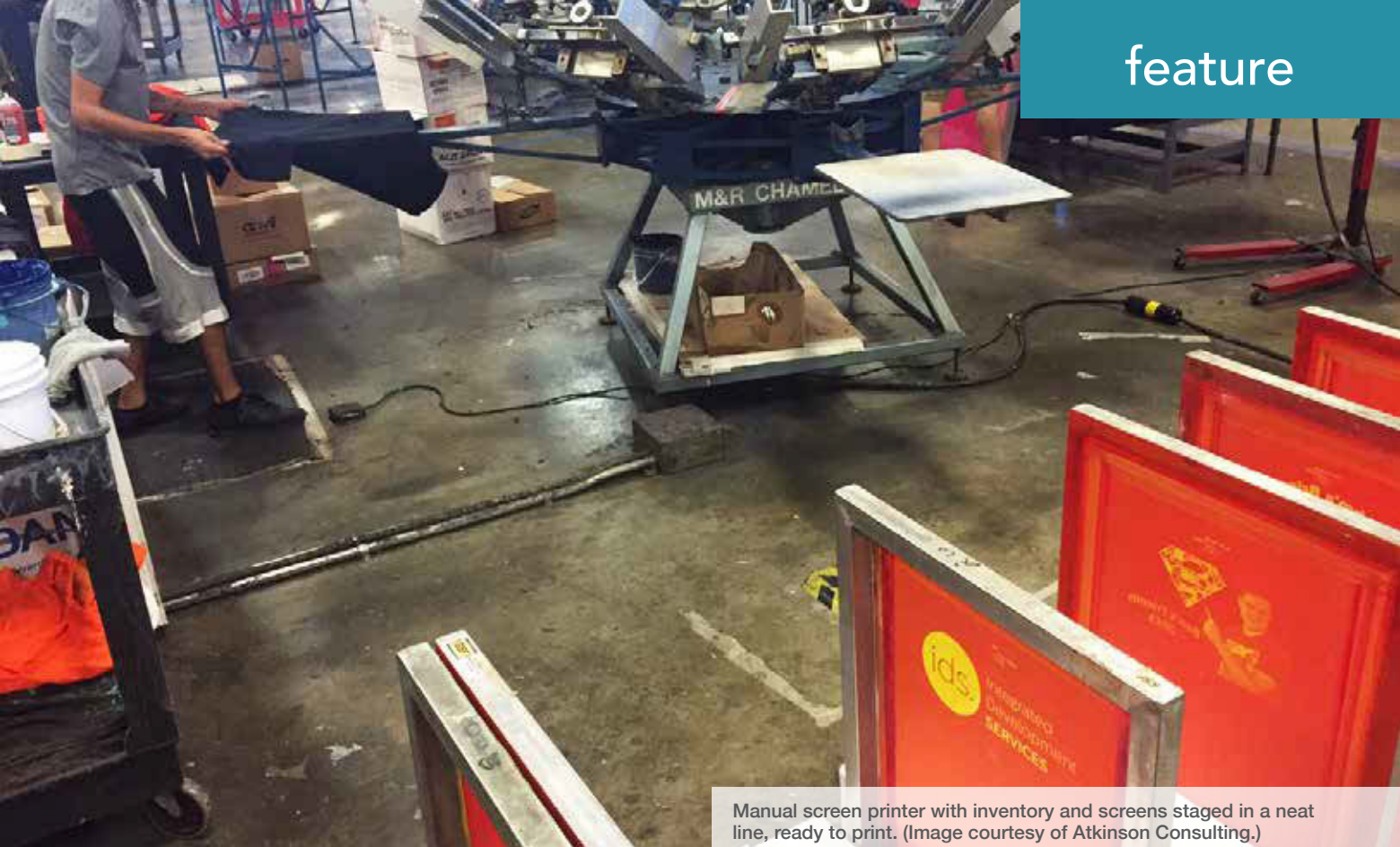




Manual screen printer with inventory and screens staged in a neat line, ready to print. (Image courtesy of Atkinson Consulting.)

