

Tamaira Pierce, Manager of Distribution Services, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.



Putting The Customer First At Penn Med School

Tamaira Pierce Drives Home Customer Service Message

PHILADELPHIA, PA -- The 5,000 faculty members and students at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine are receiving better mail service despite the fact that their mail arrives three hours later.

"When we initially changed the mail delivery times we received complaints from customers who wanted to return to the old way where they received their mail at 8:30 a.m. rather than just before noon like they do today," said Tamaira Pierce, Manager of Distribution Services. "Once I explained that they were receiving yesterday's mail at 8:30 a.m., and that they now receive today's mail, today, they embraced the change."

The U. Penn School of Medicine is located in west Philadelphia. Ms. Pierce joined the organization nearly three

years ago following a career with the U.S. Postal Service, and she brought with her a skill set gained as supervisor of delivery services in the Delaware region.

What Ms. Pierce found upon her arrival at the Penn School of Medicine was an operation focused on handling mail and material, not serving customers.

Shaking Up The Status Quo

"When I started there was no systematic order for casing mail or delivering mail, so it took our guys a long time to throw mail," Ms. Pierce said. "For example, if a new laboratory opened up they just found an open space in the case and put in the department name. There was no numeric order to the bins, so we reorganized mail sorting by re-labeling and renumbering all the bins."

In addition to reengineering the sort bins, Ms. Pierce helped improve mail sorting times by simply showing her staff where to look for information in

the address block. She also put in a system that calls for the employee to put unrecognized addresses to the side to be worked at the end.

"Part of the reason we were slow sorting mail is because of the high turnover of students and visiting researchers, so if they don't recognize the names they put these to the side and finish the mail they are familiar with. Then, they sort this 'difficult mail'," she explained.

Because of these changes the faculty and students at the school of medicine now receive their mail within six hours of its arrival in the mail center. All the mail is sorted in the main mail center, banded together, and distributed to six substations for pickup by individual employees and students.

To make this mid-day mail run even more effectively, one staffer goes out to all six substations before 9 a.m. and collects all interoffice and outgoing mail, so the interoffice mail can be included in the 11:30 a.m. delivery run.

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Ms. Pierce is responsible for more than mail services, as her management duties also include shipping and receiving and infectious waste removal.

"Before I came here the mail center, shipping and receiving, and infectious waste removal were part of everyone's job," she recalled. "Because infectious waste removal has its own unique rules, responsibilities, and federal regulations our management team decided that we needed to separate this area out and we now have two people who only work in infectious waste removal.

"We left the mail center and shipping and receiving together, and each month 10 employees switch between departments so we have automatic cross training," Ms. Pierce added. "As a manager, I don't want to be held captive by having an employee absent."

The operation receives between 600 and 900 packages per day, and by setting a policy that demands all overnight items be delivered within four hours and all items be delivered within 24 hours, the staff has all but removed the backlog of 200 packages that greeted them every morning in the old days.

A New Tracking System

As for the shipping and receiving department, Ms. Pierce and her team installed an SCLogic tracking system in April 2005, and now all package deliveries and infectious waste items are fully tracked throughout the facility.

For the staff handling infectious waste, the system records each pickup and how many items are collected at each of the 71 pickup locations. This mail is tracked down to the dock, and since the firm that picks up the infectious waste uses barcodes, Ms. Pierce's team can track the infectious waste removal right through to handoff.

The shipping and receiving department handles everything from FedEx envelopes to large medical equipment, and the SCLogic system gives them the ability to track everything throughout the facility. "Our mail center staff delivers mail and our shipping and receiving staff delivers all packages and large equipment received at the dock door," Ms. Pierce explained. "The reason there are two separate runs, mail is delivered to the substation in bulk; the shipping and receiving staff must deliver the item to the individual recipient and get a signature."

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"Most days we get all the items out within 8 hours, and our employees see the benefits of moving the mail because there is no work waiting for them when they arrive in the morning, and that is a good feeling," Ms. Pierce said.

Changing Staff Attitudes

Along with changing the internal structure, Ms. Pierce needed to change the mode of thinking among her staff. A lot of the employees she inherited had worked for the U Penn Medical Center for 10 to 15 years, so it was vital for her to get them to understand why the changes were being made and then get them to buy into the new programs.

"The guys here did what they were taught to do. But now they see how our customers are directly impacted by how fast we sort and deliver mail," she said. To get this buy-in Ms. Pierce needed to explain that their group is a customer service organization. "We needed to have a mindset that says, 'we treat every package like we are delivering it to ourselves.'" An example of customer service is a dedicated courier service that is provided for the Dean of the School of Medicine. He has important documents that must be delivered to individuals located at the four hospitals affiliated with

the School of Medicine: Presbyterian Hospital, the Hospital of U Penn, Children's Hospital, and Veterans Hospital. "The dean has staff located throughout these hospitals and throughout the University of Penn, and he wanted to get these items to his staff without going through the main mail center. We provide this service using a special envelope, clearly marked for the Dean's staff," Ms. Pierce said. "In the next few months we will create a unique barcode and number for the dean's items so the dean can track this mail."

Getting employees to see the value they bring to the organization has all but removed most discipline problems. When Ms. Pierce arrived 9 of the department's 13 employees had performance issues on files, such as not coming to work or reporting to work late. "We instructed them about the basics, about how important it is to come to work," she said.

"We showed them how not showing up to work hurts the rest of the group. We don't have any performance issues anymore. If an employee has more than three unscheduled absences in a performance year they cannot meet one of their performance goals. Last year we had only two employees with four missed days."

Ms. Pierce speaks glowingly about her team. "The greatest contribution our distribution services team has brought to Penn," she said, "is more efficient and more reliable service, and we have done it together."

TIPS FOR COMBATING EMPLOYEE ABSENTEEISM

Absenteeism can be a problem for any organization. Here are a few tips for improving employee attendance and company morale:

1. *Pay attention to every absence.* Some companies require employees to complete "claim forms" upon their return. Others informally talk over the absence. Large firms often refer absent employees to their in-house health service. The point is to convey a "no-nonsense" policy to employees. Laxity in rule structure only invites abuse.

2. *Watch the doldrums days.* In many industries, absences skyrocket on Mondays and Fridays, or just before or after vacation periods. You can bet that absence abuse is occurring here. While every absence deserves attention, "doldrums absences" deserve special attention.

3. *Hold supervisors accountable.* Research studies suggest that the quality of supervision frequently affects attendance levels.

4. *Reward good attendance.* Provide bonuses, profit-sharing, gifts, or special holidays to recognize people with perfect or near-perfect attendance records.