



The No Limits Workplace
Aligning Work with the Human Spirit
Yielding Enduring Prosperity and Individual Reward

Standard Work - Business' Best Silver Bullet (yet rarely understood and practiced)

“Standard Work is the greatest key to consistent performance” - The Toyota Way Fieldbook

“It may sound paradoxical at first, but standardization unleashes energy, creativity, and innovation”

“No single factor can bring a company out of the past and into the future faster and bigger than standard work”

Hopefully the statements above will entice the reader to pursue the idea of standard work with enthusiasm and an open mind. If there's one thing that can transform many thousands of talented and knowledgeable business professionals from managers and doers to leaders of high performance enterprises, it's understanding standard work and it's awesome power within the context of today's business environment. For a manager to fully “get” standard work, one has to move from a “what's in it for me” motivation to a “what can I do for others” motivation. And as mentioned in Tenet 6, that paradigm adjustment has much to do with becoming a leader. While at first appearing to be just a practical tool, implementation of standard work in full is a leadership initiative of significant proportion and great worth.

The aim of this article is high. Within a relatively few pages, we want to do something we've not seen before but believe to be very worthwhile. And that is, in one place to touch on all of the key aspects of standard work and illustrate their integrated nature. As it's in explaining this integration that the wide-ranging potency of this seemingly one dimensional work practice becomes apparent. To that end we hope to provide the right combination of comprehensiveness, segmentation, and detail that best translate the total understanding.

The article is segmented into five areas as follows;

1. What standard work is
2. What it achieves
3. Why it's become increasingly important to success
4. How to implement it - Phases of implementation
5. How we work with clients to get them up and running and on their own

Section I - WHAT STANDARD WORK IS

Standard work definition # 1

Let's start with a drastically simplified definition and build out from there. Standard work is the defined one best way (OBW) to do something. That sounds simple enough. Who doesn't want to do the activities of their job the OBW? Let's take a little closer look and work our way to a more complete definition that may, at this point be a bit confusing.

Packing a car

Since everyone's work is so different, we'll choose a non-work activity that everyone has done to gain a better understanding of standard work and the OBW. Do you need to have a defined OBW to put a couple travel bags and other items in the trunk or back of your car? Of course not. The time spent creating such an instruction and training people to it would be a waste because it's simple and the degree of exactness has little bearing on the goal of moving the bags and other items from one place to another.



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So to the degree an activity is simple and the goal easily achieved and variation matters little, there's no reason to specify the how-to or OBW to do something.

Adding complexity and need for precision

But let's change that car-packing situation a bit. What if you were packing your car and there were many various items of different shapes and sizes and in total barely fit in the car. And some could be crushed, broken, or spilled, and you had a limited time to get everything in the car before it drove away. And on the other end it had to be unpacked in a certain way?

Whoa. Now that's a different story. Let's expand on that. What do we think would happen if ten different people performed that pack job? It's not hard to picture the results. Perhaps none of the cars would be packed on time or without damaged material, spills on the carpet, missing contents, complications unpacking on the other end, etc. And if this were a work situation we'd have to deal with the costs to replace the missing or damaged product, costs to clean the car, costs to expedite broken or missing stuff, and all the time it takes to do those things.

So what happened? The job got complex. We're still just packing a car but now it has to be done a very exacting way in order to achieve the goal. And if it isn't, the downstream problems and waste are tremendous. And of course there will be much frustration and other negative responses that accompany those problems because that's the way most people respond when caught in a failing process. This is a very simple example and analysis. But it makes the solution obvious. The answer to complexity is to develop a OBW to pack the car and train people to it, and also to make sure they always do it that way unless they can come up with an even better approach.

