

Automating Your Housekeeping Quality Assurance Program

by Stephen Walsh

These days, more hospitals, schools and senior residences are automating their QA (Quality Assurance) programs within housekeeping departments, with hopes for improvements in accuracy, speed, and quality of information.

Up until recently, most facilities used a paper-based approach - someone would tour with a checklist, noting deficiencies, problems, etc. Sometimes that list would simply get reviewed and filed, while in other instances, the data would be entered into a QA database program of some sort.

But today, facilities have a wide array of QA programs to choose from. The traditional paper checklist approach is still the most common solution, but there are also a variety of technology-based options. These options range from paper-based systems that require manual data entry all the way to integrated systems, where a cell phone or PDA is used to collect data and feed it instantly into a central program.

What Does Technology Offer?

Technology brings an array of pros and cons - some real, some perceived. For example, depending upon the system selected, technology can dramatically increase the speed and accuracy of a given inspection. On the other hand, new technology can appear intimidating to some workers to the point that they don't want to use it.

But imagine this: You walk into a public washroom in your facility and your cell phone has a GPS system that knows where you are and loads your inspection checklist immediately. This checklist is different from that for other areas, because a washroom has different items to inspect than, say, an office.

With your checklist, you are able to quickly run through your set of items to check: Walls? OK. Floors? OK. Toilet rolls? OK. However, when you get to the hand towels you can see that two of the four dispensers are empty, and instead of hitting "OK" on your phone, you indicate a "fail". After completing the inspection, and you click "process now," the handheld contacts your staffing system to look up the name of the housekeeper who was assigned to this area on this shift. Then the QA program will prompt you: "Would you like to contact this housekeeper concerning this deficiency now?" When you select "yes," your cell phone can page, SMS (Short Message Service), or call that employee automatically. You can then contact them return to correct the problem immediately. In the meantime, all of your QA data has been automatically loaded into your inspection database system and your QA daily reports, summaries, and trends are ready for you.

What's great is, you don't have to imagine this scenario at all - systems available today can do all of this, and more! It is up to you as a manager to determine the level of automation, mobility and integration that works for you and your budget. One of the problems that has been seen with QA automation is when people want to go high-tech, but don't really have QA discipline to begin with. In general, a successful QA program has each of the four following characteristics: common standards, analysis, follow-up, and management commitment.

Common Standards

Common standards are not as simple as they sound. Different people see things differently,



Most systems run on the Windows Platform (Windows Mobile, Windows Smartphone, etc.), which can allow for a wide range of functionality from signature capture to digital cameras to GPS.

based upon everything from their training, to their language skills, to their cultural background. Through all this diversity, common standards must be shared by inspectors and by the housekeepers themselves. To accomplish this, standards must be documented and inspectors and housekeepers must be trained to comply with these standards. High-tech programs can help in this case by providing the inspectors with detailed standards specific to what they are looking at.

Analysis

The analysis of findings does not need to be complicated - it may be as simple as a regular review of inspection sheets with the supervisors or housekeepers; or

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as complex as automated reporting with trend and shift analysis. Whatever you choose, you must be able to get value out of the data collected.

Follow-up

Obviously, managers perform QA's to assure quality. The simple act of performing the QA can have a positive effect, as people tend to perform better if their performance is being monitored. An effective QA program is helpful in improving training, selecting equipment and supplies, and performing staff evaluations. Imagine if you knew that 30% of your fails involved "High Dusting", and 70% of the high dusting problems came from only five of your 60 employees. It is reasonable that you would work with those housekeepers specifically on high dusting, and expect to

improve your overall scores. This type of understanding of the problem only comes from data analysis combined with useful reports.

Similar logic applies to equipment and supplies. Let's say you switch cleaning supplies and notice an immediate drop in floor cleanliness in those areas. You can use your QA data to uncover the cause of the problem and take steps to correct it.

Management Commitment

Management commitment is the cornerstone of quality and quality control. Without management commitment, any QA program will eventually fail. When you look at any company in any industry, those that are successful share a management commitment to quality.

Management commitment does

not need to be a big, complicated process. It can be as simple as a manager requiring that QAs are being done on time, in the proper format. It could also involve QA scores being integrated in supervisor and employee evaluations, an enforced minimum numbers of surveys per week or an integrated corrective plan for repeat issues. Whatever the form, commitment is necessary for any QA program to succeed.

Common Fixes before

Automation

There are often problems and issues when it comes to switching to an automated QA program. The following are problems and solutions that can be done before the change is made:

***Problem: QAs are not be-**

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Types of Automated Systems Available: <i>In selecting your QA program, you should look at the pros and cons of each approach. Some guidelines are outlined in the graph below</i>			
Type of Program	Details	Pros	Cons
Paper-based	No data or computer analysis	-No up front cost. -Easy for all to understand and implement. -Can be effective when inspections are reviewed in a consistent and timely manner.	-Limited value from efforts. -Little or no analysis of data.
Paper-based with manual data entry into a computer program	Collected data is entered by staff into a database or other program	- Paper is easy to use. - Could be less expensive than a fully-automated system.	- Data input is very time consuming and error prone. - Requires constant management oversight. - Higher operational costs are hidden in overhead and lost time. -Often significant delay between time of inspection and data input.
Handheld - based, data automatically synchronized with computer program	Automatic input	- Very low operating costs. - Once trained, less management time required. - High-tech look provides added credibility - Eliminate delay between the inspection and results. - Eliminates input errors. - Easy to use format encourages higher volume of inspections. - Eliminates input delays allowing for corrective action in real time.	- Can look intimidating to some users. - May require additional handhelds. - Higher up front cost. - Requires training.

