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Lean manufacturing for designer-makers – how to make more for less.

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Do you spend too much time on sales processing, production, packing and despatch and not enough time being creative? Do you have the feeling that things should be easier? Or that you should be getting more out of the business?

You are not alone. In fact this can be a particular problem for designer-makers who have built up their business in a creative studio environment and are starting to win more and more orders. There comes a time in a business when improving production efficiency becomes very important.

At that point 'lean manufacturing' becomes highly relevant.

What is Lean Manufacturing?

Lean Manufacturing is a collection of simple techniques that can be applied to business and production processes to achieve ever increasing efficiency. They go hand-in-hand with a philosophy of 'continuous improvement' to help you achieve more and more as your business develops.

Lean principles and techniques are firmly rooted in common sense and ease of application. They combine the best of Western working practices with the best of Japanese efficiency to produce a powerful toolkit that has revolutionised whole industries over the last two or three decades.

Lean techniques

There are a number of techniques that can be used to improve efficiency, several of which are directly applicable to small creative businesses. For example:

1. **The 7 Wastes.** This is a way of looking at day-to-day activities in your workshop and focusing on reducing the time spent doing things that are not particularly useful.

Many activities can be categorised under the list of wastes below.

- Transport – carry things around too much – store cupboard to bench to cupboard to bench etc etc
 - Inappropriate Processing – doing things that you could manage without
 - Movement – it's difficult to get on with the job while you are running about!
 - Waiting – hold ups are very inefficient
 - Overproduction – making more than you need (and then having to find somewhere to keep it)
 - Overstocking – buying too much raw material
 - Defects – making rejects and having to start all over again
2. **The 5 'S'.** This is a great way of turning a slightly (or very) disorganised studio, where there is never enough space and where you can never find the scissors, into a smooth running, efficient workshop.

Five basic steps – SORT – SET – SHINE – STANDARDISE – STICK TO – are used to arrange the workspace, tools etc into the most appropriate way.

There are a few rules behind each step that help you to do it in the best way.

This technique can make a big difference, for example, in packing and despatch. Wouldn't it be great if you could halve the time it takes to pack and despatch things.

3. **Spaghetti Diagrams.** This technique helps you to decide the best workshop layout. By plotting all the movement around the workshop during your normal processes it can become very apparent if your equipment, tables, storage areas etc are not in the right place. There are plenty of examples where this has saved significant time in small creative workshops – my favourite example was in a fine chocolate factory where we saved around half an hour a day per person by using a spaghetti diagram.
4. **Process Analysis.** This one is great fun, despite the name. It uses 'post-it' notes to identify and focus on ways to cut out wasteful parts of a process. It is usually done by a small team and really helps everyone to realise how they can be more effective.

Continuous Improvement

One thing to remember is that you can always do better. Even after you have applied the most appropriate lean techniques for the first time, you shouldn't stop there. Things are always changing, and you are always going to find better ways of doing things. 'Lean' helps you and your team to see the way you work in a different light and encourages you to come up with new and better ideas, however big or small, as you move forward. This continuous improvement is invaluable in building on your successes.

In conclusion

All these techniques have been applied in studios in the creative industries with some outstanding results. One workshop recently estimated that they had improved their productivity by at least a third.

If you would like to learn more please talk to the team at Cockpit Arts who can let you know about the forthcoming workshops on this subject.