Adding rapid and constant change

To cap off our point and bring our example in line with the reality of modern day work, let's add change. What if we developed our OBW, trained everyone to it, and all was better but then the items changed, or requirements changed, personnel kept changing, etc.? What will happen? Of course we'll have a new round of errors, mistakes, damaged items, late or incomplete deliveries and all the waste, reactivity, and frustration that goes with it. So what to do? Again, there's only one answer. That's to get even faster and more effective at developing a OBW, getting everyone properly trained to it, and ensuring that everyone is doing it. And of course to always keep thinking about better ways to do it.

A full definition of standard work

So, yes we might say that standard work is simply the one best way of doing a task. But hopefully we're making clear how challenging this can be in today's increasingly complex and fast-changing work environment that's becoming the norm (if you're not seeing this reality, you're not looking). And let's ask this question. Who is going to create that OBW when things get more complex and are continually changing? In the traditional top-down organization management or supervision dictated how work was to be done. But it's absurd to think that anyone can know enough to tell people how to do work effectively in that environment.

The fact is, there is only one way to deal effectively with the situation described above. That is to provide the people doing the work with the right resources to work as a team to develop the OBW and to continually change it to match external demands and make internal improvements. That's what standard work is. It isn't the work instruction itself. It's the entire system of tools, resources, processes, and roles and responsibilities that it takes to continually produce that accurate OBW, get people trained to it, ensure they continue to do it, and to supply ideas to make improvements to the work and the standard work system itself. Wow, that's a mouthful. But that's standard work. When we said "resources", here's a partial list of employee needs;



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- Technical support to ensure that they understand the “design intent” of the work they’re doing.
- Support to turn the ideas about how to do the work most effectively into documents for effective training, ongoing learning, and auditing.
- The time to work on figuring out how to do the work the OBW and to manage problems and figure out how to continually do it better (see NLW Tenet 3 re; continuous improvement tools and techniques)
- Identified resources to ensure that people are trained initially and ongoing as changes occur
- Resources to ensure that people continue to perform work the OBW

So let’s provide our NLW definition of what standard work is within the context of today’s business environment.

Standard work is a system of tools, processes, and defined roles and responsibilities for continually developing and defining the one best way (OBW) to perform a task, training people to it, and ensuring ongoing compliance in an increasingly complex and fast-changing work environment.

Question, is it becoming clear that the manager’s role in all of this is to a) fully understand what we’re saying here and b) to work with employees at all levels to figure out how to provide those “tools, processes, and R&Rs”? As we said in the introduction, this requires that managers put themselves in a “what can I do for others” mode as that’s what it takes to bring this standard work system into reality.

Companies that get the need for this and who work with their people to develop a fully functioning standard work system will run circles around their competitors. This will become even more clear as we discuss the benefits of standard work.

Section II - WHAT STANDARD WORK ACHIEVES, THE BENEFITS

The benefits of standard work and what it achieves is probably becoming clear from the preceding example. But let’s just make sure we get it in full. To do that we’ll put the objectives and benefits into three categories. Those are work, people, and organizational benefits.

Direct work benefits of standard work

More than anything, standard work is a superior operational methodology. It’s most basic objective is to reduce waste of all kinds by ensuring that each activity within many inter-related activities is done the OBW. As was made clear above, as work gets more complex, as it changes more often and in greater scope, as it’s more directly integrated with other’s work, and to the degree that exactness impacts results, standard work becomes more and more crucial. And as is covered in Tenet 1 of the NLW, jobs everywhere are becoming more complex, more changing, more integrated, and more in need of precision. If one is not in agreement with that statement then he or she is either not positioning him/herself to see what’s happening or is rationalizing a view to fit a pre-selected reality.