Computerized Systems: <i>If you do decide to go with a computerized system, then you will need to choose between a PC-based system and a Web-based system. Below are some guidelines in making your decision:</i>			
Type	Details	Pros	Cons
PC-based	The program resides on one of your local or networked PC's.	-No Web access required. -All IT costs and extra efforts are hidden in facility overhead. -Limited technical support.	-Upfront fee plus upgrade fees. -Heavy involvement of your IT staff. -Requires IT approval. -You manage all upgrades, backups security, etc. -May only be available from one PC.
Web-based	The program resides on the provider's server; you access your account via the internet.	-Accessible from any computer anywhere -Supplier provides all security, backups and upgrades. -Requires virtually no support from your IT staff.	-Subscription fee. -Requires internet access.

ing done: The truth of the matter is if QA's are not being done in paper form, they probably won't get done on a computer. As a matter of fact, you can expect to hear complaints about how the automated system is too difficult to use, does not work, etc. People do not like change; and they really don't like a lot of change at once.

***Solution:** A way to correct this issue is by setting inspection goals and having your staff commit to them before you introduce an automated QA program

***Problem: Inspectors are not applying the same standards:** This issue is a question of training and support. Some automated systems can actually provide you with a printout of common standards, and some products will even deliver training videos unique to the items being inspected right to the PDA or cell phone of the inspector.

***Solution:** The way to correct this issue is to start with a set of standards in the beginning and then train both housekeepers and inspectors on those standards.

***Problem: No analysis or action from the results:** Often, data is too difficult to work with,

especially if you are using the old paper-based approach.

***Solution:** This is an issue that can be improved simply as a result of automation. An automated system that pushes your QA reports directly into a data-base will free up your time to look at the meaning behind the data and begin to move forward with it. Fully-automated systems can provide better information faster, and with less effort.

Steps to Automating

If you are considering automating your QA process, you can expect to go through the following phases:

1. **Selecting an approach:** First you need to determine if you want to go with a system that uses paper checklists to collect the inspection, or go directly to a handheld based (PDA, cell phone etc.) system. This boils down to your sense of the benefits and savings of each option. How long does manual inputting of data take? How much time will be saved? How long will you wait between the inspections and completion of the data input step? How difficult is the entire process to manage?

What is the cost of input errors? How easy is it to get the reports that you want? How user friendly are the handhelds compared to a paper checklist?

2. **Choosing a system:** Once you select an approach, you can then begin to look at the commercially - available systems, or consider building your own. With a web search, you should find systems that could meet your needs. If you are looking for information on systems, you might try the following search phrases: housekeeping inspections, quality assurance programs, or handheld inspections. Once you determine which systems interest you, most vendors will provide some sort of a demo and a proposal. In some cases, you may request a limited-free trail of a system – don't be afraid to ask. Also, check the references of the providers you are interested in. You will want to ask about after sales service, hidden costs, effectiveness of their training programs, and the ability of their IT staff to deal with unforeseen problems.

3. **Budget approval:** You can expect to spend from \$500 to as much as \$50,000 depending upon the system you choose, op-

tions, hardware, training and implementation costs. Whatever your budget, you may need help calculating the expenses and savings. You can log onto [www.walshmobile.com / qsscalsculator.html](http://www.walshmobile.com/qsscalsculator.html) to download an easy-to-use calculator. This tool will help you estimate your budget for any automation program.

4. Implementing the solution: You've selected your solution, and gotten approval and the PO. Now the fun can begin! In the world of technology, the implementation stage is where 50% of systems fail. This stage requires planning, and a commitment to a timeline. It is critical that your supplier (even if you are creating a system internally) has the experience and ability to provide the training, guidance and support. This installation step may very well provide unwanted challenges. Expect them. Commit to working

through them. Your team needs to know that this implementation will happen. If they see your commitment, then you will see theirs.

5. Follow-up: At this stage, you have implemented your new system. Your users are trained and are using it. Now is the time to start getting value from your efforts. Depending upon your choices, you should be able to see meaningful reports almost instantly. As your inspection team sees this information, they will better understand the need to complete their inspections on time. As housekeepers are given timely and consistent feedback on their performance, you will see a greater understanding and appreciation of the performance standards.

Conclusion

Automating your QA program may not be for everyone, but it has proven to be a cost-effective way to

improve your quality. If you are having difficulty getting inspection results entered into your system, or you don't feel you are getting good information for your effort, then automation may deliver tremendous value. You can expect to see information that you always suspected was there!

If you are actively involved in your QA program and see QA as an area of strategic importance, then automation is the next logical step. You should expect to save time and money by automating and get a lot more for your efforts. While automation is not perfect, most facilities will see it a reasonable progression in their ongoing efforts for continual improvement. ★

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