

A Secret Weapon: Standardized Pre- Operational Inspections

Regardless of the size of the company, they all do the same. There is a time when it is decided to start a production run. It can be daily, weekly, as needed, or any other frequency. It can be a state of the art production line or a commercial kitchen. Requirements are the same: to be safe for operators, to be food safe, to be an efficient and reliable operation, and to be able to produce product on specification. And it is important we take measures to ensure this is happening. If those measures are not taken we enter into the “problem waiting to happen” zone.

Typical examples of these situations may result in producing product from an unclean machine, forgetting to set up a part of the process, producing waste, rework, higher costs, and many others. An added layer of complications can occur when things go wrong, and then attempts to resolve them on the fly complicate the situation. Those quick decisions can sometimes save the day, but many don't.

If we think production as a journey, let's imagine the luggage we need to take with us. Usually, we take a logical approach. We are not going to take our winter jackets to a Caribbean destination with the intent of wearing them there, however, we might need them upon our return. Keeping in mind the entire journey from start to finish, we create lists of what to take or what to do to ensure that the journey is enjoyable, smooth, with the end result of many happy memories.

The same approach can be taken for production. A list of “to do” or “to take” can be converted in a powerful tool to ensure a smooth run, product on specification, and safe.

This list can become the first version of a pre-operational inspection (aka: pre-op inspection, or pre-op). There are some caveats. It has to be prepared in a way that allows for a systematic approach to the steps of the operations and, written in a way that triggers critical thinking with the intention of helping the operator to foresee situations and become proactive.

To put the list together, different angles will need to be considered. Here are some of most common topics found in pre-op lists that should not be forgotten:

Health & Safety: Are there any health and safety hazards that need to be addressed before starting production? (ie: wet floor, chain guard missing, steps ladders needed). Is Personal Protective Equipment available and ready to use?

Food Safety: Are the machines/utensils/tables clean, sanitized?

Mechanical: Is the machine in working order? Can it be started without ingredients to check (dry run)?

Gauges: are they working properly?

Consumables/ingredients: Is there enough for the run?

Set up: Is the set up correct, properly done and the one needed for the product to run?

It is recommended that the operator of the machine should also perform the pre-op inspection. In this way it will be clear that they are responsible for a safe run. Sometimes, given some process complexities, it is necessary to have a food safety coordinator or specialized maintenance personnel involved in the process.

Each operation will have their particulars and questions/topics/checklist should be adapted to it without neglecting the core topics mentioned above. Enjoy the run.

This material was prepared by Jorge Feldman of S.I.I. Strategy, Innovation and Implementation, a Winnipeg Firm dedicated to design and implement operational optimization and quality plans including HACCP. 25+ Years of Food Industry Experience.