Often people don’t see waste because they just assume that it’s normal work. But in reality the amount of “work” done every day by millions of people contains huge percentages of waste. Entire jobs exist only to deal with things that happen because they aren’t done the OBW to begin with. Most often because the OBW hasn’t been developed, defined, trained to, or kept current. And especially managers and supervisors spend vast chunks of time applying their knowledge, skills, and experience to react to problems that needn’t occur. Per Tenet 4 on the Value of Work, people doing wasteful work are simply doing what needs to be done to get through the day. But they could be working on improvements or on developing and upgrading the standard work system so to eliminate wasteful work instead of reacting to unnecessary problems. The list of types of waste is long. It includes product and material damage, technology and equipment problems, the need for too much inventory that often goes bad or just sucks up capital, customer problems that have to be dealt with, taking too long to do something, causing others



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to wait, incredible amounts of time spent dealing with problems and of course the greatest waste, that of ideas and improvements that never happen because of time and creative effort diverted to reactivity. Surely there are many other forms of waste that standard work can reduce or eliminate but the point is clear. In today's business environment, the potential to develop the OBW to perform certain work and training people to do it represents incalculably huge productivity opportunities for companies. Hand-in-hand with reduced waste are customer benefits. As waste is reduced, costs are reduced, waiting time is reduced, and quality, predictability, and the ability to measure increase. Customers benefit as do all functions of the enterprise. Companies that are figuring all that out are winning in a big way.

So benefit / achievement # 1 of standard work is to reduce waste and improve efficiency and productivity thereby offering numerous work and customer-related benefits.

People benefits of standard work

This is two-fold. One part has to do with the fact that people working in an environment where the tools and resources for success are supplied to them have more secure jobs, earn more money, and have a better chance of improving themselves by gaining skills and abilities that are necessary to move into more responsible positions. The other is the positive work experience that people have when working in an environment where leadership's primary commitment is to provide them with the means for success and the opportunity to influence how their work is done.

A book could be written (see Toyota Culture, closest thing) on this aspect of standard work but clearly companies that are adopting inclusionary standard work-type methods and in parallel developing "investment-first" leaders are becoming the companies that are most successful and that people want to work for. And this differentiation gap between companies with an investment-first management culture versus a more self-centered management approach is surely going to widen as the fast-changing and increasingly complex knowledge and idea economy continues to take hold. People will be attracted to investment-first type organizations for a long list of reasons and success will breed success.

But here's the biggie. Standard work requires the full engagement of people in developing the OBW to do work and in getting others trained, complying, and making continual improvements. As we've said, this isn't a top-down effort. The power of this full engagement of people's hearts and minds in their work is beyond measure. As people are engaged in their work in a meaningful way, ownership, accountability, commitment, loyalty, camaraderie, creativity, and in general what we might call an entrepreneurial spirit, becomes the norm. We might say that this is simply the way people respond when properly "positioned". As is covered in Tenet 2, when the workplace is structured to promote what's best in people, when work is meaningful, people respond by tapping into their own higher nature and all the high-performance behavioral characteristics that every organization wants and needs in today's business environment, become possible. Standard work, that seemingly simple work instruction is the practical starting point for generating this sort of game-changing shared purpose.

That was a very brief summary of the "people benefits" of standard work. Hopefully this is translating to the reader. There's more to these positive people aspects than we can cover here.

Organizational benefits of standard work

Some of the organizational benefits should be obvious at this point. Less waste, more productivity, more innovation, a more energized and entrepreneurial workforce, happier customers, probably better sales, earnings, etc. Wow those are pretty big pluses. But the following may be the biggest benefit of all.

When standard work is in full swing with employees at all levels working together in various roles to develop the one best way to do work, responding together effectively to external changes of all kinds, and continually working on ways to do things better, a certain "type" of organization emerges. We might describe that increasingly responsive, adaptable, innovative, energized, and purposeful organization as



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the “organically evolving enterprise”. This isn’t a business that requires top-down direction to operate at a high level. It’s a business that moves higher value work down and throughout the organization so that work is done very efficiently and decisions are made very effectively at the moment and point of contact. As is covered in Tenet 4, higher value work is what creates wealth and prosperity.

