Implementing Best Practices is More Than Just Words

It is important to remain tuned to emerging tools and techniques.

BY GREGORY A. BRAMHAM

The term "best practice" has been used throughout our industry for several years to describe methods and processes that are better at delivering quality information transport systems (ITS). BICSI recommends global best practices in training courses and details them throughout educational manuals. While following BICSI best practices is a must for every ITS installer, the term has unfortunately become an overused cliché that many use to describe their services but that only the best know how to truly implement.

Some consider best practices to be those methods that their competition deploys and should therefore be automatically duplicated. Others attempt to deploy certain best practices without ensuring that their crews understand the reasons behind them or that they are consistent and shared among all crews. An ITS provider that truly understands what it means to implement best practices is the one who recognizes that knowledge comes from all levels of an organization and that actual use, evaluation and benchmarking in the field are critical before adopting any new tool or technique. As the Chinese Philosopher Confucius said more than 2,000 years ago, "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

Deployment Strategies

Truly defining and implementing best practices starts with three key strategies: training, consistency and benchmarking. ITS providers would be wise to follow these three strategies before implementing or mandating any practice among crews.

Training

Technicians in the ITS industry should attend BICSI training and become a BICSI certified ITS Installer 1 or Installer 2. This will help ensure that best practices are being deployed in the field by everyone that represents your company. It is also beneficial for technicians to attend manufacturer training for specific tools and products. When only one or two technicians receive training and attempt to reiterate what they learned to others in your company, critical steps and information can be inadvertently omitted.

Consistency

Many ITS providers have multiple crews spread out in different regional or national locations, which can make implementing consistency from crew to crew a challenging endeavor. However, consistency is imperative to your industry reputation, installed performance and bottom line. When an ITS provider has 10 different crews using 10 different techniques, installed performance can vary significantly from job to job, and it ultimately appears as though the installations were completed by 10 different companies. ITS providers should therefore bring their crews to one training location or employ a training provider that travels to each location, allowing all crews to learn the same best practices.

Sometimes ITS technicians who are new to a crew may want to stick with techniques they have been using for years, which can further impede implementing a new best practice and maintaining consistency. While change can be difficult for a technician that has come from a different background, it is important to ensure that all new technicians receive training and work with peers so they can learn and adopt your company's specific best practices. At the same time, it is important to remember that new technicians may have knowledge of tools or techniques that could be beneficial to your company as a whole. To take full advantage of that knowledge, ITS providers must give technicians simple means to share information on a companywide level so that all crews benefit from the knowledge set.

Benchmarking

Whether it's a new tool or a new technique, ITS providers should consider every possible innovation that may help them ensure best practices. This is best done through a comprehensive benchmarking process that uses a structured evaluation approach. Benchmarking

starts with researching new tools and techniques. Attendance at industry conferences, standards participation and conversations with other ITS professionals can help you stay on top of the latest and greatest tools and techniques that can potentially enhance best practices among your crews.

When a specific tool or technique is deemed viable, lead foremen in the field should implement the tool or technique and evaluate its impact through careful analysis and comparison with existing tools and techniques. Those conducting field evaluations also should be given the means to easily disseminate information to their peers and to management for further evaluation. Any ITS provider that is able to calculate the benefits of deploying a certain best practice, whether in terms of labor hours saved or installed performance achieved, will realize that the practice is worth investing in and implementing.

For benchmarking to be successful, training and consistency still play a critical role. Anything can be marketed and sound great, but actual hands-on training with a new tool or technique is critical. If you give a new tool to five different crews, you may get five different results—unless they are properly trained on the techniques and actual benefits involved in using that tool.

Bottom Line Impacted

From punch-down tools to bend radius control, there are many tools and techniques in our industry that ITS providers can identify, evaluate and implement to help save labor, increase accuracy and improve installed performance—all of which ultimately impact the bottom line. One example of a tool or technique that impacts the bottom line is a cabling installation system, which is designed to systemize and control the various tasks associated with the actual installation of the cable. These tools conserve time and materials, maintain minimum bend radius, reduce errors, and ensure consistent installation practices from crew to crew.

