



10 Operational Steps to A Peak Season Home Run

The ramp up is almost gone with only weeks remaining to tell how well your operation is prepared. Now is the time for near-term actions that will leverage those long-range plans and make the difference in throughput and performance. Below are ten operational steps that you can take to ensure every play is well made and the team is hitting home runs.

Maintenance – With higher stress and usage on equipment this is no time to forego preventative maintenance. Instead it is important to increase the service of critical subsystems such as sorters and merges to avoid unexpected and expensive downtime, loss of throughput, and customer dissatisfaction. Review parts inventories and bump up the on-hand of high wear and crucial parts. Have a meeting with OEMs and parts suppliers to review response times, lead times on parts supplies, and on-site services.

Exceptions – Exception handling strangles throughput and inflates operating costs. Closely examine exceptions such as no-reads, hospital areas, order shortages, and hot replenishments. Assign ownership to a cross-functional team whose responsibility is not just a quick resolution, but to diagnose root cause and drive immediate remedy. Work with your MHE provider to audit and resolve exceptions that may be caused by controls settings, scanner adjustments and photo-eye alignment.

Labor - During peak season, staffing within a distribution/fulfillment center often expands by 2 to 4 times that of the rest of the year. Hopefully, for months you have been cross-training associates to provide that much needed flexibility going into the peak season with a 24x7 schedule. As new staff is brought on board, it is now critical to focus their training on where they are needed most and determine how their skills can be leveraged to bring about maximum benefit to the overall operation. On-boarding time should be well planned measuring performance to targets with escalation routes for the associates that excel and can quickly be effective in those functions typically performed by the more seasoned personnel.

Metrics – It is true that “what is measured gets managed,” and it’s also true that “measures drive behavior.” Total cost per unit or cost per order shipped are fundamental to understanding the efficiency of your operation. If we aren’t careful, we can let the numbers gathered over the course of the year jade our decisions during peak. One such decision might be to forego order consolidation during certain hours and ship multi-item orders as singles. Managed effectively this can increase throughput and provide the best opportunity to meet service levels.

Cadence – In order to meet higher throughput demands, the drumbeat of the operation must get more disciplined and pronounced. With daily order demand as the target, develop and document a means of measuring and tracking the required output, staffing, and performance from receiving through shipping and schedule hourly cross-team communications to report and adjust to plan. A [WES \(Warehouse Execution System\)](#) dashboard is the “go to” for managing and communicating the cadence of your operation.

Cycle Time – Know the cycle times for each function (dock to stock, replenishment, order pick duration, batch completion, order pack out, etc). Capture real-time information so that you know immediately when any cycle time begins to stretch, and data quickly points to a change in work content/complexity, exceptions, or staffing.

Utilization – Whether it is a packing station, a sorter, or an ASRS, utilization is key to their throughput. Examine the utilization of the processes within your facility. This is another example of where your [WES](#) can be instrumental in providing the information quickly and effortlessly. Begin by examining any process over 85 to 90% utilization. This could indicate a bottleneck that is throttling all other processes feeding it or consuming its output. For the short term, the process may need to be supplemented by a manual or off-line process. Likewise, look at the processes with the lowest utilization and it will point to a problem with a process feeding it. It may be that the upstream process is too complex and needs to be streamlined or replicated.

Slotting – The inflation of SKU populations during peak season can easily breach the capacity of forward pick locations. Before your operation gets backed into a corner of no available pick slots, try some of these ideas:

- Comingling low cube slow movers of unique products
- End-capping pick rows with bulk slots for medium to high movers
- Delivering high moving non-conveyable or ship-alones directly to the shipping dock via milk runs
- Using virtual locations near a conveyor take-away for picking high velocity and cube intensive items
- Setting up a pick-tunnel in the deep reserve
- Locating hyper velocity “ad” items near packing stations

Flow – Observe the material flow within the operation. Look for “touches” that do not add value. If possible, remove the process. However, these “non-value” processes often involve transporting goods, supplies, or materials from one process to another. There is no or minimal decision-making taking place. One near term solution is [AMRs \(autonomous mobile robotics\)](#). These solutions can often be expanded as service and easily deployed to move product or materials where conveyance is not possible. Whether transporting pick carts, replenishments, or dunnage, AMRs are worth considering.

Joy – With the focus on shipping orders, it is too easy to overlook the most important resource available to a distribution or fulfillment center. The associates. Regardless of the amount of automation, the success of the operation depends on the people. As leaders, we are responsible for creating a work environment that associates find rewarding, where they can contribute, and take pride in what they do.

These ten areas are found within every distribution/fulfillment center. It's whether we manage them or allow them to manage us that determines how successful we will be during our Peak/Holiday Season.

About TREW

TREW provides automated material handling solutions for integrators and end users, including Warehouse Execution Systems (WES), Warehouse Control Systems (WCS), PLC- and server-based machine controls, motorized driven roller (MDR) conveyor and services such as concepting, engineering, technical support, parts, field service and training. Serving the North American retail, warehouse, distribution, manufacturing and ecommerce industries, TREW's experienced staff and broad network of integrator partners enable uncommonly smart solutions scalable to any material handling needs.