In summary, this organically evolving enterprise that maximizes capability of all employees and ensures that capability is directed towards organizational objectives is the winning formula now and will be more so going forward. And it’s important to note that people are just waiting for business leaders to construct such organizations. And while standard work by itself won’t achieve that in full, for certain organizations it can be a very good starting point. As a Toyota manager is quoted as saying in the Toyota Fieldbook, “it’s the foundation of continuous improvement”.

Section III - WHY STANDARD WORK IS NECESSARY FOR SUCCESS

This one is also most likely becoming pretty clear based on previous discussion but again, let’s just be sure by making some direct corollaries between today’s business environment and what standard work is about.

As Tenet 1 discusses and as is foundational to the No Limits Workplace’s purpose, the business environment has changed greatly in the past 30 years and is continuing to do so rapidly. Per that there are three trends that must be fully understood in terms of how they affect any organization. They are increasing complexity, faster and greater scope of change, and increasing competition. We won’t explain these trends here as other articles do that (NLW Tenet 1). We just want to make the following connections and recommend a general plan for dealing with these trends.

As far as the general plan. The NLW recommends that any organization do a diagnosis of how these trends are influencing that particular entity. A brief analysis that begins by defining each of the trends and then obtaining input as to how that trend is affecting operations and people will reveal countless areas of challenge, concern, and problems. As increasing complexity, change, and competition are coming at organizations that have a less than strategic response in place to manage these trends chaos, waste, frustration, reactivity, and less that positive results are commonplace. That was a very brief review but again for purposes of this article we’ll move on.

The responses to those trends are as follows.

Increasing complexity is dealt with by increasing intelligence. Standard work literally makes an organization smarter. Back to packing our car. Development of the one best way to pack the car requires shared knowledge and understanding, especially down the organization. Continual development of the OBW ensures that a company becomes individually and collectively smarter as knowledge and ideas are both developed and shared. Getting smarter happens automatically in the process of developing and sustaining the OBW.

Increasing “external change” (changes around us that we must deal with) is dealt with by becoming increasingly responsive and adaptable. Standard work ensures exactly those things. When work is standardized and for example, a new customer comes along with different needs. Responding is relatively easy. The organization takes the current standard, examines the needs of the new customer, and makes changes as fit the new customer requirements. If standards don’t exist, responsiveness can’t exist because there’s nothing documented and known by all participants from which to work systematically. Instead we react much more chaotically. And as far as managing continual external change, adaptability is just the ability to take those responses and turn them into to new standards, codifying them so they’re repeatable. Again, that’s part and parcel of standard work.



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“Internal change” (ideas on how to do things better) is also an output of standard work. Standard work promotes new ideas and innovation. These can be incremental like reducing the time it takes to do something, or if it fits the need of the enterprise, a culture of greater innovation can be created. Either way it’s possible to dial into innovation when standard work is the operational norm. It creates a continuous improvement mind set that management can emphasize to whatever degree deemed necessary. And adaptability in this sense is the ability to continually change one’s self not so much to fit external demands but to be what one wants to be and to bring change to the marketplace.

And lastly the third “C”, competition. This is simple. If we employ standard work we will be responsive, adaptable, innovative, and have an enterprise full of engaged and entrepreneurial people continually doing higher value work. THAT’S the way to reduce costs, lead the industry on many fronts, and compete.

In summary, standard work as a strategy is the perfect “fit” for matching the trends in today’s marketplace. It offers a direct response to increasing complexity, change, and competition and sets up ideally for successful operations in today’s knowledge and idea economy.

Section IV - IMPLEMENTING STANDARD WORK

Like standard work itself, there’s a standard way to implement standard work but within that process there is much differentiation depending on the current state and particular objectives of the enterprise. What we’ll provide here are the normal phases of implementation and a comment on each.

