

## Automation Isn't Always the Answer

**I used to think new automation** was always the answer to improving processes. But, then the challenge became save money, but do not spend a lot of money in the process. This taught me that while automation is an important part in any business, it's not always the answer to efficiency problems.

It's easy to get caught up in the newest automation with all the benefits that are promoted. However, sometimes it's best to just look at something from the simplest approach. This is usually inexpensive in comparison, but can bring just as much, if not more, efficiency savings than automation does without the upfront costs.

What do I mean by "look at something from the simplest approach?" Simply said, it means getting back to the basics. Not every business can afford the newest, greatest machines, or maybe even more controversial, is the idea that some automation actually introduces more inefficiencies to the process than anyone might ever admit.

When looking at a process it is important to step back from that process and break it down into individual segments. Doing this will help identify issues easier than if the whole process is lumped together. Once the processes are uniquely identified, break down each step even more to really find the waste in the process.

### ELIMINATING WASTE

The waste in a process will begin to show as soon as you start to look closer. Watch things like the amount of steps taken, the hand movements made and the unnecessary moves it takes to grab something. All of these can add up to seconds, that if adjusted or eliminated, will begin to turn into real savings. Don't think that a few seconds saved in the process doesn't mean that much. If you think about how many times a day those few extra seconds happens, it will likely surprise you. Timing everything in the process is key. Do not trust what you think you see, time it!

Once the waste is eliminated, make sure it does not get reintroduced back into the process. Most waste usually tends to stem from not having strict process controls to begin with. If the process is not well documented, or is missing steps, employees will naturally (with good intentions) find a work around of their own. While this can sometimes lead to a better way to do a process (which you want to encourage), you can imagine what

will happen if you have six employees doing a process differently than the way it was designed. You will quickly have inefficiencies that you cannot easily identify anymore.

Processes need to be strict and followed how they were designed, but if someone has an idea to make it better that's great, just make sure you can prove it with numbers before you introduce it. Personally, I think creating process maps and work instructions are keys to keeping the process working the way it was designed.

### NUMBERS DON'T LIE

I have been involved in many process changes that have helped gain efficiency with little upfront costs. Some have worked great, while others caused me to go back to the drawing board. The key is to not give up, and trust what the numbers tell you.

One of the most recent process changes we implemented, that has shown huge benefits, is the redesign of our sticking lines. This area was redesigned by focusing on four things. First, we took out as many unnecessary steps as possible. Second, we utilized the space to its full potential. Third, we stayed within a tight budget. Fourth, we could not jeopardize the crops' health in the process.

We were successful in all four of these areas. We are seeing increases of efficiency of 10-20%. We were able to double the amount of sticking stations within the same footprint which eliminated having a second shift. By using off-the-shelf items for 99% of the build, we significantly decreased our cost versus buying customized sticking lines. Health of the crops is maintained by storing cuttings in coolers until they are ready to be stuck.

These are a few of the simplest steps to begin to cut costs and make things more efficient without spending money on automation. It is extremely important to have everyone involved agree on the expectations and to clearly define the desired outcome. Automation absolutely has its place in any process, but you first have to have control of that process for the automation to really benefit your company and make the most impact.

If you think throwing automation into an already inefficient process will solve all of your efficiency problems, you will likely be making a costly mistake. Once your process is under control, then you can look at what automation can fit into your process and what automation just doesn't make sense. [gpn](#)



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