

5S in the Office Today By [Audrey L. Thomas](#)

Picture this scenario- an organized workspace, less stress, less chaos, a semblance of order. It would be nice to be surrounded by this thriving and productive environment. The goal of organizing a productive office like this one is attainable *and* sustainable.

More than sixty years ago Toyota created the 5S system, a method of organizing and maintaining neat and clutter-free manufacturing facilities that encouraged productivity. Today, manufacturing plants and offices world-wide have implemented the philosophies and practices of the TPS (Toyota Production System).

Lean Office principles of 5S may seem mysterious at first, but are quite sensible when focusing on each one individually. After 5S-ing the office and committing to keeping it in place, you will be able to concentrate on the tasks at hand more easily, and productivity will increase.

Let's take a look at the 5s' and see why they are a necessity in today's busy office environment.

S #1 --Sort

Scenario: As you look around your office, notice the items that have been tucked under your desk, piled on top of a filing cabinet or inherited from a previous employee when you began your job--three years ago. Even though you've never needed these items, you *still* have them. It's time to implement the first S - **Sort**.

Begin by considering: "What do I need to do my job every day?" Think of your office as expensive real estate. Only items that add value to your daily routines and tasks deserve to sit on your desk and take up space. When in doubt, move it out! (Or, in the environmentally-conscious spirit of recycling, give it to someone who needs it!)

Application: Conducting a sort/purge of filing drawers and hard drives will free up much-needed space. Reviewing your company's retention policy before starting this process helps you to make quicker decisions and gives you permission to either hang on to an item or release it. To help speed up the Sort process, have a large trash can and shredding bin available.

S# 2--Straighten/Set-In-Order

Scenario: You've just been handed a new project and your boss suggests a similar proposal which you worked on a year ago for another client. You open up your hard drive files and within sixty seconds, you're reviewing the previous file. It feels great to be able to locate an older document without having to spend hours looking for it. **Straighten** up your area by creating specific "homes" for files, objects and equipment. You'll use things more often and easily put them away when they are designated to a specific location.

Application: We've all seen pictures of a workbench pegboard with outline drawings for each tool. This is a prime example of Straightening and Setting in Order. You can do the same with the office supplies on your desk. Using electrical tape (available in several colors) create an outline on your desk for your stapler, 3-hole punch, phone, laptop, and other desk accessories. Instantly, you'll be able to see if something is

missing or out of order.

Using labels will help in the Straightening process too. You can apply them to individual shelves, cabinets, and drawers in your office. They will act as visual reminders of what goes where and help keep you from stashing items where they don't belong!

S #3--Shine/Sweep

Toyota discovered that maintaining the equipment and deep cleaning the facilities decreased the number of breakdowns and the cost of repairs. A clean environment encourages organization and also is an attitude-booster.

Scenario: You need to retrieve something from the dreaded storage room. The last time you were there, it took an hour to uncover what you were looking for in the dusty, cluttered mess. Thanks to 5S, when you flip on the light switch, you discover that someone has already cleaned and organized to help this space undergo a major transformation. Ahhh, life's simple pleasures.

Application: Once a week (I like to do it on Fridays), wipe off flat surfaces such as desktops, filing cabinets and book shelves with a damp paper towel, cleaning cloth or disinfectant wipes. Talk to your IT department about their preferences for cleaning your keyboard and monitor. Use a can of air to deal with the dust bunnies hiding amongst the cords behind your computer and under your desk. Your equipment will run better, and you'll breathe easier in a clean, dust-free office.

S #4--Standardize

Bringing standardization into the office allows for systems to be put in place so everyone follows procedures the same way. This might mean creating a form used for inbound customer service calls, creating a color-coded filing system or using a checklist before sending product to the customer. **Standardizing** processes and procedures lowers the error rate (referred to as Waste of Defects) and ensures that 5S techniques will be applied.

Scenario: Several individuals in your department handle inquiry calls for new business. Your job is to follow up on the initial calls once leads have been qualified. However, the format of the information that you receive varies by who handled the call.

Application: Develop a standardized form (electronically or paper) for all initial inquiries to ensure that complete and thorough information will appear in the same format every time. Standardizing any process will cut down on errors (Waste of Defects) and increase productivity.

S #5--Sustain

We do not live in a paperless society yet, and the paper trail often leads to your desk. Paper, projects and "stuff" are constantly streaming into our offices so we must be proactive in returning items to their designated areas (straightening) and developing processes for handling incoming information and projects (standardization). After developing a daily routine of Sort, Straighten, Sweep and

Standardize, the final 5S step of Sustain will occur more naturally.

Application: Just keep it up! Fight the urge to "put things away tomorrow." Make a checklist as a reminder to sustain all of your new good habits. Check the list at the end of every day, or at least at the end of every week.

S # 6--Safety

Many companies have added a sixth "S" - Safety. While this topic is common in manufacturing settings, it isn't considered a very relevant topic in the office. But safety issues always exist and are worth our attention. Obviously, any accident - whether on the manufacturing floor or in the office - costs the company money in lost labor and health benefits, and costs the employees in pain and lost salary.

Injuries related to tripping over loose cords, tangled cables or piles of "stuff" being stored on the floor is easily fixed. Also, if your desk surface is so full of papers, stacks and "stuff", you may be using your lap as a work surface, putting yourself at risk for strained neck and shoulder muscles. Addressing the well-being of employees will enhance the other S's and improve quality of work. Always put Safety first. The dividends are too high to ignore.

Application: Wrapping up this "S" is easy. Use bag ties or wire ties to keep cords from becoming tangled. Staple "snaky" cords to the baseboards, and file those piles away each day. Approaching your office with 5S in mind will eventually become second nature. Soon you'll find yourself sorting and straightening things at home and spotting areas that could be improved with a little standardization.

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