

The First Week on a New SPD Assignment: How Experienced Techs Shorten the Ramp-Up

By Janet Tull, CRCST, CIS, CHL
VP of Sterile Processing Solutions, Moab Healthcare

hello@moabhealthcare.com | 833-773-8324

In September, I wrote about why certification is worth the work. Certification proves what you know.

This time, I want to talk about what happens next: the first week in a department you have never worked in before.

After more than 30 years in Sterile Processing, I can tell you that week says more about a professional than almost anything on a resume.

Every new assignment starts the same way. New trays. New equipment. A new tracking system. New people who are already stretched thin. And an OR that needs complete, sterile trays on time, starting on your first shift.

When SPD leaders talk to me about agency staff, I hear the same frustration again and again:

"They showed up, but the ramp-up was long."

I understand that frustration. I have also watched the opposite happen many times.

Picture two technicians starting at the same hospital in the same week. Both are hardworking. Both are capable. By the end of the week, one is still asking where the loaner trays are staged. The other is building trays the OR trusts, knows which surgeons have preference cards that change often, and has already flagged a recurring wet-pack issue to the lead.

The difference is not talent. It is habits.

Experience is not just how many years you have worked. It is how quickly you can become useful in a department you have never seen before.

The First-Week Habits of Experienced SPD Professionals

These are the habits I see in the professionals departments ask for by name.

1 Learn the Trays That Drive the Schedule

You will not learn every tray in a week. You do not need to.

Find out which trays carry the highest volume and which services drive the schedule. Study their count sheets first. Those trays will touch the most cases, and getting them right builds trust fastest.

2 Read the IFUs Before You Need Them

Do not wait for a complex instrument or scope to land in decontamination before you look up how to process it.

Pull the manufacturer's instructions for use for the department's most complex instruments, powered equipment, and scopes. Every set of IFUs you already know is a delay you will never cause.

3 Get Fluent in Tracking and Documentation

Every facility documents a little differently. Learn how this department records loads, biological and chemical indicator results, and quality issues.

Good work that is not documented correctly creates survey risk. Experienced professionals treat documentation as part of the job, not paperwork after it.

4 Know the Sterilizers and the Rules Around Them

Learn the sterilizers, cycle types, and load configurations in use. Find out the facility's policy on biological indicator testing and Immediate Use Steam Sterilization before your first solo shift.

The standards are the same everywhere. How each department applies them is not.

5 Ask Where the Problems Are

One of the most valuable questions a new professional can ask the SPD lead is:

"Where are the defects and delays coming from right now?"

It tells you where to focus. It also tells your lead that you came to solve problems, not just fill a shift.

6 Learn the Department's Way First

Experienced professionals bring good ideas from other facilities. The best ones learn how this department works first, then raise improvements through the lead.

A standards concern is different. If something puts a patient at risk, say so right away.

> **Certification gets you in the door. Habits like these are what make a department trust you on day three instead of week six.**

For SPD Leaders: What to Look For

If you lead a department, the first week tells you most of what you need to know about a new team member, whether they are a new hire or a traveler.

Watch for the professional who:

- Asks which trays and services drive your schedule
- Looks up IFUs before an instrument reaches them
- Asks where your current defects and delays are coming from
- Learns your documentation and follows it from the first shift
- Learns how your department works before suggesting changes

Those behaviors are what certification and years of experience look like in practice.

When you bring in outside support, ask your staffing partner directly how they prepare people for the first week. **The answer will tell you how long your ramp-up will be.**

The First-Week Checklist

- Study count sheets for the highest-volume trays
- Learn the tracking system and documentation
- Ask the lead where defects and delays start
- Raise any patient safety concern right away
- Pull IFUs for complex instruments and scopes
- Know the sterilizers, BI testing and IUSS policy
- Learn the department's way before changing it

Where to Start

If you have an assignment or a new role coming up, start before day one.

Ask for the facility's highest-volume tray list. Review IFUs for the instruments you have not worked with recently. Write down your questions for the lead.

Preparation begins with a decision, just like certification.

And if you are an experienced professional, share what you have learned. Some of the best first weeks I have seen happened because someone more experienced took ten minutes to show a new team member where the problems were.

Your first week sets the tone for every tray that follows.

Make it count.

At Moab Healthcare, Sterile Processing is all we do. Our professionals average 8 years of SPD experience, are certified and vetted before they arrive, and are matched to each department's volume and equipment.

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