

Learn how to spot, track the symptoms of production problems

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One of the first things I do when I'm working with a shop is sit down with the owner to go over what I call "canaries in the coal mine." A century ago, miners brought canaries into the mine because the birds are very sensitive to toxic gases, so if the birds became sick, it alerted the miners to unsafe conditions.

In a body shop, the "canaries" I look for and ask about are signals of a situation that can be improved to boost the shop's efficiency, quality and profitability.

I was recently talking to a shop owner about internal come-backs. Some shops track external come-backs — when a customer returns with a problem with their repaired vehicle. But few shops have a good handle on internal come-backs and what they are costing the business.

Internal come-backs occur when a vehicle moves forward in the process — from the body department to the paint department, for example — when it's not really ready for that to happen. For the paint shop, this means doing something to the vehicle that the body department should have done to ensure it was ready for paint.

We see such internal come-backs happening at nine different points in the process. Yet very few shops are really aware of these "canaries in the coal mine" until we help track them.

There are three levels of such internal come-backs. With a "soft come-back," the paint department can just do what's necessary to keep the vehicle moving. On average, we find soft come-backs eat up about 15 minutes per vehicle.

With a "medium come-back," the painter has to get the body tech involved, stopping whatever that tech is doing to go to the paint department to fix something. And with a "hard come-back," still others are involved, such as a detailer or porter to move the car back to the body department. These typically eat up a half hour of time for two or more people. For a painter who is at 200 percent efficiency, a medium or hard come-back can cost him an hour off his paycheck. There are hits to cycle time as well.

The shop owner I was talking to assured me internal come-backs weren't an issue. "We had a meeting last week and asked if anybody had any problems, and no one did," she told me.

But I then talked to the painter. He told me that Jose, one of the body techs, does a great job and that it was rare that the paint department had to fix anything on Jose's jobs. The other body tech, Joe, was a different story, the painter told me. Pretty much every car Joe worked on required something. The painter estimated that 1 in 5 of Joe's jobs involved a medium come-back, and 1 in 10 jobs were hard come-backs.

The shop's prepper confirmed what the painter told me. He said Jose's jobs required little more than a couple coats of primer, whereas Joe's jobs required five or six.

"Are you letting the primer on Joe's jobs dry two or three times as much as Jose's?" I asked him. "No way," he said, "because the car has got to go."

I went back to the shop owner to tell her what I'd learned. Not only is Joe's work impacting cycle time, but it's

requiring twice as much primer material. And she might want to check some of Joe's finished cars if they come back into the shop to look for shrinkage caused by the primer not being fully cured.

"Yeah, we have had a problem with that," the shop owner acknowledged, not having made the connection between those external come-backs and the internal come-backs that were signaling the real problem. In some cases, customers spotted the problem and came back. But how many customers, I said, either spot the problem and just never do business with you again, or only learn of the problem after a subsequent accident when an adjuster or other shop point it out to them?

The canaries are out there in your shop. You just need to make sure you're looking for them.