The Need for Turn Time Speed

There are two obvious reasons to take a deep look into the overall turn time speed of your shop. First, your competition is already knee-deep in this effort. Maybe you've noticed this in their recent marketing efforts. Second, and most importantly, your customers are demanding it.

Let's face it, we live in an age where nobody has patience and your target market is no exception. They are fleeing in droves to shops that can deliver a great product, but much quicker. For those shops caught in the 7–10 day turnaround window, your number is coming up soon unless you change.

This article will give you some fresh ideas on tightening up that chunk of time from “order received” to “order shipped.”

Start With Eliminating Downtime

Downtime refers to those moments throughout the production shift where you are not decorating a shirt. When you aren't

adding value to the order, it is costing you money in opportunity and speed.

The trick is to winnow out those reasons why you aren't producing anything. Most shops don't measure this. Remember, you can't manage what you don't measure. Want to get more handled in a day? Figure out why your crew is pausing or stopping production.

Until you start investigating, the downtime may appear to be “invisible,” meaning, nobody noticed. All it takes is a few questions to start digging into the challenge. The best question to lead with is “Why?”

“Why did you stop three times on that last order, Bill?” Well, he had to tape up a few pinholes in the screens that kept surfacing. When you keep asking why that happened, you find out the new kid you hired in the screen room isn't degreasing the screens properly. Your production challenge shifts to a screen room challenge. This is corrected with some training and a

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By Marshall Atkinson, Owner, Atkinson Consulting, LLC



Stacks of counted inventory ready to be received into the shop's system. (Image courtesy of Atkinson Consulting.)

new standard operating procedure that is put into place.

When you start correcting these issues, you'll start getting more accomplished in a day. This increases your overall speed.

Information is Key

On several occasions I've stated that a work order is comparable to a blueprint, except instead of building a house, you are producing a job.

But what happens when a chunk of that "blueprint" is wrong or missing? The work stops until the answer is uncovered. If you are sloppy in how your orders are entered, this could happen in several departments along the way.

The "Hey, I have a question on that order" problem only adds to the length of time it takes to produce it. This is why it is

absolutely critical the information for any work order be as complete and correct as you can get it.

I've seen rush orders sit in "receiving," "complete" and "ready to ship" for days while waiting for the shipping address to be sent in. In the meantime, that order "that just had to go" blocked other orders from being completed on-time or early. Establishing rules, such as "It's not an official order until the information is complete," can help keep your schedule on-track and situations like this to a minimum.

Another great tip is to have a checklist or quality proof before that job moves on from order entry. Is all the information complete and accurate? Look at the order from other department or staff perspectives. What will they question on the instructions? Anything as clear as mud? Now is the chance to correct it.

Additionally, have your art staff print a color mockup of the image on all of the garment colors for the job. Use the art approval if that is created the same way. You want to have your production crew have something in their hands to review with the first strike-off. Details count here, too, so be sure to add dimensions, the screen/color order and any location tips (for example, "Print three inches down from the collar.") to help guide others in what to do.

Finally, look to see how your information is entered into your system. Is this an automated or manual procedure? What gets missed or coded wrong?

I know shops that have set up online stores for customers who only order once a year because once it's set up, there isn't any transactional time or cost for the order entry portion. The key is in how it is mapped to your system.

Rock-Solid Organization

In this part of the speed discussion I like to talk about what I call "The rock in the river."

Imagine a river before you, flowing quickly with cool, clear water. What if a large boulder is placed in the middle of the river? The water slows down and has to flow around the rock to continue downstream.

This is a metaphor for your shop. The river is your workflow, the large rock all things that impede that progress. The river represents your organizational methodology.

It could be how your shop's production area is laid out. I've been to shops where

accounting filing cabinets are placed in the middle of the production floor. What about the daily delay with your order approval process for strike-offs when a new order is set up? It could be anything.

