

Managing Inventory

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Among the major causes of lost productivity in the lab are:

- Equipment not working properly or out of spec
- Equipment broke
- Equipment parts are not available if a break-down occurs
- Supplies not centrally located or hard to get to
- Supplies partially lacking or out
- Special equipment or supplies needed not available

These are all events that can be eliminated or at least controlled to a large extent by proper inventory procedures. Every lab should have its own inventory procedure. However, very few people like to inventory and keep records. Therefore, any system you set up should be as simple as possible. Whatever method you chose to record those data should be made as easy and efficient as possible so that anyone can use it and use it correctly. You also want to make sure to explain why an inventory system is so necessary so that everyone involved understands and buys in to the process.

Inventory systems are usually classified into three groups, experimental system (if appropriate: animal, cells, etc.), equipment, and supplies. Check to see whether your university, company, or department has preferred forms for inventories and whether there is an annual required inventory.

Equipment

Equipment includes large equipment (e.g., centrifuge, hoods, spectrophotometer, etc.); smaller equipment (analytical balance, pH meter, etc.); computers, printers, and other peripherals; and furniture (desk, chairs, supply cabinets, etc.).

As the head of a lab, you will be responsible for your equipment. In most instances this will include the proper ordering procedures (demos, purchasing bids, maintenance contracts); the receipt, inspections, and set up of new equipment; marking it with inventory stickers and making the necessary files for warranty and service purposes; knowing the location of all equipment (present or on loan); and knowing how to properly dispose of extra or old equipment. It's a good idea to make sure you know which parts on each piece of equipment are likely to need replaced on a regular basis and whether they are routinely stocked by suppliers and shipping time. Keep one of each of those back-up parts that are the most used on hand if at all feasible to reduce down time in the lab.

Experimental System

Check your university or company to find out their preferred procedures for handling the purchasing and housing or maintenance of your experimental animals, cells, microbes, etc. if appropriate.

Supplies

There are two main categories of supplies, lab supplies, office supplies, and equipment maintenance supplies. Lab supplies consist of chemicals, reagents, glassware, general lab supplies (pipette tips, plastic ware, etc.), and cleaning supplies (pads, disposable gloves, paper towels, dishwashing materials, etc.). Office supplies can include computer and printer supplies, paper pads, pens and pencils, and lab notebooks. Equipment maintenance supplies include small repair parts, cables, batteries, etc.

Again, check with your university or company to find out their preferred procedures for handling the purchasing of lab and office supplies. As head of the lab, you will be responsible for the proper ordering, receipt, storage, and disposal for all types of chemicals, drugs, radioactive materials, and other supplies. By maintaining an inventory system, it will allow you to avoid running out of the critical drug in the middle of an experiment.

When inventorying supplies, each item is described along with the common unit of purchase (mg, gross, box, etc.). In addition, you should list your supply source, price per unit, and any other pertinent comments (lot number, order every 4 wks, order 2 wks in advance, etc.). These data can also be put into a computer so that anyone can retrieve the information rapidly.

Although setting up an inventory system can take time and effort, the payoff in terms of time lost later on can more than make up for it.