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SUCCESS STORIES

Supply Center solutions

Lab manager Walter Lee explains how his company's new Supply Center has replaced chaos and complaints with efficiency and productivity

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—Walter Lee
Pacific Biosciences

The challenge

Before Walter Lee received an opportune email from a Thermo Fisher Scientific sales representative, product ordering was a mess. A staff scientist and senior manager at Pacific Biosciences for over a decade, Lee describes their process up until March of 2018.

“During all of that time, you'd have to go into the online purchasing system, order products individually, and then try to track things. Every time we'd order an item, we'd have to type it manually in an Excel™ spreadsheet to track the items, the cost, dates, and things like that. It was done by individuals; there wasn't any coordinated effort.”

Lee's group of about 20 scientists conducts biochemistry research in directed evolution, which involves the mutagenesis of proteins, so they rely on products for molecular biology, protein expression, and purification as well as analysis and assay screening of DNA and proteins. But the tedious, chaotic ordering system had been causing problems for the lab so often that it had become normalized. They'd often discover that they didn't have a reagent available, and they'd be set back days while they waited for it to be delivered.

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The challenge (continued)

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Prior to March, Lee and his colleagues had to constantly check with each other to see if an item had been ordered. Sometimes they’d get held up by waiting for someone to go pick something up from the receiving department, or by finding out something hadn’t been ordered yet.

Confusion. Disorganization. Waiting. Scheduling glitches. Missing products. Complaints. And worst of all: disrupted research.

The system was problematic, but it was just the way it was.

The solution

Then Lee got the email. A representative reached out and introduced him to the Thermo Fisher Scientific Supply Center program. Lee thought it sounded like a great idea. After a couple of conversations with the representative, Lee went to work convincing Pacific Biosciences to implement a Supply Center.

It was easy for Lee to convince the company to execute the Supply Center solution. Many products in the Thermo Fisher family of brands—Thermo Scientific™,

Applied Biosystems™, Invitrogen™, and Gibco™ reagents and assays—were already being purchased and used in the lab. “So it was a pretty straightforward decision—kind of a natural progression for us,” he explains.

Once the logistics were worked out within his company, Lee says that the Thermo Fisher team was very quick to get the system up and running, and implemented within a matter of a month or two. In March 2018, their customized Supply Center was installed on the second floor of the two-story building. It includes a kiosk, where they scan in products; next to that is a dry-goods shelving area; and behind that is a –20°C freezer next to a 4°C refrigerator—everything is within a radius of 10 feet. The main users are those in Lee’s biochemistry lab, who work on the same floor as the Supply Center. Scientists from other labs, located on the building’s first floor, also order and walk up to procure items from the Supply Center.

Lee notes that because of the breadth of the Thermo Fisher portfolio, he decided against other on-site stocking options—and actually moved reagents from other suppliers over to product brands they were able to order through the Supply Center, simplifying their process. Lee explains, “Having one system—one Supply Center—really helps to consolidate the things that we’re purchasing; we try to go through the Supply Center to further simplify our ordering process.”

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The solution (continued)

He offers this example: his lab uses a lot of restriction enzymes for the cloning process. When he saw that Thermo Fisher had compatible Invitrogen™ Anza™ restriction enzyme products, he was able to convert all of his cloning purchases to Anza products and order them through the Supply Center program. They no longer had to constantly make one-off purchases for restriction enzymes. Now, they just pull an Anza product out of their reserves and scan it; they don’t have to worry about also logging it into a spreadsheet to track it.

Adoption of the Supply Center by Lee’s colleagues was equally seamless. He recalls how his Thermo Fisher representative helped educate the scientists. Once researchers were given a key card and shown how simple it was to use—as Lee puts it, “You just scan your key card, scan the item, and that’s it”—the initial experience was enough to get everyone on board. He recalls, “It was actually a very simple thing to get this set up, get it implemented, and quickly adopt this program.”

The results

Lee describes two main benefits of having implemented the Supply Center: one is that it has helped streamline processes, making the workplace more efficient and productive. The second is minimized cost.

The Supply Center has allowed his company’s scientists to better schedule purchases and experiments. This has reduced a lot of confusion around organizing and coordinating

the ordering and restocking of items, especially for community-based reagents used across multiple labs.

“We’re doing things more efficiently now that my colleagues don’t have to worry about having to order and wait for products. At our company, we work on multiple projects at the same time, so it allows our scientists to multitask more efficiently and quickly. It allows them to be more productive and work on more projects simultaneously.

“It not only simplified things for people in the group and the company logistically, but it’s also helping us save money,” Lee says. After just a few months, it’s still too soon to calculate the overall cost savings, but Lee can already see the difference. For shipping costs, there’s a flat fee for every purchase. Therefore, if the company ordered a –20°C item, a –80°C item, and multiple room-temperature items, there would be a fee assigned to each order, regardless of whether the lab was ordering one or ten items at that particular temperature. Now, with the Supply Center, if two different people need to order a product at –80°C, their purchase is coordinated. Thermo Fisher ships the products on Monday, and the Supply Center receives them on Tuesday. By consolidating shipments—“Instead of, say, five packages,” he says, “we can get the same products in three”—they substantially lower their shipping costs. This reduction in shipping costs alone decreases the overall cost of purchasing from the family of Thermo Fisher products. Lee intends to calculate the long-term cost savings, but he expects it to be pretty significant over time.

“A Supply Center would be a benefit to any company,” he concludes. “If you look at it globally, it can make everyone working in a science company more efficient, allow them to really focus on the science, and make them more productive.”

The results (continued)

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And how do the scientists like the Supply Center so far? A few have said simple things to Lee like, “Hey, this is nice.” He reiterates that it has lifted a burden from them since they no longer have to worry about ordering or making sure things they need are in stock. But some of them haven’t said much of anything. Lee explains why this is a good thing.

“In fact, it’s a compliment; because usually when they say something, it’s because they don’t have what they

need. So, by them not talking about it, it means they’re able to do their jobs,” Lee says, laughing. The results of the implementation of the Supply Center have exceeded his expectations: “It has worked out very well.

“A Supply Center would be a benefit to any company,” he concludes. “If you look at it globally, it can make everyone working in a science company more efficient, allow them to really focus on the science, and make them more productive. And I would also argue—if you’re looking at it from a corporate or a budget standpoint—it should decrease overall cost or decrease expenditures, so that’s a big selling point, too. But making my colleagues’ lives easier is the main thing. Our Supply Center does that.”

Find out how a Supply Center solution offers you peace of mind at thermofisher.com/supplycenter

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