Mom had a saying to fit just about any situation: “A stitch in time saves nine.”

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”

One of those sayings that’s become a lot clearer to me over the years was the error of being penny wise and pound foolish. What it means is someone who’s willing to waste big bucks just to save a few cents… obviously not the best way to succeed in business. But for many shops, it’s become a common business strategy.

Think about this: The most valuable business resource that most shops have to offer is technical service. So it stands to reason that the more work their technicians perform, the more money they have the potential to earn. Then wouldn’t you think it’d be of utmost importance to make sure their staff was able to keep working? Even if that meant spending a couple extra dollars? For many shops, the exact opposite is true.

A few days ago I was over visiting a friend’s shop. One of his technicians was working; a second was standing around, talking to the first tech. It wasn’t that the second technician was lazy or the type who slacks off when no one is watching; I know him, and that’s not his style.

No, it turns out the second tech was waiting for the oil drain. The shop only has one, and the first tech was using it. So the second technician was standing there, waiting for the oil drain to become available. How long was he waiting? Not long; maybe 5 or 10 minutes. As soon as the oil drain was available, he was back working again.

But that got me thinking: How many other items in the shop do the technicians have to share? What other items are likely to create a delay… and cause a technician to stop working?

Well, there are trouble lights in various places around the shop. But they’re arranged for specific shop areas, not individual technicians. So it is possible for one of the technicians to find himself waiting for a trouble light; either that, or have to go and take one from somewhere else in the shop… leaving a different area without a light.

Drain pans, funnels, oil cans, air lines… all sorts of small, relatively inconsequential items, all throughout the shop… and all likely to create a bottleneck in the shop’s workflow.

That oil drain cost the shop maybe 10 minutes of productive time. Over the course of the day, there could easily be two or three of those instances for each tech in the shop. If you count them all up, those momentary slowdowns in production could add up to as much as two or three hours of a technician’s time… your most valuable resource.

What’s your shop’s hourly rate? $50? $60 an hour? More? So a loss of just two man-hours a day may be costing you over $100 a day… all because your technicians have to share a few simple tools.

Remember, we’re not talking here about big dollar pieces of equipment. We’re talking about drain pans and funnels; drop lights and air hoses. Sure, they cost money, but having them enables your shop to earn money, too.

Where else would extra equipment be helpful? How about a couple extra digital meters? No, not one of those expensive name-brand meters. You already have one of those for your more involved diagnoses.

But what about something for when one of your techs just needs to check battery voltage or solenoid resistance? You don’t need a really expensive meter with all the bells and whistles for that. A simple, low-cost meter from your local Radio Shack store or parts house should be adequate. If the diagnosis requires more umph than that, your technicians can just trade meters.

What else can your shop use to keep your techs productive? Take a look around for yourself. Watch how the work progresses over the course of a few days or more. See where slowdowns occur. Is someone standing...
around because he’s waiting for a tool or piece of equipment? Is it happening for that same tool more than once a week? Maybe you need to consider adding a second one to your shop equipment list.

I mentioned this idea to my friend, and explained why I thought he should invest in some extra shop equipment. “I’d like to, but I can’t,” he said. “Every time I buy extra shop equipment, it ends up getting lost. In a few weeks we’ll be right back to sharing, and I’ll be out a few hundred dollars.”

Fair enough; then maybe you need to make your technicians responsible for their own equipment; no, not making them buy it, but making sure they know it’s part of their job to keep that new equipment available and in good working order.

Apply an individual serial number to everything you supply to your technicians. Make up an inventory list for each technician, and have them sign it. If possible, try getting different color items, or apply a bit of paint to each one, to make each technician’s equipment easy to distinguish.

Now, if someone loses his equipment or damages it due to carelessness, it’s his responsibility to replace it. If it wears out normally, then it’s up to you to replace.

And if someone’s caught using another technician’s tools or equipment without permission, he gets fined, and the tools get returned.

However you decide to handle making your technicians responsible, make sure you specify everything up front and in writing. That way everyone understands what their responsibility is to the shop, and to their coworkers. And make sure that everyone understands the reason for these additions and changes. The object is to keep your shop more productive, without causing any additional stress or extra work for your technicians. Once they buy into that, getting them to take care of your new equipment should be easy.

Because, as Mom will be happy to explain, an important way to make sure your business remains successful is to be wise with your pounds as well as your pennies.