

## **Strip away the high cost of cleaning what's under foot in your facilities**

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### **Feature**

Powering up productivity, training staff and preventive maintenance are the keys.

*by: James Peduto*

Hard-surface floors play a key role in presenting the “right” image for a facility because they are often the first surface someone notices when entering an establishment.

Indeed, it has been said: “If your floors shine, your facility shines,” and that applies to floor care in just about every industry sector: Health care, education, business and hospitality, to name just a few.

And this does not pertain to just building entries, even though they may be a facility’s most visible area.

Portraying the right image also applies to indoor food courts, stores and shopping facilities, airport corridors, pool and fitness areas — indeed, just about anywhere hard-surface floors are found.

However, in many sectors, the appearance level of floors in the United States is on the decline. Traveling from coast to coast on a regular basis, it is clear to me that this is a growing national trend that may actually be picking up steam in some areas of the country.

Interestingly, we see this happening at the same time that some of the most innovative and productive floor care products, chemicals, and equipment are becoming available.

Cylindrical brush technology, for example, along with other tools introduced in the past few years, has made floor care less taxing and more efficient than ever before.

So why is the appearance of floors on the decline? Very simply put: It is all about the cost of labor.

### **Intensive and expensive**

All cleaning work is labor-intensive, but floor stripping, scrubbing, polishing, and refinishing are some of the most labor-intensive — and therefore expensive — cleaning tasks.

In many situations, as much as 70 percent to 90 percent of the cost to strip, clean and refinish a floor is for labor.

To reverse this trend, it will require building service contractors (BSCs) and in-house cleaning professionals to work with their customers and building occupants.

To do so, they are going to have to take a three-pronged approach to floor care. This means they must:

- Determine just how much time, effort, and money the facility wants to invest in floor care
- Evaluate the cost- and productivity-effectiveness of the floor care products and equipment currently used compared to what else is available in the marketplace
- Develop an effective and ongoing floor maintenance program

### **Work backwards first**

The BSCs and facility directors who have been most successful at keeping their floors well-maintained on a consistent basis and in a cost-effective manner appear to do so by working backwards first.

By this I mean they set goals considering such issues as:

- The budget to be designated just for hard-surface floor care
- The appearance level the facility wants for its floors
- The floor traffic conditions
- The equipment necessary or now available for floor care
- The floor care skill and training of staff.

This is just the opposite of how most BSCs and in-house directors start their floor care program. In most cases, they play a wait-and-see game, waiting to see how the floors look after a couple of months and then scrambling to make improvements when the floor's appearance becomes unsatisfactory.

Additionally, those with successful floor care programs view their hard-surface floors as a building asset. They recognize the importance in providing the "right" image and appearance for their facility.

But they also view floor care as a safety and health issue, since well-maintained floors lessen the possibility of slips, trips and falls.

In addition, a well-maintained floor minimizes the chances for dust, soils and contaminants from being "walked in" from one area of a facility to another.

### **Mechanization and productivity**

Worker productivity, as it applies to floor care, is all about mechanization, according to most cleaning industry experts. This becomes clear when mechanization is "cost analyzed" with respect to the cost of floor care tools and equipment and the labor costs associated with floor care maintenance.

With these figures in hand, BSCs and facility managers can clearly see a reduction in the labor costs associated with floor care.

As an example, for many facilities the only floor care equipment available is a mop and bucket, which costs approximately \$40.

Using this mop and bucket, it takes one cleaning professional about four hours to clean 2,200 square feet.

If the cleaning worker is paid \$10 per hour and the floor is cleaned 260 days per year, the actual labor cost to maintain this floor is about \$10,400 annually.

Substituting the inexpensive \$40 mop and bucket for one of the more popular floor machines that cost about \$2,800 may seem like a big jump. However, the annual cost savings can be dramatic, to say the least, in the above example.

This is because the floor machine can clean the same area in less than an hour. Thus, using the floor machine, it takes that same cleaning professional one hour (for the sake of discussion) to clean 2,200 square feet.

If the same cleaning worker is paid \$10 an hour and the floor is cleaned with the floor machine 260 days per year, the labor cost drops to \$2,600, a 75 percent reduction in labor cost.

But your savings in labor cost, in reality, is much more when applied to a larger area. This popular floor machine, according to its manufacturer, can clean approximately 10,500 square feet in one hour.

That means it would take a cleaning professional with a mop and bucket approximately 20 hours to match the machine and clean 10,500 square feet. At that same \$10 an hour, for 260 days, the annual labor cost would be more than \$50,000.

One note: BSCs and facility managers who would want to take advantage of such mechanization must factor in the initial price tag of the machine as well as the costs associated with running the machine and for its upkeep.

In the end, a positive return on investment is realized in a rather short period of time.

### **Practice prevention**

Mechanization isn't the only way to increase productivity when it comes to floor care and maintenance.

One of the most effective ways to keep floors looking their best while minimizing labor costs at the same time is prevention — preventing floors from becoming soiled, marred and discolored in the first place.

This can be accomplished with an effective matting system.

Such a system requires:

- Mats to be at least 15 feet long. Such mats allow enough space for shoes to hit at least three times, removing as much as 90 percent of soil, oils, and moisture that would normally enter your building.
- Mats to have a high level of scrapability. The scrapability of the mat — its ability to remove soil — is determined by the coarseness of the mat's fibers.
- Mats to have a high level of absorbability. Absorption, to help trap these soils as well as oily substances and moisture, is determined by the thickness or denseness of the mat. The thicker the pattern, the more it will absorb contaminants and the less soil will enter your facility.

When an effective matting system is used, the need for such floor care tasks as heavy scrubbing and cleaning and dust mopping can be reduced and labor savings can be realized.

At the same time, with less dirt and debris entering your facility, there is also less of a need to do restorative floor care projects such as stripping, finishing and polishing.

## **Worker training**

Even with the best machines and the most effective prevention programs BSCs and in-house facility directors can't avoid the need for floor care cleaning and maintenance completely.

At some point, it has to be done.

Even then, there is yet another important way to enhance your staff's productivity when it comes to floor care — training.

Of the more than three million workers in the professional cleaning industry in the United States today, I would suggest that probably less than 10 percent of these people are professionally trained.

And, less than 1 percent has any accreditation or certification in cleaning tasks and procedures when it comes to floor care.

This means many cleaning workers do not have a fundamental foundation of technical knowledge when it comes to cleaning work and floor care.

Without this base of knowledge, productivity can suffer greatly when it comes to such a labor-intensive task as floor care. Workers often are simply satisfied just to get the job done and don't have the time to be concerned with how they got it done.

Even more important is the fact that they won't consider what might be best practices to accomplish quality floor care cleaning and maintenance.

Without proper training, poor techniques and work practices can lead to injuries to staff and building occupants, worker's compensation claims and property damage.

All of this can come back to haunt BSCs and in-house facility directors in the form of high employee turnover, which in turn starts the entire vicious cycle over again.

## **A plan of attack**

For floor care cleaning and maintenance to improve in the United States and for BSCs and in-house cleaning professionals to be guaranteed they'll attain the "right image" for the facilities, the three-pronged plan of attack of mechanization, prevention, and training that has been outlined in this article should be employed.

Each facet of this plan of attack carries the added benefit of enhanced worker productivity and considerably savings in terms of labor costs.

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