Keys to Making Your Agency More Productive and Efficient

An interview with an insurance agency consultant

Mary LaPorte knows that change can be tough. Yet, she also knows that change is essential for insurance agencies that need to keep up with the quickening pace of business and fast-evolving trends and consumer preferences.

As a national faculty member for the Society of CIC and president of LaPorte Insurance Agency Consulting, the former insurance agent focuses on helping agencies improve their processes and leverage technology to become more efficient, productive, and, ultimately, more profitable.

LaPorte also writes a column called "E&O Q&A," which is published in several association periodicals and recently authored a book titled *Mission: EXCELLENCE— Creating an Internal E&O Loss Control Program.* Recently she shared her insights on how ERIE Agents can get on the path toward improving productivity and operating their agencies more efficiently.

What do you find are key reasons many agencies don't operate as productively and effectively as possible?

Well, the big challenge is Agents are just too busy with the day-to-day pressures of taking care of business—sales and service, interacting with customers. In fact, they are so busy that they may not realize that making some small, simple changes would really help boost productivity. People could be working smarter rather than harder. Also, agencies may be intimidated by the rate of change in technology and not know which way to go, so they end up not doing anything. There are many hardware and software options, so it can be a bit overwhelming.

Change can be daunting. What have you found is the best first step an agency can take to get on the path to better productivity and effectiveness?

The best approach is to take a step back and analyze where you are now compared to where you want to be. In the Agency Management program I conduct, I introduce participants to the SWOT analysis—a process of identifying Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This helps you better analyze each area of management in the organization, including operations and technology. Some agencies find it helpful to use the services of an outside consultant, since he or she can bring a fresh perspective and make observations that others in the agency may overlook. Either way, by establishing goals and related action plans, agencies can move forward in an organized fashion, one step at a time.

What is the role of technology in this process? How should Agents view technology in terms of improving productivity?

Technology has dramatically changed the way we interact with our carriers and customers, and, obviously, it's still evolving. Change is difficult for a lot of people, but improving technology can give you a payback of that pain. Principal Agents need to continually assess technology changes and weigh the benefit the change may bring in their own agency. It's important to involve everyone at the agency in the process early on so they understand the benefits of the technology and how to use it.

What have you found to be the keys to sustaining an agency improvement program and keeping the momentum going?

There are so many aspects of productivity in an agency, so it stands to reason that it's a lot for one person or one manager to handle. Even in small agencies, it makes sense to assign some responsibility to other employees. This not only spreads out the work but creates a reason to discuss, review and adjust goals periodically. Staff members are typically more intimately involved in processes, so they are in a better position to address lags in productivity. Having said that, management still needs to orchestrate change and identify areas of improvement. Also, not all employees are able to "think outside the box," so agency management needs to continually challenge the staff to make productive changes.

What results have you witnessed when an agency commits to making these improvements?

Using your resources more effectively results in more profits. Eliminating redundancies and utilizing technology maximizes the revenues handled by each employee. By streamlining workflows, time becomes available to pay attention to detail and interact more with the customer. This directly results in better retention, which also contributes to profitability. It's always fun to see agencies moving in the right direction and experiencing the many benefits of changes they have implemented. Their staffs are much happier because of less stress, and that leads to improved customer experiences. By freeing up employees' time, they can focus on better interactions with the customers and being more proactive so they can spend time consulting rather than processing and paperwork. It's a win-win for the agency and the employees. •

*Do you have any agency efficiencies you'd like to share for a future story? Email **Tara Maciulewicz** at tara.maciulewicz@ erieinsurance.com.*