

# Frontline Maintenance with Operator Care

By E. Victor Brown

Successful heavy construction companies understand that boosting profit margins can only happen by increasing efficiency and lowering costs. To ensure a rise to the top rather than a race to the bottom requires helping mechanics and operators to improve equipment performance in every way possible.

While Operator Care (OC) programs have emerged as the best way to achieve that goal, realizing the potential of a program requires holistic process and business cultural changes. Ultimately, OC program advantages may change proportionally across different companies based on several business structure factors. The common denominator is that this OC program potential is always substantively about:

- Improving uptime
- Lowering maintenance costs
- Maximizing the equipment lifecycle at peak performance
- Empowering operators and mechanics

By creating a program that delivers these results, companies can realize operational gains that make them stronger and more competitive. However, the devil is always in the details so building the program with clear goals and learning how to sustain it are key elements to achieving that success.

## OC MAINTENANCE BENEFIT POTENTIAL

The benefits of a successful OC program can be seen in all facets of the business from the bidding process, company image, and market competitiveness to cost reductions, and increased profit margins, among others. Although these benefits go to the bottom line in quantifiable ways with decreased breakdowns and increased uptime, it requires building a program based on maintenance proactivity, operator empowerment/training, and companywide buy-in and follow through.

The ability to anticipate potential problems and resolve them while they are small via an integrated and streamlined process is a hallmark of OC. This sets the stage for achieving major OPEX and CAPEX reductions that enable increased uptime and productivity gains.

In OC, the operators that are in the best position to know the equipment get the training and support to identify problems early and play a key role in correcting them in the field. This increased operator oversight facilitates a sense of ownership among operators and an ability to better control their own daily output and job satisfaction. Simultaneously, it also empowers maintenance staff to concentrate on larger projects and better manage their time in a world where maintenance crews are always in short supply.

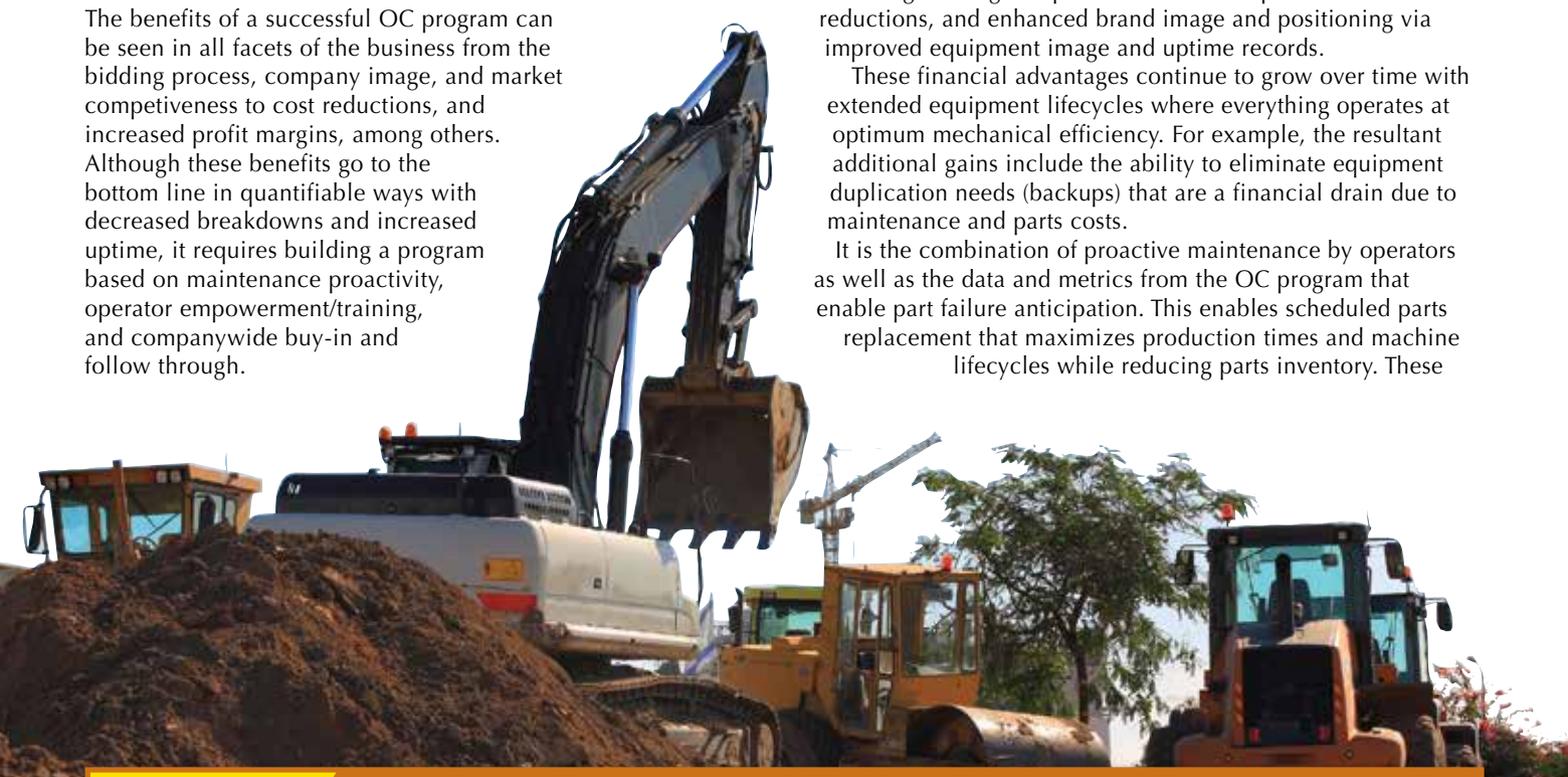
This shared maintenance responsibility with the formal maintenance department increases efficiency, maintenance outcomes, and the cooperative support and respect between operators and maintenance personnel. The benefits can be clearly seen with companies like North Carolina-based S.T. Wooten, which has reduced breakdown rates from a high of 70 percent a few years ago to roughly 7 percent currently.

