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Technology wrings costs out of laundry operations

BY JOE COLE

Sustainability, efficiency, and the bottom line are on the minds of every business owner. Laundry operations, whether on-premise laundries or linen services, are no exception.

Technology advances are significantly changing business operations and the way services are delivered in every sector. In laundry rooms, they are helping equipment to run smarter and even to contribute useful data to the decision-making process. Improvements are leading to reduced labor costs, increased productivity, maximized energy efficiency, lower utility costs and enhanced linen life. Here is how these evolving machines enable these cost centers to take up a smaller part of the operating bud-

get, while ensuring that the overall operation runs smoothly.

GETTING A JUMP

Typically, when laundry operators punch in, the first thing they do is load linens, uniforms or other washables into the machines, start them up, and then enter a 35- to 45-minute "dead" period waiting for the first loads. This is no way to start the morning.

Thanks to an advanced-start function engineered into newer washer-extractors, today's laundry crew could be greeted by a machine filled with freshly washed clothes and linens. It allows workers to load up the machines at the end of their shift and to program them to turn on the next morning about an hour before the morning shift arrives.

The loads will be just finishing

and almost ready for the tumble dryer when the first shift comes onto the floor. This feature also shortens the previous day's last shift. The time saved adds up to lower labor costs. In addition, having loads already washed to start the day ensures that parts of the operation that depend on their availability can be reliably supplied by mid-morning. More timely availability could enable a smaller inventory of linens and uniforms to handle daily demand for on-premise laundries.

USE THE G-FORCE

Tumble dryers should be asked to deal with as little water as possible. Low-G-force washer-extractors can leave significant amounts of water in the laundry, which means the dryer has to work harder and longer. When opera-

tors run fabrics such as all-cotton terry cloth through a low-G-force washer, there can be as much as 90% water retention.

Water-heavy goods present potential ergonomic problems for workers who have to lift laundry into the dryer. It also requires extra drying time, which means more energy to heat the air. It also reduces throughput. High-G-force extraction removes more water from linens, leading to decreased drying times. It can reduce the amount of moisture left in linens by up to 47%, decreasing gas or electricity usage by as much as 35%.

CAN'T BEAT THE CLOCK

You can't improve what you don't measure. Using the advanced controls now available is like having somebody in the

laundry room with a notepad, recording information on every cycle run, monitoring machine performance and tracking maintenance history. This can be especially valuable for facilities that run more than one shift.

For example, a chemical company had a customer who complained about the quality of finished laundry. The control system that monitors the equipment pinpointed the problem. Reports showed that operators on the 2-6 p.m. shift were advancing the machines, skipping the bleach step and skipping a rinse step.

The chemical company was able to show that the problem was not with chemicals but with how the workers were using the machines.

The reports provided by these control systems help administrators better understand and manage workloads and increase throughput. The information also helps determine whether they need to add more machines.

Washer-extractors and tumble dryers equipped with advanced controls have a real-time clock telling the operator how long the machine has been sitting idle. Laundry operations paying overtime can check to see whether the extra hours are really necessary.

IN TOTAL CONTROL

Advanced washer equipment

controls enable the operator to match each load with one of 30 different water levels for optimal water and chemical use without compromising cleanliness. This feature can help save thousands of gallons of water each year, which also reduces heating energy costs.

Some new tumble dryers make use of moisture-sensing technology to prevent linens from being scratchy and to ensure longer life for linens and uniforms. Operators set the desired moisture level, usually 4-5%.

Over-drying is one of the biggest wasters of utilities and labor in the laundry room. Impatient

operators sometimes check to see whether clothes are dry by stopping the machine and sticking a hand in every now and then. Not only does this waste the operator's time, it also wastes energy. In addition, improved technology that prevents over-drying can reduce fiber loss by 31%.

NOT DOWN THE DRAIN

One problem with technology is that sometimes management doesn't want to invest in it. But that ignores real dollars-and-cents benefits. There is a big difference between lowest cost and lowest price. Whether a laundry service

or an on-premise laundry, operations that resist upgrading or that choose a less expensive machine can spend \$100 per month for the next 12 to 15 years on additional energy, water, and labor.

Break down the budget of a typical laundry operation. About half of every dollar spent in the laundry goes to labor. Another 10-12% goes to equipment, 10-12% to linen replacement, 8-12% to chemicals, and 10% to utilities. Equipment maintenance completes the cost schedule at 3%.

Spending money wisely on equipment can affect the other pieces of the cost pie, reducing them while making better use of the laundry workforce by increasing productivity and throughput. **ALN**



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