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FINDING SUCCESS WITH OPERATOR CARE PROGRAMS

Representatives from four heavy equipment organizations discuss the realities of building and sustaining a successful operator care program

BY E. VICTOR BROWN

Heavy construction companies know all too well the differences between a program or plan on paper and one that works in the real world. Although operator care (OC) programs are not new, translating them from the drawing board to company practices and culture can be easier said than done. TBR Strategies' CEO Preston Ingalls laid out the foundational specifics of a successful operator care program based upon total process reliability (TPR) principles and standards. He has led maintenance and reliability improvement efforts in 30 countries for Shell, Toyota, Skanska, Bayer, Exxon, Lockheed Martin, Unilever, Monsanto, Pillsbury, Corning and Texas Instruments.

We spoke to representatives from four heavy equipment organizations about the successes and challenges of their OC programs and what it takes to make them work in the real world. These companies include:

- Baker Rock Resources, which supplies aggregates, landscape and decorative products, as well as asphalt and paving materials to northwest Oregon via divisions in Beaverton, Dayton and Molalla;
- S. T. Wooten, which has numerous concrete and asphalt facilities across central and eastern North Carolina, specializing in both large and small public works and commercial projects;
- Superior Paving Corp., which specializes in both public work projects and commercial projects across northern Virginia; and
- Lehman-Roberts Co., which handles major and minor public and private projects across western Tennessee and northern Mississippi.

Each of these companies operates multiple facilities across wide geographic areas with large fleets of rolling

stock, and have developed a comprehensive OC program with consulting support that ranges from just under two years to five years or more.

THE ADVANTAGES

OC programs aim to increase the bottom-line profit margin and reduce operational costs. The advantages of an OC program may change in proportion across different companies based on a number of business structure factors, but they all seek consistent improvement and substantive gains. These four companies have seen and continue to see those gains with expectations of greater improvements over time.

They benefit from the proactive nature of OC in catching and anticipating problems while small, as well as in creating a more streamlined and integrated process between maintenance and operators. A well-run OC program enables greater uptime and higher productivity, and sets the stage for achieving major operational and capital cost reductions.

“Operator care puts the most knowledgeable people about the equipment (the operator) in a proactively responsible position of seeing and avoiding potential problems through daily maintenance,” said Matthew Cox, CEM, Director of Asset Management for Lehman-Roberts. “That not only empowers the operator to have more control over his day, but also gives them greater pride with a sense of equipment ownership.”

Jacob Dodson, TPR Coordinator for Superior Paving, echoes those sentiments by explaining how OC enables catching small problems before they become major breakdowns via stronger operator involvement. “The guys in the field that are running the equipment every day are in the best position to provide the routine maintenance and spot



>> OC programs enable small problems to be caught before they become major breakdowns by enabling stronger operator involvement.

Advice from Practitioners

For companies looking to formalize an operator care program that is successful and sustainable, all four companies advised that it is a struggle to maintain an appropriate balance between production, asset care, quality and safety. Some of the advice that they gave for others includes:

- Give operators a voice in the documentation creation so they can put their stamp on how the equipment is maintained for full involvement from day one.
- Take your time so you create

the process and the documentation the right way the first time.

Incorporate details and clear graphics, photos and explanations so that the program is easily understood by the operator.

- Long-term and consistent follow-through is critical to success, as any sign of weakness in the program will lead to it falling apart.
- An OC program must involve everyone in the company in order to make it part of the culture of the business moving forward.
- Although you should give

every opportunity and effort to operators that aren't adopting the program successfully, be prepared to part ways with them when it becomes clear they cannot or will not adapt.

- For those starting an OC program, they need good leadership that can drive the process and push back on management to fulfill program needs.
- They also need to have someone that intimately understands the equipment to ensure getting clear operator support.

potential problems proactively," said Dodson. "That's a huge benefit to the maintenance department because you have shared maintenance responsibilities between the operator and the maintenance department."

Dodson and others say the increased involvement, sense of ownership and organization-wide teamwork from the office to the field has forged the maintenance departments and operators into a unified group. "Operators and drivers are performing considerably more maintenance on their own, which has resulted in decreased calls to the maintenance department, so that proactive approach is cutting down on big and small repairs," said David Hughes, Equipment Superintendent for S.T. Wooten.

THE BENEFITS

A successful OC program benefits all facets of the business from the bidding process, company image and market competitiveness, to cost reductions and increased profit margins. For example, the benefits go to the bottom line in quantifiable ways with decreased breakdowns and increased uptime.

"Before we started doing OC, our breakdown rate was extremely high, at an estimated 70 percent," said Tyler Stallings, TPR Manager for S.T. Wooten. "Through OC and other factors, we now have it down to about 18 percent with even more reduction on the horizon."

Competitiveness in bidding is about reducing overhead, but winning bids can also be about the company's image and brand. "We've seen the benefits in our operator care program through the bidding process, with jobs awarded that were clearly influenced by the look and operational track record of our equipment when clients come to look over our facilities," said Shannon Todd, Baker Rock's TPR Coordinator. "In addition, the pride that our drivers feel is palpable to the clients and the community when they

interact with us, which helps to reinforce our brand as the company that can best handle the job."

According to all of the company representatives interviewed, the financial advantages of OC become clear as the program progresses. It can manifest in better and newer equipment that has a longer life cycle with lower maintenance and repair costs. It can also lower the duplicate equipment ratio that many companies find themselves perpetuating. "The ability to make the shift from old, costly, high-maintenance equipment to newer, meticulously maintained and monitored equipment ensures longer life, less downtime, and fewer parts replacement over the life cycle," said Nick Ellis, CFO, Superior Paving.

