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No Uncertainty

The Health and Finances of Better Cleaning

By Stephen P. Ashkin

Imagine two scenarios that take place commonly across America: The first is in a private-sector boardroom of a corporation looking for ways to improve its bottom-line. The second in the public-sector board meeting of a school district seeking to improve fiscal efficiencies as well as student results on standardized tests.

In the first case, the corporate leaders are discussing strategies to increase sales, reduce customer turnover, improve worker productivity and quality, invest wisely and reduce overall expenses. At the school board similar discussions take place focusing on how to reduce expenses, implement new curriculums, and whether or not to invest in new technologies. In both cases, investments are evaluated based on the rate of return, with quick payback investments given priority.

But rarely is a representative of the cleaning team at the table. And when a cleaning manager is there, typically he or she is simply asked to clean the building less expensively, by reducing labor or other operational costs. Unfortunately, too often cleaning is simply thought of as an expense – one that is thought to make little if any real contribution to the success of the organization.

Scientific studies are beginning to document what we in the cleaning industry have believed for years. Cleaning is not merely an expense used to keep floors looking shiny and to minimize the number of complaints relating to the lack of toilet paper in the restroom. Rather, cleaning plays an incredibly important role in supporting the work of the organization's most important asset – its people.

Ground-breaking research conducted in Europe and the United States has been studying the effects of the indoor environment on worker productivity and student performance with astonishing results.

In landmark research conducted in the 90s, scientists led by Michael Berry, PhD, pinpointed improvements to the indoor environment made simply through cleaning in a non-problematic building. Dr. Berry's study showed for the first time that contaminants which are potentially harmful to people's health and performance are impacted by the cleaning process.

Dr. Berry conducted his research at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The collaborative effort involved members of the cleaning industry and utilized deep cleaning methods, new equipment and cleaning supplies. The deep cleaning process yielded the following environmental results:

- Airborne Dust Declined 52%
- Total VOCs Declined 49%
- Total Bacteria Declined 40%
- Total Fungi Declined by 61%



The researchers suggested, and reasonably so, that by reducing contaminants better health outcomes could be expected, and these benefits could be achieved through following sound cleaning practices using the right equipment and chemicals, especially as it applies to carpet maintenance.

Additional research has continued in an effort to measure if and how cleaning can not only reduce the contaminants as demonstrated by Dr. Berry, but could directly impact health and attendance. Such a study conducted by Dr. Leonard Krilov was published in the Journal of Infection Control. His research team looked at a group of children in a day care setting run by the Association for Children with Downs Syndrome in Bellmore, NY, focusing their research on health indicators and resulting attendance impacts as a result of implementing a deep cleaning strategy. Their deep cleaning process demonstrated the following results:

- Total Illnesses Declined 24%
- Number of Doctor Visits Declined 34%
- Number of Courses of Antibiotics Declined 24%
- Days Absent from School Declined 46%

Recently, Dr. Berry led another team of researchers into the Charles Young Elementary School in Washington, DC, where they undertook a major renovation including the methods of cleaning in an old and decaying school.

This study was designed to determine if student performance on standard tests could be improved based on an improved indoor environment without changing teachers, curriculum, technologies or other typical strategies that school boards used to address such improvement issues. The resulting improvements were staggering:

- Passing Math Scores on Standardized Tests Increased 51%
- Passing Reading Scores on Standardized Tests Increased 27%
- Attendance Increased 4.5%

It is, however, only fair to point out that cleaning was not the only change in the building as major renovation work took place and the improved indoor environment did affect teacher morale and retention, thus affecting their ability to teach.

With these types of results, it is time that cleaning professionals make their voices heard at the board table.

Show me the money!

Like Jerry McGuire, you may be asked to "Show me the money." Answer by showing them the money they can save by cleaning that makes their buildings more conducive to good health, better attendance rates and achievement scores. Spell out clearly these benefits in dollars and cents.

Researcher and consultant Judith Heerwagen, PhD, has been assessing the affects of the indoor environment on worker productivity. Evaluating numerous, documented studies, Dr. Heerwagen found that productivity increases of between 0.5% to 7.0% (translating into approx. 3 to 34 minutes saved per day) are not unusual when improving the indoor environment.

On the conservative end, those three short minutes might be saved by reducing the frequency of blowing a nose, rubbing an eye, or dealing with a headache due to allergens, particles or VOCs in the air.

Cleaning plays a key role in the process, since it removes the contaminants that can affect people's health. Cleaning to keep the floors shiny is important and everybody does need and expect toilet paper in the restroom, but keeping workers healthy, free of allergy and flu-like symptoms is essential for good performance.

Clearly, there is money on the table. Consider what a conservative 0.5% productivity increase really means. On the one hand, while the 0.5% productivity gain represents nearly 3 minutes per 8-hour work day, that same conservative 0.5% productivity gain can represent big savings throughout an entire organization.

Based on figures from the Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA) the estimated cost of salaries and benefits per square foot for a Class A office building is nearly \$300. Thus, an increase in productivity of just 0.5% translates into \$1.50 per square foot.

Perhaps our thorough cleaning not only saved a few minutes each day as stated above, but also reduced the bacteria, viruses and other causes of illness, ultimately reducing absenteeism, which often is figured when determining state funding. In this scenario we might be able to justify using the more aggressive 7.0% productivity improvement, representing a savings of 34 minutes per day.

In this scenario, the improved productivity gains would amount to \$21 per square foot. While cleaning cannot claim total responsibility for the productivity gains that have been reported, it is without a doubt a solid contributing factor.

What strategy can those sitting around the board table offer that can contribute in such a major way?

In Syracuse (New York) Public School District, Barry Moore of Opus Consulting reported an attendance increase of 11.17% after implementing an improved cleaning strategy. Rather than saving a few cents by

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reducing cleaning costs, the additional attendance resulting from better cleaning resulted in more attendance-based funding to the school in the amount of \$2.5 million.

The building services industry needs to take its seat in the boardroom to make its value understood. When electrical upgrades and retrofits are made because they can reduce energy consumption by 25 cents per square foot, it's time to let the decision makers know they can improve performance through better cleaning with a much lower upfront investment.

When school boards are looking for more innovative ways to meet standardized test requirements, tell them you have a solution that has proven not only to have a dramatic impact on standardized tests, but on kids' health as well. After all, kids can't learn if they're not in school, and there is a very real financial and emotional burden placed on parents and the organizations that employ them when they have to miss or be late for work when trying to make arrangements to care for a sick child.

Our seat at the table is a timely one. The cleaning industry has an enormous contribution to make to the discussion, especially when we have the facts

and figures, and proven dollar savings to back us up.