, Ship Date and Box 1 of 2, 2 of 2 or similar. These labels are placed neatly in the upper left hand side of the short side of the box. There is nothing worse than the time wasted squinting trying to find the inventory you need based on the original shipping label. Get this organized and do it right.

## ELIMINATING BOTTLENECKS

# 10

There is one thing that is true for shops and that you can only move at the pace of your slowest part of your company. These weak links are called "Bottlenecks". I'm sure you've heard that term before.

In your shop, can you name that weak link? It could be a person. Maybe a lack of skill in an area. How about that outdated and clunky equipment that you are “making do” with until you can afford to buy something better?

There is a cost for just ignoring these problems. It may not be readily apparent, but if you start digging into them you can see what that lack of change is really costing you.

Let’s do some math. Yeah, I know. I hate math too. But it’s necessary sometimes.

For example, let’s say that you use an older automatic press and have your lowest skilled person running it. While other presses on the production floor might be getting 500+ impressions per hour, this one is averaging just 298. Let’s say that in an eight hour shift, subtracting breaks, your printer prints for five of those hours.

$5 \times 298 = 1,490$  impressions per day. That’s 7,450 impressions per week. That’s 387,400 in year.

But with a better operator and newer equipment, you could be producing:

$5 \times 500 = 2,500$  impressions per day. Which is 12,500 impressions per week. For a year, that’s 650,000.

That’s a 262,600 impression difference. Are you sure you don’t want to upgrade your people or equipment?

## IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

Bottlenecks are caused by a lack of capacity somewhere. This could be in the capabilities of your crew. Maybe it’s the actual cycle time in the equipment you are using. It could even be the parameters of the consumables too.

As mentioned, sometimes these challenges aren’t obvious. The first step always starts with a question.

“Why?”

As in *“Why, are we doing it that way?”*

Chances are the answer is going to sound something like this. *“Hey, we’ve always done it that way.”*

Here’s something you should know. You can change anything. In fact, you should be experimenting and tweaking your processes, systems and equipment on a regular basis.

*That’s how you get an extra 262,600 impressions during the same working hours in a year.*

The extra capacity is more skill in the operator coupled with better running equipment.

## HOW TO UNBLOCK A BOTTLENECK

A common bottleneck in a screen-printing operation is that the screens are not ready for production when they need them. This issue can cause scheduling delays, as jobs are not started on time.

For this example, trace back the challenges in imaging screens. Ask some pertinent questions:

*“Do we have enough screens in the right mesh counts for the jobs scheduled?”*

*“Is there a log jam in reclaiming, coating, imaging or washing the screens out?”*

*“What is the optimal amount of screens that can be imaged a day? Are under or over that capacity?”*

*“Is the artwork approved and ready to go to the screen room at least one business day before the screens should be exposed?”*

So let’s pretend in this example that the root cause of the challenge was that the artwork wasn’t approved in a timely manner by the

shop's customers. This happens in a lot of shops that I've coached.

Harking back to a point I made earlier about "Clear Expectations" and point out that this could be a matter of the shop not managing their customers well with their art approval process. Instead of just sending the files off for approval, make a change.

Add some clear expectations to the mix such as "Please review this image by 12:00 pm on xx/xx/xxxx so we can stay on schedule with your order. Any changes made after xx/xx/xxxx may result in moving the production date."

Of course, the art department needs to send out the approvals with the correct art and in a timely manner. But when you give the expectation to the client, you are more apt to stay on track.

Using this process as a small lesson, what bottlenecks are present in your shop that you could solve just by asking "Why"?

## CONCLUSION

Ok, so that's ten tips for you to use in your shop. This was just a 30,000 foot view flyover.

For real change to happen in your shop, you need to look deeper into your processes and systems and honestly assess what isn't working the way it should. No fingerpointing.

If you get stuck. **Call me.** I happy to help your shop like I've helped others.

# THANKS!

Thank you for reading this eBook. I hope that you found the contents helpful for your shop. But don't stop at just reading the book. The key to making lasting change is implementing new ideas.

Not everything may go correctly the first time. Or the second. Keep plugging away and tweaking things. Try to get 1% better everyday.

If you need help along the way, that's what I do. Reach out and contact me and let's work together to solve your problems!



**Got a burning question or problem that you need help with?**

Feel free to email me at [marshall@marshallatkinson.com](mailto:marshall@marshallatkinson.com)