## BENEFITS OF OPERATOR CARE

A sound OC program has several other potential benefits that are subtler but no less tangible in terms of the bottom line including increasing bidding competitiveness for companies via overhead reductions, and enhanced brand image and positioning via improved equipment image and uptime records.

These financial advantages continue to grow over time with extended equipment lifecycles where everything operates at optimum mechanical efficiency. For example, the resultant additional gains include the ability to eliminate equipment duplication needs (backups) that are a financial drain due to maintenance and parts costs.

It is the combination of proactive maintenance by operators as well as the data and metrics from the OC program that enable part failure anticipation. This enables scheduled parts replacement that maximizes production times and machine lifecycles while reducing parts inventory. These



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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all collectively work to increase long-term financial gain, reduce overhead, and increase uptime and residual equipment.

The companies and the operators benefit from increased operator equipment knowledge that gives them a proactive vision into avoiding component failure and enabling targeted maintenance. For Northern Oregon's Baker Rock Resources, accurate problem descriptions driven by increased operator equipment knowledge has reduced emergency rates from 50 percent down to 1.5 percent with corresponding maintenance costs reductions. Another example is Albany New York-based The Gorman Group's use of Operator Care as one of the elements to reduce its breakdown rate to 2 percent from 35 percent.

The programs evolution fosters longer equipment life and lower maintenance costs that frees capital for newer equipment. This directly benefits both highly experienced operators and new hires via streamlined training on modern equipment with newer technologies.

## BUILDING AND SUSTAINING SUCCESSFUL OC POTENTIAL

While starting an OC program is one thing, maintaining the program over time can have its own challenges due to the natural tendency for the workforce and management to drift away from Total Process Reliability (TPR) principles and the established OC standards. Avoiding this subtle erosion requires constant reinforcement and attention to detail via an auditing program.

According to Preston Ingalls, CEO of TBR Strategies, a TPR implementation company, "the process of auditing to ensure OC compliance is key and key to that is auditor training. In addition to auditing, the foundation of OC must be built on clear expectations and training to meet those expectations, process oversight by management, and rewards and recognition to encourage success."

Ingalls states operators are the first line of defense against early signs of degradation and chronic issues on equipment and about 75 percent of all issues can be detected by a trained operator.

For companies looking to formalize an Operator Care program that is successful

and sustainable, companies must consistently and effectively work to create a balance between production, asset care, quality, and safety. That should include:

- Operator input on equipment condition from day one
- Meticulous document creation process with details and clear graphics, photos and explanations for operator understanding
- Long-term and consistent follow-through to avoid program degradation
- Involvement of all levels and facets of the company to foster business cultural change
- Knowing when to part ways with habitually non-compliant operators that cannot or will not adapt
- Strong program leadership to drive and support the program

Above all, companies must always remember that Operator Care is as much about keeping the operator focused on the welfare of the equipment in addition to its output. ■

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