Phase I - Project scope and initial content development

This varies greatly depending on the organization’s familiarity and history with standard work. Everybody’s starting point is a little different. It’s important to have some early success so therefore not to “overscope”, yet at the same time it’s important to have some impact by choosing an area that if improved will show results. These are normal decisions. In general, smaller scope is better as most find the initial effort to be more challenging than anticipated. One has to keep in mind that this is a system build. So regardless of the size of the effort all the tools, processes, and roles and responsibilities have to be defined. There’s a lot to that. The good news is that once done future efforts are a refinement and a fraction of the initial launch effort. The third or fourth effort is far easier than the first and second.

We could define all those tools, processes, and roles and responsibilities but it isn’t our objective here to provide a blueprint. We’ll just say that they all make common sense within the understanding of what is being achieved. And are best decided with much local input.

Two “awakenings” commonly occur in the initial effort. One is that as the effort to define the OBW unfolds, managers get a first hand look at the complexity and change frequency within tasks and jobs and see the amount of unclear requirements and lack of effective tools and information that employees commonly work with. Of course this doesn’t always happen. But it is common and of course is a very positive thing for the organization to get this full dose of reality known up the organization.

Two is that in many cases work processes are found to be highly unstable. And often a fairly large number of improvements need to be made just to get the work reasonably consistent and repeatable so that it can be documented. It may take two or three “rounds” of evaluation, documentation, and trial just to establish a standard. We call this “fighting our way to stability”. Like many things in life these initial efforts can be challenging because there are so many learnings going on simultaneously. It takes persistence fueled by keeping an eye on the great benefits to keep moving forward.



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It goes without saying that those who do the work must be involved in this process. Ideally they are the primary drivers and decision-makers along with technical support to ensure that “design intent” is maintained and support to help get the OBW documented in a format that can be used for effective training, auditing, or reference depending upon the organization’s needs. Leadership’s role is to ensure that the system build is taking place, that knowledge and resources are available, and importantly to keep setting the context by linking the day-to-day efforts to what is being achieved and the benefits of it.

There is much to this phase. The key is to get it “right enough” and move forward.

Phase II - Initial implementation

Be prepared for some failure. It’s rare that after going through the initial OBW development that once it hits the floor so to speak that employees won’t find multiple weaknesses in it. The group developing the work documents and reference items will face many decisions for which there are no absolute guidelines. Such as... How specific to make the instructions? How to tie work instructions into training materials or auditing materials? Do we initially include the time it takes to do the task? Do we initially put metrics in place that indicate success or lack of it? How perfect do we have to get the instructions before we train people to them? To what extent do we insist that experienced employees adjust their methods to fit the standard? And others.

To the degree that an organization is operating with autonomy many of these things will be more challenging. But then the gains for highly autonomous organizations will also be more significant. It’s key to stay determined and keep the end goals in mind as people will likely focus in on details and faults. But employees who are most engaged will tend to sell their peers on the advantages. Perfection isn’t the aim, non-stop improvement is. And again, leadership is important to continue to paint that very positive picture of success and benefit for all participants.

Phase III - Developing a deviation management system

Now we begin to get at the heart of continuous improvement. No matter how much effort is poured into identifying the OBW, it won’t be perfect. And even if it’s very good and all participants are doing the work consistent with the standard, problems will occur. So there must be a sub-process for dealing with problems and “deviations to the standard”. Otherwise the integrity of the OBW will drift. A deviation management system (or whatever an organization chooses to call it) is a defined process for anyone to identify problems and/or potential improvements.

This sub-process is what really get the “continuous improvement wheel” turning. As the OBW is developed and people do it, efficiencies are gained. As problems and opportunities are identified and then solutions reached, the solutions go into the new OBW and the enterprise is better than it was before. This is the never-ending Stabilize - Standardize - Improve cycle in action. Again we are only providing an overview, there’s a lot to this. Companies that have these systems and processes in place are not only far more stable and efficient but they literally seek problems as they know that they can solve them and that in doing so they’ll be stronger. That’s the difference between a continuous improvement culture and a lack of one.

