

Keep it simple, kids

Don't try to turn your distribution center into a superstar if you don't have the basics down first.

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When my son was 11 years old, he passed the long New England winter by playing on a futsal (indoor soccer) team. Some of his teammates were overly enamored with their own fancy footwork and trick shots. Why pass the ball when you can dribble it between a couple of defenders' legs and impress your teammates with your ability to "nutmeg"?

Their coach, however, was rarely impressed. "Simple! Simple!" this normally mild-mannered man would exclaim whenever the kids gave in to the temptation to showboat. "This game is so simple!" In other words, whenever possible, keep it simple, kids; you're not Messi yet, so don't try to be.

It's not just preteen athletes who need to be reminded of this. I admit I often yearn to use a clever analogy (see above?) when a straightforward phrase would do. And I imagine it's the same way in the distribution center. Especially these days, when a zippy little robot can carry your orders instead of Marty with a cart that resembles the ones used to bring in the AV equipment for sixth-grade science class. (See, there I go again.)

Which is why it was refreshing to chat with David Norton, vice president of customer solutions and support at lift truck company [The Raymond Corp.](#), during ProMat DX (MHI's digital version of its biennial ProMat trade show). In spite of all the "gee-whiz technology" that Raymond has on offer, Norton was less interested in talking about automation and **more interested in what you need to do before you can even think about automating your DC's operations.** Norton's point was "Not everything can be automated. **Automation may not actually be the right decision for you.**"

Before automating, according to the folks at Raymond, DC leaders need to make sure they are at least following the basic tenets of Lean thinking. And by that, they don't just mean eliminating unnecessary inventory. DC managers should also be sure that their space is well organized, the path that the products take through the facility is efficient, employees are following standardized processes, and available resources are being used effectively.

A common story, according to Norton, goes something like this: A company is experiencing a surge in business and comes to Raymond wanting to buy five new forklift trucks to help it meet the added demand. Often, however, the company has made that decision without first stopping to consider whether there are process improvements it could make. **Are products moving through the warehouse in the most efficient way possible, or is there wasted time—or unnecessary steps?** **Could current resources be used to support the new orders?**

In fact, **the most common problem** that Norton sees when he visits DCs is not a lack of automation. Instead, **it's a lack of focus on good organization and tidiness.** (As someone who struggles with organization and tidiness, this point struck a rather uncomfortable chord with me.)

Basic housekeeping is so simple, so obvious (so boring?), that it's easy to overlook. It's hard to impress the boss by keeping a well-organized and clean DC (except maybe if your boss is my son's soccer coach). But there is a cost associated with every scrap of wood that's left on the floor instead of being disposed of; in every pallet that is not properly aligned on the rack; in every scanner that's not put back into the locker at the end of the shift.

The message here is simple: Before you bring in that new piece of equipment, first make sure your house is clean and in order... and then maybe you'll find you don't need the fancy new machinery after all.



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