What “gigantic boulder” is preventing your shop from completing more work today, and are you looking at this to help you increase that speed to completion? You are only as fast as the slowest part of your process — what is that bottleneck in your shop?

One good trick to find out is to sketch a spaghetti diagram. Draw out the work area for a piece of equipment, then — using a pen — trace the footsteps of the main worker as they set up, produce and tear down a job. Where are they walking? Living up to its name, the diagram looks like a plate of spaghetti by the time it is completed.

What you will find is generally the worker should stay close to their area. When they wander off to go get something, ask a question or solve a problem, it is an opportunity to make that process more efficient. It is based on just simple observation. Where did they go? What if their need was already arranged for them or closer?

At the end of the day, this type of thinking helps you determine what you need to do to change. Your goal is to help your crews proactively prepare — before anyone leaves today, tomorrow’s production is ready to go.

Tools of the Trade

The right tool for the job can make all the difference. Yet, when I go to shops I am sometimes bewildered at the lack of thought on this subject.

For example, with the right ink mixing system, an average worker can mix any Pantone color in about three or four minutes. However, I’ve seen shops disregard this and spend hours trying to mix a Pantone color, never really getting it right. What’s worse is they are using three or four times the amount of necessary ink in their attempts. Multiply that cost over a year, and the cost of setting up the ink mixing station correctly is miniscule in comparison.

Another big challenge is when shops have the correct tools but don’t use them. How many screen rooms have tension meters that never come out of their cases? What about shops that only keep the Pantone books with the art department? Don’t forget about those expensive production registration systems that



Overhead view of staged inventory ready to pull to equipment. Each row ends with a different work order number for easy identification and retrieval. (Image courtesy of Atkinson Consulting.)

are gathering lint underneath a dryer somewhere.

For a faster workflow, buy (or demand) the right tools for the job for your shop. Make sure your crews are trained to use them properly. In fact, cross-train with multiple people.

Have standards in your shop with tools. Show everyone how to set up a job: How to tape up a box, where to place the package label or barcode stickers, how to proof a job with a Pantone book, etc. Use your equipment correctly and take care of the tools of the trade.

Also understand that some degree of automation is worth the price. For example, if you are coating screens by hand and only have a few to take care of, a simple scoop coater will be sufficient. If you have 100 to do a day, buy an auto coater. That same worker can be multitasking while the screens are being perfectly coated.

Equipment Considerations

Next is the subject of equipment. While plenty of shops make do with well-used equipment, that weird functionality problem you are “living with” daily can be costing you more money than you think in comparison to upgrading. You should

You should be looking at everything through the lens of output.

be looking at everything through the lens of output.

How much is getting competed per day? What if there is something more efficient on the market? Have you calculated the difference between what you are achieving now and what is possible with better equipment?

For example, let's say a shop is "living with" an older 6/8 automatic press they have been using for years. It has millions of impressions on it. When it prints, it shakes and hisses air, and two of the print stations will no longer hold registration, so only one or two color jobs are printed on the press. The most it prints a day is about 1,250 impressions.

A new 6/8 color automatic press wouldn't have any of those limitations. It would print as fast as you could load and unload the press. A decent crew could get about 2,800 impressions a day on it — probably more depending on skill level.

That's a 1,550 impression a day difference, or 403,000 impressions a year when you do the math. That being said, what are you "living with" in your shop?

Effective Training

It's no secret that well-trained people work

faster. "Rookies" will naturally handle the same task slower than a veteran staff member might complete it. Therefore, if you want to complete more jobs or work faster in your shop, a training program is a no-brainer.

But you have to show staff the details and all the little things that make a difference. Build your core training program by writing down the key steps to any task. Not just in how it's handled, but the ergonomics, too. What are the details that matter? Can you get your key staff members to help you?

It's as simple as jotting down that list the next time someone completes a task and using your phone's camera to take pictures. Print and highlight the work order, or use an order as an example. Keep samples of the good and bad results.

