

Follow-up: Standardizing the work without standardizing the people

A strong shop can standardize reliable outcomes without standardizing away the judgment that makes difficult work successful.

Subject: Standardizing the work without standardizing the people

Hello everyone,

As we consider tighter book times, more standardized jobs, greater specialization, and diagnostic automation, the important distinction is not between standards and no standards. It is between standards that support good work and procedures that reduce skilled people to interchangeable operators.

A useful standard should clarify the outcome, the safety requirements, the checks that cannot be skipped, and the conditions that call for escalation. It should not pretend that every vehicle, fault, or repair develops in exactly the same way. The underlying principle is simple: form should serve use. In the architectural example behind this discussion, good builders adapted structure to actual need rather than forcing every building into exterior symmetry. The same logic applies in the shop: a process is strong when it helps us respond to the work in front of us, not when it preserves a neat sequence at the expense of the result.

That does not make variation automatically valuable. Healthy variety has to be balanced with reliability; novelty for its own sake becomes another kind of monotony. Likewise, imperfection is not an excuse for sloppiness. The useful question is whether a deviation reflects informed judgment and produces a sound result, or whether it reveals that a necessary discipline was ignored.

This matters especially for apprentices. If we teach only exact motions and fixed answers, we may produce technically consistent work while weakening curiosity, responsibility, and the ability to diagnose unfamiliar problems. Thought and labor need to remain connected: judgment should guide hands-on work, and hands-on work should keep judgment grounded. An apprentice should learn not merely what to do, but why the standard exists, what evidence can challenge it, and when a different approach is justified.

A practical test for any new checklist, automation tool, or book-time target is: what is essential to the outcome, and what can be varied without harming it? If removing a step would damage safety, quality, or meaning, keep it. If a step exists only because it is familiar, measurable, or cosmetically precise, examine it. Precision is valuable, but precision for its own sake can turn a craftsperson into a machine.

The next step is to review our proposed standards against real workshop cases. For each one, identify the non-negotiable outcome, the evidence that permits judgment, the failure that must be prevented, and the point at which experience should override the default path. That gives us accountability without confusing uniformity with excellence.

Best,

[Your Name]