

## **Dealing with Absenteeism and labour Turnover- a different approach**

***If you can't eliminate the cause just minimize its effect.***

Absenteeism and labour turnover have long been major cause of worry among the garment manufacturers. Everyone on board the apparel industry bandwagon has been putting efforts to find a permanent solution for this problem. Unfortunately, there is no magic spell; various steps at different levels have to be taken to bring this problem under control.

This article takes a two prong approach to tackle this problem. The first part attempts to highlight issues that can attack on the root cause and reduce the problem and the second part devises a system to minimize its effect on the floor. It does not fundamentally solve the problem but of course it is a way forward.

### **Company Policy**

It is a well known fact in the Northern India that many companies have a policy to release labour every 6 months and then re-employ them after a month's break; the question needs to be asked whether this policy helps or harms. In lure of immediate benefits are we ignoring long term losses.

This policy should be re-considered if India is to reach the efficiency performance levels necessary to compete with the rest of the world.

The effect of this policy on the workers must be considered, why should they have any loyalty to the company if the company has no loyalty to them? How would you like to work in a situation where your job stops every 6 months and you have to find new employment, how would you get any stability into your life?

Many companies in the country work without the above policy. I asked the managing director of one of the larger and well respected companies (who employ their people on a continuous basis) what they do in the periods where work is in short supply, his response was that labour turnover solved the problem since they just stopped employing new operators during this period, so although the offer of permanent employment does not solve the labour turnover issue completely, it does reduce it, and in times of short supply of work the labour force can be reduced easily to minimize financial losses without resorting to firing off the entire staff.

### **The role of the Personnel Department**

There is no doubt personnel departments must assist in a much more pro-active way to solve the problems and I would like to suggest that members of this department become responsible

for the absenteeism and labour turnover for sections of the factory, and for the fundamental labour disciplines required to make the company more productive, these disciplines to be handled as follows

1. One personnel person to handle a number of sewing lines and produce figures showing the labour statistical information
2. To be responsible for operators on the sections allocated to them, to see that they start on time, to discipline late comers, and for this they need to be on the factory floor BEFORE starting time. A late start of 15 mins in a factory of 500 operators is equivalent to a loss of 3% productivity!
3. To ensure that managers and supervisors are in place BEFORE starting time
4. To interview all absentees on their return to establish their reasons
5. To establish how the company can reduce the current absentee levels

The above was actually done in one of the factories we were involved with and it had the effect of reducing the absenteeism by 50%

### **The effect on Production Managers and Supervisors**

It is extremely difficult to increase efficiency in an assembly process when an absenteeism level of 10 -16% is the order of the day. The supervisors job is difficult enough without having to cope with such a daily operator replacement situation, and with the industry still growing the pool of highly skilled labour that waits outside your door in the hope of employment is growing smaller and smaller. The industry has moved away from "Tailors" (people who can make the whole garment) to "Operators" (people who can perform up to 3 operations to a satisfactory performance level) and with buyers demanding lower and lower prices the pressure on companies to improve productivity performance and to lower lead times is ever increasing

The effect of high labour turnover and absenteeism is as follows:

1. The supervisor has to show the new operator how to do the job
2. Assuming the line has 50 operators (machinists and others) then an absentee level of 15% means 7- 8 replacements
3. How can we expect the supervisor to cope with training these new people AND obtain a satisfactory level of efficiency and quality?
4. At least 50% of the first day is lost before the new operator is working on the operation they have been employed for
5. The efficiency of the new employee is generally much lower than the person he/she is replacing
6. The quality level is immediately suspect and repairs will occur - the repair rate will increase, which will lower efficiency whilst faulty garments are corrected.
7. A bottleneck is created due to the newness of the operators

8. Operations following the one replaced will slow down due to the lack of supply
9. Overtime has to be worked to correct these effects overtime is paid at double pay rates.
10. Efficiency levels drastically reduce during overtime.

## **Flying Squad**

### **What is it?**

The introduction of a team of multi skilled people who are on the company role, not allocated to any specific section of the factory who can be used to plug the gaps caused by absentees, help to maintain productivity levels.

- a) It is a team of highly multi skilled operators who are intended to replace daily absenteeism and to help to eliminate bottlenecks and help to train poor performers on the factory floor
  - High level performers
  - Good attendance record
  - Co-operative and helpful personality
  - Able to perform more than 6 operations and a satisfactory performance level
- b) It is necessary to establish the level of Absenteeism to determine the size of the group
- c) Flying squad operators will be paid at a higher rate than normal operators
- d) They will be expected to wear a specifically coloured overall / Cap to signify their position

### **How does it work?**

- 1- IE in charge will be responsible to distribute them daily in consultation with Production manager.
- 2- The operators to be included in the flying squad will be taken from the production floor, is is a good idea to advertise the offer and select from those who apply.
- 3- Operators used in Flying squad will be replaced by good operators in the line who are not doing important jobs, these will be replaced with the best trainees available
- 4- Flying squad operators will be distributed proportionally to each area of the factory
- 5- Every morning flying squad operators will be distributed by the Production manager of the relevant department in conjunction with the Workstudy head of that department.
- 6- There will be a board in front of every section with 10 red lights on it, the supervisor will indicate the number of people he/she require replacements for and switch on the appropriate number of lights.

- 7- There will be a clipboard adjacent to the lights with the following checklist which will be designed to last for one month.
  - a. Date
  - b. Section Name
  - c. Supervisor
  - d. Replacements required
  - e. Replacements given
  - f. Time given
  - g. Balance
  - h. Remarks
  - i. Supervisor signature
  - j. Checked by
- 8- Supervisor will make a request for FS operators daily in a duplicate book, this entry to be signed by W/S and a copy detached for the allocation of operators and a second copy retained in the book – this to be done within 20 mins of the starting time
- 9- Workstudy head will allocate required operators to every line from flying squad. This to be done immediately.
- 10- W/S analyst will check the method employed by the FS operator to ensure maximum efficiency
- 11- If there are any operators left after allocation they will be at the disposal of the Production manager for allocation.
- 12- After replacement supervisor will switch off the light. If replacement has not been done lights will be left on to show the number of operators missing from the section.
- 13- All of the above processes to be completed within 40 minutes of the starting time.
- 14- After the first hour the Production manager and the W/S head will visit every department to ensure that sufficient corrective action has taken place
- 15- It is the responsibility of the Production manager / Line in charge to assist with the line balancing of any section who has not received the number of operators required to replace the absentees
- 16- Flying squad operators will only be allocated to an operation for a period of 3 days, after this time the training school must provide a replacement for the missing operator.
- 17- Flying squad operators will be included in the section in Pro-Man reports
- 18- A weekly report must be produced by the W/S department listing the performance of the FS operators, this to be discussed with General Manager and W/S head to ensure that FS personnel are performing to a satisfactory level.
- 19- If FS personnel do not perform satisfactorily they will not be allowed to continue in the FS and will be transferred back to their original section.

We feel that a system such as this requires proper disciplines to make it work in the longer term, there is no point in setting this up without the necessary backing otherwise it will work for a short time and then stop.

The effects of such a system will produce excellent results