These problem solving and improvement processes have standard steps that can be crafted to fit the needs of the particular enterprise or work area.

Phase IV - Dealing with urgent change

This is an area that has become incredibly challenging. For many companies and many jobs within them change is an every day thing. From a long list, let’s just pick one area of change, customer requirements. Many jobs receive short term notice on changes in customer requirements such as defect guidelines, packaging instructions, timing and shipping schedules, quantities of product, variation in types or styles of



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products or services, and other factors that can all have impacts on the standardized work. So how to respond to these sometimes immediate changes by getting the necessary information to people, ensuring they know what to do, yet without creating an administrative nightmare of constantly updating work instructions?

This very much gets to the art of standard work. There is no absolute prescription to these challenges. For an organization that deals with constant change work standards may have to be more generalized, and/or broken out by differing customer types, and/or perhaps something like a “task alert process” has to be defined to deal with immediate changes. Every organization will face different challenges in the area of “change management” and especially as it relates to fast change. Our experience tells us that if employees are engaged in these challenges they will always come up with workable tools, processes, and roles and responsibilities for managing these things. And to the degree that employees own these things they will make sure they succeed.

Phase V - Expanding standard work

An organization needn't wait until this point to begin to expand the scope of standard work. At some logical point additional work areas need to be defined for expanding the efforts. If moving from one similar type of work to another, the expansion can be relatively easy because so much is repeatable. But if moving from say a factory floor to an office environment or a store floor into a functional department, a lot has to be reconsidered.

The basic elements (tools, resources, processes, R&Rs) are always the same especially as far as getting all stakeholders up to speed on what standard work is, what it achieves / the benefits, and engaging them in the process throughout.

Summary of implementation phases

There is no “end” to standard work. Every job has elements that can be standardized. Some more than others. As with any business tool or business decision the aim is highest impact / highest return with the least effort / least investment. That's not to say we want to short the effort. It just means we should use common sense and good business instincts in deciding what to standardize and what not to. When to shoot for extreme precision and when not to. The goal is continuous improvement driven as much as possible from the front lines of the organization where things can be done quickly and with less resource expenditure. But of course people have to be fully equipped with knowledge, etc. to do that. And with standard work they are. The more things have to go up the organization for consideration, the weaker the enterprise and the more delays and often poor decisions get made by those at a distance. Standard work is about strengthening the organization at the front lines ensuring speed and accuracy and the ability to improve and change quickly. This is what success and prosperity are about in today's business environment.

Lastly, standard work will spread quickly once the tools, process, and roles and responsibilities are worked out and people see that management is committed to providing them with what they need to succeed and contribute. These investments appeal directly to what is best in people. Everybody wants the tools and resources to both do their job well and to be able to be reasonably independent but also supported as necessary in handling problems and making improvements. When this is the work environment, positive behaviors and high performance attributes become the norm and all of the very positive benefits we mentioned above come to life.

Section V - HOW WE WORK WITH YOU ON STANDARD WORK

From a No Limits Workplace view standard work is just one practice, albeit sometimes a key one, for achieving the greater goal of aligning work with people's higher nature in order to achieve our big win-win



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of enduring enterprise prosperity and individual reward. Standard work may or may not be the ideal starting point for an organization. Our 14-point diagnosis is designed to identify that and other things.

We can advise on standard work from a distance, consulting with key leaders who can work with their organizations or we can roll up the sleeves and lead a pilot group. Either is possible depending on the organization's needs. If you'd like to discuss the potential benefits of standard work and related continuous improvement, employee engagement, and potential maximization ideas, please contact us.

In summary it's worth mentioning again that standard work done right will not only lead to great reductions of waste and increases in productivity and operations in general but can ultimately turn any organization into the highly entrepreneurial organically self-evolving business entity described above. This is completely achievable and it's what people want. And there is no better fit for operating successfully in today's complex, changing, and highly competitive knowledge and idea economy.