ITS installers need to remain aware and diligent at all times when pulling cable, and a cabling installation system can help them do that. For example, a constant setup technique typically has to be maintained when pulling cable, and a cabling installation system manages that setup almost as if it were another technician working with the crew. A cabling installation system also provides the means for technicians to easily maintain proper tensile pressure, control bend radius, and keep a natural separation of cables as they are being pulled into the pathway, which are all critical to achieving installed

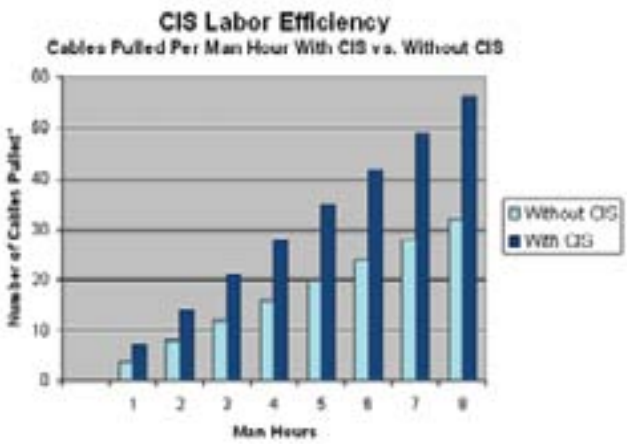

Figure 1: * Rough-in-only, does not include terminating and testing. Data is based on information collected from ITS providers using CIS. The number of cables and time required to install cables are an estimate by lead foreman based on previous installations.

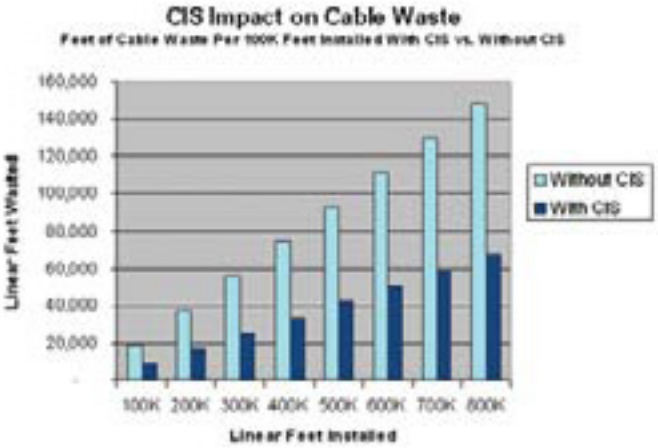

Figure 2: * Data based on minimum standard of two drops per workstation. Impact improves with increased number of drops per workstation.

performance. A cabling installation system can save labor hours by speeding up the labeling and sorting tasks of any ITS installation, allowing a technician to apply legible, color-coded labels and sort cables for termination in a fraction of the time required by conventional processes.

Through repetitive training, many ITS crews have learned to reduce cabling waste, but they need to constantly pay attention to lengths and write down footage markings. Unfortunately, this task is often omitted or flawed due to human error. Because a cabling installation system easily tracks and displays cable lengths, there is now no excuse for crews not to track and manage lengths to reduce cabling waste.

As an example of benchmarking, data collected from ITS providers using a cabling installation system shows a dramatic improvement in the number of cables pulled per hour and the linear feet of cable wasted as shown in Figures 1 and 2. The data was collected from several lead foremen using a cabling installation system with comparisons based on the number of cables pulled and amount of cable wasted during previous installations without a cabling installation system. Conservative estimates show that approximately 55 percent more cables can be pulled in an 8-hour day using a cabling installation system, which can result in significant labor savings. The use of a cabling installation system also has shown that the amount of cable wasted on a job can be reduced by more than half. For example, the 150K feet of cable typically wasted when pulling 800K feet, is reduced to approximately 70K feet. At an average network cable cost of $0.30 per foot, that's roughly a $2,400 savings.

A Broader Effect

For some ITS providers, it is not just about implementing best practices during installation and finding the right tool or technique for the job. It also has a lot to do with your overall corporate culture and how implementing best practices can have a broader impact that benefits an entire organization.

For example, a cabling installation system can affect accounting and cash flow because jobs are completed and invoiced faster. Estimators can be more aggressive and flexible on pricing because a cabling installation system can reduce labor costs. Marketing can now target the fast-growing "green" market segment because the improved process provided by a cabling installation system can help divert significant cabling waste from landfills. Accordingly, when a new innovation is adopted in the field, training does not stop with the technicians in the field but requires every department to learn about how best practices impact their jobs and mission.

While successful ITS providers know what it means to truly implement best practices and not just say they do, they also know that every job is different and must be properly assessed to determine the best practice for the environment. Because there's always a right tool or technique for a job, ITS providers must remain tuned in to all the tools and techniques available in our industry. While not every tool and technique warrants being adopted as a best practice, successful ITS providers understand that there's always going to be something that comes along that will improve how they do their job. With that attitude, and the willingness to continually research and evaluate new tools and techniques, ITS providers can continually enhance and improve their best practices. When the right tool or technique is discovered, ITS providers can promote its implementation to customers and use it as an edge against the competition. ■

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