

Use SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures)

SOMETIMES you have to figure out the best way to do a task through trial and error. Other times, however, your parents, teachers, and employer may want you to do things their way. There may be a proven method of completing a task that will save you time or make the job easier. Such an established method is called a standard operating procedure. In this unit, you will learn more about SOPs and how they can help you in your job.



Objective:



Describe the purpose and benefits of standard operating procedures.

Key Terms:



acronym
checklist
job aid
lockstep

operating procedure
operational guideline
rule

standard operating
procedure (SOP)
standing operating
procedure

Standard Operating Procedures

A **standard operating procedure (SOP)** is a prescribed sequence of actions to be followed routinely to complete a work task. An SOP is a set of instructions having the force of a directive, covering those features of operations that lend themselves to a definite or standardized procedure without the loss of effectiveness.

An SOP is different from a **checklist**, which is an array or listing of items or steps needing attention but lacking sequence or order. A shopping list, for example, is a checklist. It is simply a list of things to buy at the grocery store. If, however, you arrange your shopping list according to the order in which you will encounter the items in the store, it could be an SOP.

Most SOPs are written, but some are verbal. They may be simple, such as “Duck and cover.” Other SOPs may be very long and complex. For example, a restaurant SOP on how to set a table may specify not only the layout of the utensils but also the quantity and arrangement of sugar packets on the table.

An SOP contains two or more steps. Otherwise, it is called a **rule**, which is a directive with only one step. Each step in the SOP is an action step. The steps are arranged sequentially from the first through the last. Some SOPs also involve factors of time and situation. Cooking recipes, for example, include steps that must be completed in order, as well as cooking times and temperatures.

Other examples of SOPs are a To-Do List, which is a list of items prioritized from most to least important; the process of opening a combination lock; and the process of beginning a race by saying “Get on your mark! Get set! Go!”

Standing operating procedure is the term often used in the military for an SOP. An **operating procedure** is similar to an SOP and is a prescribed sequence of actions to be followed in manipulating or operating a piece of equipment.

An **operational guideline** is similar to an SOP but allows worker discretion and flexibility. Some SOPs are **lockstep**, standard procedures followed exactly and often mindlessly, such as brushing your teeth.



FIGURE 1. A checklist is simply a list of items or steps, but an SOP includes a specific sequence.

BENEFITS OF FOLLOWING SOPs

SOPs are important for several reasons. They can help you complete job tasks effectively and efficiently. SOPs help protect equipment and machines from inappropriate use, and they keep workers safer as well. They also reduce the amount of materials used and the amount of scrap or waste that results from production jobs. SOPs spell out what each worker should be doing so that you can accomplish work tasks in the midst of other workers.

If SOPs are not followed, you may experience detriments, such as being inefficient or ineffective in completing tasks or even being injured or killed on the job.

REASONS FOR SOPs

There are many reasons for establishing SOPs. First of all, work SOPs may be written to ensure task steps are completed in the proper order. They are often written by engineers, supervisors, or operators to make procedures more efficient and effective.

SOPs also help people prepare for the unexpected. An SOP may list the steps of action to be taken in case of an emergency. Such an SOP is often written by the managers or administrators of a company. It may detail steps on how to evacuate the building in an emergency or how to operate a fire extinguisher.

Other SOPs list the best ways of doing tasks in everyday routines. They may include, for example, how to make a batch of cookies or how to practice good oral hygiene.

LEARNING SOPs

An employer usually provides training on SOPs before the worker begins the job. Sometimes an employer provides “just-in-time” training, which occurs just before the worker begins to perform the task. Operations manuals may detail SOPs. For example, schools often have manuals that cover SOPs, such as “duck and cover” or lock downs, when students may be threatened.

A **job aid** is a prompter or guide for doing a task, which jogs the memory while the task is being performed. For example, many people are trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), but few people perform it frequently. A person may carry a small card in a purse or wallet as a reminder of the sequential steps in performing CPR. Workers may use job aids to remind them of highly critical task sequences.

Some SOPs are easy to remember because they become habit. You probably don’t have to think about the steps involved in brushing your teeth, for instance, because you have done it multiple times a day for years.

An **acronym** is a word formed from the initial letter of a sequence. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, for example, is commonly known by the acronym *OSHA*. Sometimes an acronym uses parts of words to create a new word, as in the word *radar*, which comes from the phrase “radio detecting and ranging.” You may be able to form an acronym to help you remember the steps in an SOP.



DIGGING DEEPER...

UNCOVERING ADDITIONAL FACTS: SOP Secrets

In your career, you may come across standard operating procedures that are shared with the public. The details may even be posted for all to see. For example, restaurants post the procedure for the Heimlich maneuver, and hotels post fire evacuation plans in every room. In some jobs, however, SOPs contain information that is more sensitive and should not be shared with the public. These are not the same as unwritten SOPs. They may be explicitly spelled out in an employee manual, but the information is meant to be kept confidential. Visit the following Web site to view a video clip explaining how the leak of a Transportation Security Administration guide may have compromised security at airports.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tf5alPFj-LA>

UNWRITTEN SOPs

Every organization, business, and school has unwritten policies, rules, and SOPs. They may remain unwritten so the organization never has to justify or defend the SOPs. For example, wait staff at a restaurant may learn of the unwritten SOP to share their tips with the bus staff and dishwashers in order to get things done in a timely manner. Otherwise, the tables may remain dirty. This means they are not available to the next customers and the wait staff loses out on potential tips.

New employees should learn unwritten SOPs as quickly as possible by listening when co-workers talk about doing the job. Find a trusted co-worker who will explain what, when, and how to do the job. Ask questions if you do not understand something, but realize that not knowing about an unwritten SOP is not an excuse for not following it.



FIGURE 2. Restaurant wait staff may have to talk to their co-workers to learn about any unwritten SOPs, such as sharing tips with other employees.

Summary:



A standard operating procedure, commonly called an SOP, is a prescribed sequence of actions to be followed routinely to complete a work task. An SOP is different from a checklist, which is an array or listing of items or steps needing attention but lacking sequence or order. SOPs may be written or verbal, but they must contain at least two steps. Their purpose is to help you be more efficient and effective, protect equipment from improper use, reduce waste, and keep people safe. You may learn SOPs for your job from your employer or a manual, but sometimes you have to learn unwritten SOPs by watching and talking to co-workers.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What is an SOP?
2. What are three examples of SOPs?
3. What are the benefits of using SOPs?
4. What is a job aid?
5. What are some ways of learning unwritten SOPs?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Ask family members, friends, or co-workers for specific examples of unwritten SOPs in their jobs. Find out how they learned about the procedures and what consequences there may be for ignoring them. Or if you have encountered unwritten SOPs in your own work experience, share them with classmates. Why do you think some SOPs remain unwritten?

Web Links:



Creating an SOP Manual

<http://www.allbusiness.com/finance/business-insurance-risk-management/4091946-1.html>

Updating SOPs

<http://www.aspcapro.org/updating-sops.php>