Cox adds that the data and metrics from the OC program enable part failure anticipation for proactive replacement to maximize production times and machine life cycles. "We're far more competitive in bidding without having the direct and indirect costs of keeping all of those redundant pieces of equipment," said Cox. "It also brings the benefit of a reduced mechanic staff and reduced parts inventory."

The long-term cost savings in terms of equipment may materialize over years, but it makes for a more financially sound company, according to Dodson. "You're making decisions and a direction for long-term financial gain and possibilities, as well as a cultural change via longer equipment life, more uptime more profitability, and greater residual value for sales in the secondary market," he said.

For these companies, a successful OC program goes far beyond trained operators following a maintenance checklist. 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.

"Operators can provide a more accurate description of what is happening since they understand what they are



>> Sustaining an OC program requires clear documentation, processes and systems.

looking for and why they are looking for this,” said Brian Young from Baker Rock. “The equipment is then maintained at a higher level, with less downtime that has reduced our emergency rates from 50 percent down to 1.0 percent with corresponding maintenance costs reductions.”

As these programs evolve, the lower maintenance costs enable longer equipment life and free up capital for newer equipment. With the advances in equipment technology, OC is a gift that keeps giving as operators must acclimate to new technology. “With many of our operators having 25 or more years of experience, they know what they’re doing, and the OC program reinforces that experience,” said Todd. “More importantly, the OC program provides the ongoing training they need with the newer generation of equipment that has more advanced technology involved.”

THE CHALLENGES

All of the companies undertaking an OC program understand there will be challenges with such a major cultural shift across the organization. Having knowledge of how those challenges can manifest and how to circumvent them is a major part of a program’s success.

“You have to keep in mind that you’re dealing with entrenched human behaviors that you’re trying to change across hundreds of people, so there is a major cultural swing for the entire company,” said Dodson. Standardization means dealing with different opinions on how equipment care should work with longstanding habits that now must be modified across the organization.

Although the cultural change must happen across the organization from ownership and senior management to the operators, it is often the middle managers that can be a key challenge to success. Cox provided this real world example:

“The first question the superintendent will ask is, ‘How many tons did you put out today?’ That focuses all the

attention, albeit subconsciously, on production, which neglects asset care, safety and quality. While it is the superintendent’s intent to ensure all production was completed safely, to specification, and without undue harm to the equipment, his question does not keep any focus on those other three aspects. So the foreman is pulled one way by words and another way by actions. Consequently, it’s a challenge ensuring that the actions of superintendents align with their intent, which is balancing production output, production quality, safety and asset care.”

HOW TO START

Starting an operator care program requires knowing where you are going and why you’re doing it. Clear documentation, processes and systems will be required to sustain the program and help it to grow. A foundational part of ensuring these elements come together in the right way is having the right people involved in order to build the program correctly and accurately.

Jeff Radack, VP of the concrete products division at S.T. Wooten, credits the hard work and teamwork of Stallings and Hughes. Hughes brought instrumental experience as a former mechanic, supervising mechanic and mixer driver to the OC program. Radack said that combination of experience and hard work played out in terms of OC program creation and success.

“I could clearly see the importance of an OC program as a major cost-saving measure, but success hinges on attention to detail and repetition in training once the program is developed,” said Radack. “In our case, that means one-on-one training in small groups of 12 to 25 drivers at a time, and painstakingly going over every single point of the OC standards list. We also committed to going back over, if need be, or back to the plants if someone needed help, as everyone learns at a different rate.



>> Understanding how challenges can manifest themselves in implementing an OC program is a major part of a program's success.

Having full support from company stakeholders, executive managers and middle managers is the key to making it work.”

The perspective of ensuring the thoroughness and quality of everything implemented and the manner in which it is implemented was also a major theme. “You really need accurate and detailed info on the front end with information from vendors and experienced operators, in order to get solid documentation on the front,” said Young. “That forms the basis for creating detailed operator training, which requires investing the time to make sure that they fully understand.”

HOW TO SUSTAIN

Although Cox, Ellis, Hughes and Young have different roles in different heavy construction companies, they all shared the same perspectives on the tremendous amount of energy needed to sustain an OC program. This is due to the natural tendency for parts of the organization to drift away from the OC standards without constant reinforcement and attention to detail via the auditing program.

To ensure compliance, each organization stressed consistency in approach and training for all auditors as being crucial to avoiding inconsistencies. “It’s crucial to ensure that each driver is doing exactly what is on the checklist, and everyone is doing the same thing,” said Hughes. “We have 125-hour inspections and regular audits where the operator and manager go over everything to make sure that they are doing things as they are laid out, which keeps the program on track.”

The auditing process for all of the companies becomes a clear way to keep the conversation going, where results are shared, rewards are given and suggestions for improvement come from all sides. Radack explained how the clarity of the auditing process is the key to sustaining OC:

“This is a process with clear expectations, so we can clearly see when it isn’t being done and when audits are necessary and will require standards retraining and another audit. The process has to continue to evolve, and I continue to look over the trucks as they go from plant to plant while the plant managers drive the daily process of the OC program. We’re able to perpetuate the program by sending David Hughes out with a 30-year ready mix mechanic veteran to ensure we have a good process for new hires, for setting that standard when they come in the door, which makes the audit process more efficient moving forward,” said Radack.

Ellis and Todd summed up the importance of an OC program:

“If you don’t choose to have an OC program, you’ve chosen a shorter life for your equipment, higher operating costs, lower residual value for the equipment and increased downtime,” Ellis said. “The cost of not having one is extremely high.”

“Companies have to keep in mind the reason that it’s called operator care is because it’s all about the operator,” Todd said. “Staying focused on providing them what they need to do their best is what it’s all about.” **EM**

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