Start with the top 10 core ideas that any new worker should know, compile everything and keep it in a simple three-ring binder. This is your new shop operating manual.

When you have those built, build the next 10. Cross-train your staff members so they are well-versed in all areas. It's great when a salesperson knows how to receive inventory or your print crew knows how

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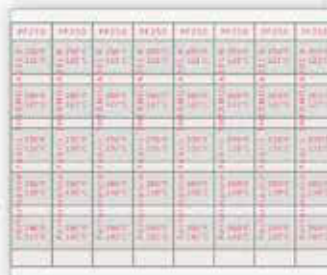
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to burn a screen. When it isn't handled right, or there is a question, the problem gets diagnosed faster.

Not to mention, they will have empathy for the person doing that work and will know how to fully provide them with the information they need to do their jobs better.

One last note about training: Your supply chain can often be a great resource for you. They want you to know how to use their products the correct way. Many of them will come into your shop and show you exactly how to employ the best practices to achieve optimal results. Take advantage of this and learn.

Finding and Solving Bottlenecks

A bottleneck in your shop is where there is some sort of log-jam or slowdown in the process. Every shop has them, so don't worry that you might be different or have problems other decorators don't have.

When one department or person is waiting on another in order to complete something, that's your bottleneck. Here are some common examples:

- Purchasing can't buy all of the inventory because there is a question about the cost of expediting the freight for the order's inventory.
- Receiving can't identify the product coming in, as it's an unknown brand or unrecognized color.
- The art department can't separate the job because the client hasn't approved it yet.
- Production can't start the job because the screens aren't burned.
- Post-production can't apply the hangtags because they haven't come in from the printer yet.
- Shipping is waiting on the other half of the order to be completed, as the job is designated to ship two orders in one box.

There are thousands more of these challenges lurking in your shop. The question is, what are you doing to identify and resolve them?

One trick is to have an "efficiency committee" comprised of a few key people to identify and prioritize what's not working as well as it should. This is not an exercise in finger pointing — it is an honest discussion about what's needed. Is it a training issue? Maybe a process or procedure challenge? What if a new consumable or piece of equipment was added? Is it simply a matter of cleaning and organizing the shop?



Unboxed inventory staged on carts by press with screens. These are lined up in the order they need to be produced. (Image courtesy of Atkinson Consulting.)



Training on faster setup techniques starts with conversations about best practices. (Image courtesy of Atkinson Consulting.)

Brainstorm what's needed and set deadlines for completing actions on a calendar. Write things down and assign tasks to people.

Remember, as in the example with the pinholes in the screens, the problem could reside upstream from the department actually experiencing the issue. Keep asking "Why?" until you uncover the truth in the matter, and maintain an open mind.

Finally, sometimes the resolution can be solved by adding some capacity to the situation. Maybe all you need is an extra hand doing the work. This could be a permanent fix, or a temporary one.

Conclusion

To accelerate your shop's workflow and turn time, the one ingredient that will allow you to have the most success is teamwork. A group of people working together toward a common goal will accomplish much more than one person trying to solve the situation alone. Don't be a martyr.

Get your crew together. They are going to have great ideas and suggestions. In fact, when you involve those who actually do the work, your initiative will have a greater chance of success as they will "own" the outcome.

Ask plenty of questions — nothing is sacred. "We've always done it this way," is concrete-headed thinking. Use data, especially key performance indicator numbers you've collected.

Increasing speed in your shop is all about willingness to change. Do you have that mindset?

Based in Gilbert, Arizona, Marshall Atkinson is one of the leading production and efficiency experts for the decorated apparel industry. He is the owner of Atkinson Consulting, LLC.

As a coach for shops in the industry, Atkinson focuses on operational efficiency, continuous improvement and workflow strategy, business planning, employee motivation, management and sustainability.

He is a frequent trade show speaker, article and blog author, and is the host of InkSoft's The Big Idea podcast. Contact him at marshall@marshallatkinson.com.

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