



Writing Standard Operating Procedures - SOP

Standard Operational Procedures come up every time one is talking about organizing a quick growing business. No surprise, it is getting an important place in the greenhouse industry. The concept is very attractive but you want to define your goals and implement it the best way possible to get real benefits.

1. What is the goal?

1- Track experience to avoid reproducing mistakes

This is a great avenue to make a company improve year over year. With production system getting more and more complicated and crop diversification, it is now very difficult for one man to handle and apply all his experience in production. When written, you tune up your production building on previous year's knowledge.

2- SOP as Constant Improvement Benchmark

SOP are your production benchmark. Anytime you validate any improvement, you want to update the relative SOP to include it in the new way of doing the task.

3- Transfer knowledge to workers

SOP make it easier to welcome a new worker in the team as it instantly provides the rules in force in the company. It also allows workers to be more independent and autonomous while following written rules.

4- Transfer responsibilities down the management hierarchy

To allow growth in your company, you want to relieve your managers from trivial tasks to let them develop your business. Your managers are very busy and you want to free some of their time to let them think of improving and growing your business.

2. Make it live

SOP are not a one time document, they need to live with constant updates.

Most of the good ideas are coming from the people in the field so it is very important to listen to their feedback.

My experience : I give a binder to my workers with all the SOP they are concerned with. All the SOP are printed copies to make it accessible fast (you don't want them to search in a sub-sub-folder of a cloud drive). They are allowed to write in any improvement they think of. After a certain period of time(1 month, 6 months, 1 year), I collect all the sheets and I update the file on the computer and print a new version for all the workers' binders.

Issues and solutions is a great part that help workers to be autonomous. You don't want the worker to bother your busy manager every time they face a problem. If the problem has appeared already and there is a better solution to solve it, you want your worker to use it. First time they will still call the manager and he will reply to read "Issues and solutions" in the SOP, but they will get used to it with time.

3. SOP sections

Task description

This has to be a step by step description with a lot of details. It has to be comparable to the "Get started" instructions when you purchase a new appliance. To make it clear, pictures and drawings or graph are preferred because it will be easily saved in your workers memory.

Before and after the task

you can split the description so that the reader find what they are looking for quicker. Before and after is an example of it.

Important controls

Here you just want to list a few key controls necessary to make sure of the quality of the result. The things your workers have to keep in mind while they are performing the task to achieve the aimed result.

Issues and solutions

Again, this is taken from appliances instructions, you want to have this section to make your workers autonomous as much as possible. Think of the final goal to relieve your managers to let them look at the big picture instead of solving everyday the same issue again and again.

4. Structure of SOP

Each SOP should have mandatory fields like :

Version : Every time the SOP is updated, the number is incremented. It allows everybody to discard the oldest version.

Author : Somebody has to be in charge of the writing. He will also be responsible to collect changes from the workers' updates.

Service/Department : When the company gets bigger, you want to segment the knowledge. For example, your accountant doesn't need to have access to the poinsettia growing SOP...

Update date : This is the latest review date. It is very interesting especially to prioritize updates.

5. Make sure it is used...

It is the tricky part.

Workers have to participate in implementation

My answer here is to get everybody involved in the writing process to catch their attention and make it theirs. Organize meetings with the people concerned with the specific SOP and run surveys with directed questions.

Management implication

Another very important point is that the head management has to be convinced and will to implement such a powerful tool. Otherwise it will just be a waste of time.

Publish on posters

It is the knowledge that you want to share within the company. Use any mean available like posters on the walls to get the worker to remember it while working.

Create a company documentation network

If your workers are keen on technology, you can make it available through a company network (according to profile connections)

Determine reminder dates

Some tasks may happen once a year and your worker might forget about the regarding SOP so is might be interesting to have a reminder which gives or send a copy of this SOP for reading before starting the work

Experience vs SOP

Experienced persons feel that SOP are useless and like to be asked for their knowledge. It is sometimes slowing down SOP implementation.

Conclusion :

Standard Operating Procedure is part of building an Autonomous System in your company. It is a time investment which pays back if it is used widely.

In "The EMyth" from Michael E. Gerber, says : "It is time for you as a business owner to stop working IN your business and to start working ON your business". So let's get started!

Want our support to implement it in your business?

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