How Long Does It Take To Make 25 Chef Salads?

By Kim Hofmann, RDN, LD

When was the last time you completed a task analysis to determine the steps and time it takes to make your chef salads? How long does it take your staff to set-up and take down a serving line? Prepare 350 cheeseburgers?

If you are like most schools, it has been a long time since you have measured productivity.

**Working smarter, not harder**

Many schools’ food service operations are facing high labor costs which often leads to staffing cuts. Working smarter, not harder, with work simplification is a great way to increase staff efficiency while maintaining high quality in your operation, while increasing staff morale. Work simplification allows your employees to perform tasks in the simplest ways possible to conserve their time and energy while reducing labor by producing more in a given time.

I have worked with many schools that are staffed with about the same meals per labor hour as they were 30-40 years ago when almost everything was made from scratch.

Fast forward to current times where pre-prepared and convenience products are the norm. Unfortunately, many schools have not adjusted their labor hours proportionately.

**Parkinson’s Law**

Parkinson’s Law, which states, “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion” has snuck into many a kitchen. It means that the task will take as long as the time given to do it. If you give a person all day to do the job, it probably will take all day.

Labor ‘creep’ has infiltrated many of the schools I’ve consulted. When these schools increased their use of processed foods, they did not make the corresponding adjustments in labor hours, and now it takes these schools close to the same amount of time to prepare a convenience item as it did to make from scratch.

Using the methods of work simplification is one of the best ways to prevent Parkinson’s Law from taking over your kitchen and make sure that each task is set-up to be performed the easiest, quickest and simplest way possible.

**Work simplification**

Work simplification is more than a technique or a set of how-to-do-its. It as a way of thinking or a philosophy that there is always a better way.¹

According to Payne-Palacio: Conservative estimates show that through implanting effective work simplification programs, food service workers productivity can be increased 20-50%. I think all food service operations would be pleased with that productivity increase.

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The first step in using work simplification is to have a plan. List jobs and tasks that need reviewed for productivity and simplification, and then prioritize these tasks. High on the list should be tasks that are completed on a daily. Once you have decided on the tasks and jobs that need reviewed, pick one and get started on evaluating and simplifying.

The steps I use are:

1. Determine the job/task to simplify.
2. Breakdown and list the tasks involved in the job (do a time and motion study.)
3. Review, question and challenge each step and detail.
4. Determine a better method (group similar tasks together, streamline, organize).
5. Apply the new method.

**The principle of “mise en place”**

All jobs have three essential parts: Get ready, do, and clean-up. Use the principles of *mise en place* (French for “putting in place”) to get organized and prioritize the work needed. Train your staff to retrieve all ingredients and equipment needed on a cart in a single trip. Set up workstations in order of assembly to increase motion economy. Dovetail tasks such as shredding all the cheese needed for the week at the same time. Have work stations equipped with all needed utensils. Running back and forth to the storeroom for ingredients is great for getting exercise, but not good for efficiency. Use cycle menus and your production sheets to note ways to simplify for the next time.

Keep in mind that every kitchen is different and what works for one kitchen may not work the same in another kitchen.

**Standardized recipes and cycle menus**

Using standardized recipes and cycle menus are important tools for work simplification. In addition to giving you a consistent product and known cost, repetition preparing the same item should increase your staff’s efficiency each time that item is prepared.

**Motion economy**

To increase productivity, use the principles of motion economy. Look for wasted motion, duplication of tasks, and tasks that can cause employee fatigue. Search for ways to make tasks more efficient by eliminating unnecessary movements and steps. Examples: using both hands when possible, gathering all needed ingredients in one trip, and stocking tools and materials needed at each work station.

One of the schools I worked with started offering grilled cheese sandwiches as an alternate. The manager said the only way they would be able to prepare 50 grilled cheese sandwiches was to have an additional 1 ½ hours of labor each day to prepare the sandwiches. This would work out to .50 sandwich per minute. Using the techniques of work simplification, we broke down and listed the steps involved in making the grilled cheese sandwich. Long story short, the cook was taking one piece of bread and spreading butter on the one piece, putting it on the sheet pan, then she put two slices of cheese, one at a time on top of the one slice of bread, then picked up the second slice of bread, buttered it, and then put it on top of the cheese. This method might work at home, but it does not make sense in a foodservice operation.

**Train**

Training staff on work simplification and motion economy helped this school boost their efficiency. Do not assume your staff knows the easiest, simplest, fastest and safest way to perform a task. Involve your staff in developing new methods that simplify the work and improve productivity.
Your Turn

Now it is your turn. Take a serious look at your work processes. Where is productivity low? Where is time being wasted? Where can you save money and energy? Once you know the answers to questions like these, you can begin your own work simplification process, and see how your operation, your staff’s morale, your costs and your bottom line will improve.

How long does it take your staff to make 25 chef salads?

After years as a school foodservice director and a foodservice distributor sales representative, Kim Hofmann, RDN, LD, started her own consulting and training business, Kim H Consulting (formerly Get to the Point). Her specialty is cost control, financial planning and management training.

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