



Stop Treating Your CMMS Like a Work Order Filing Cabinet

Most plants have a CMMS. Far fewer actually use it as an operational tool. Too often it functions as little more than a digital filing cabinet—work orders go in, technicians close them out with minimal information, and the system quietly accumulates records that nobody trusts or analyzes. Leadership still relies on tribal knowledge, hallway conversations, and spreadsheets when they need answers about reliability or crew performance.

This underuse is expensive. Incomplete data hides repeat failures, inflates reactive work, and makes planning unreliable. The good news is that a handful of consistent habits can transform the same system into a source of real visibility and better decisions. Here are the specific practices that move a CMMS from record-keeping to operational leverage.

Require Standardized Codes on Every Work Order

Free-text descriptions and ad-hoc categories make analysis almost impossible. When every technician describes the same problem differently (“leaking,” “seal failed,” “oil on floor”), you cannot group failures, spot patterns, or measure improvement.

Define a short, practical set of failure codes, problem codes, and cause codes that match how your equipment actually fails. Keep the list short enough that people will use it—ideally under 30 options per category, organized by asset type where needed. Make the codes required fields before a work order can be closed. Train technicians once with real examples from your plant, then reinforce the standard in daily stand-ups for the first few weeks. Within a month you should be able to run a simple Pareto on failure modes instead of guessing which assets are chronic problems.

Demand Complete Close-Out Data

A closed work order that only says “fixed” or “replaced part” is almost useless for future work. Require the fields that actually support reliability and planning:

- Actual labor hours (wrench time, not just total time on site)
- Parts used
- Failure or problem code
- A short description of what was found and what was done
- Whether the job was completed or needs follow-up

Supervisors should spot-check a sample of closed work orders each day or shift for the first 30–60 days. Incomplete records go back to the technician with a clear note about what is missing. Once the habit is established, most people complete the fields quickly because the expectation is consistent and the mobile form is straightforward. The payoff is better planning data, more accurate labor estimates, and the ability to calculate meaningful metrics such as planned-versus-unplanned ratios.

Attach Photos as a Standard Practice

Photos are one of the highest-leverage, lowest-effort additions to a work order. A picture of the failed component, the repair in progress, or the finished condition captures details that text rarely does and reduces the need for the next technician to rediscover the same issues.

Make photo attachment expected on any reactive job and on preventive tasks where condition is important. Most modern CMMS mobile apps make this a single tap. Supervisors can review a handful of recent work orders each week and simply ask for a photo when one is missing. Over time the library of images becomes a practical knowledge base that speeds troubleshooting and improves the quality of procedures.

Force the “Why” into the Record

The single biggest gap in most CMMS databases is the absence of cause. Technicians close jobs without noting why the failure occurred, so the same problems keep returning. Require a brief root-cause note—even one or two sentences—on every reactive work order. It does not have to be a formal 5-Why analysis; it simply needs to answer “what caused this?”

Examples:

- *“Bearing failed due to lack of lubrication; grease fitting was blocked.”*
- *“Sensor reading drifted after the last calibration was skipped.”*
- *“Operator adjusted set-point outside procedure limits.”*

When this field is required, patterns become visible. You can identify training gaps, procedure problems, design issues, or missing preventive tasks. Reviewing these notes in a short weekly reliability huddle turns individual work orders into systemic improvements.

Make the Habits Stick

Changing behavior requires more than a policy. Start with one or two of the practices above rather than all of them at once. Involve a couple of respected technicians in defining the codes and required fields so the rules feel practical rather than imposed. Use the data in team meetings within the first two weeks—show a simple chart of top failure codes or a list of incomplete work orders—so people see that the extra effort produces visible results. Recognize crews or individuals who consistently provide complete, useful records.

A CMMS only becomes an operational tool when the information going into it is complete, consistent, and used. Standardized codes, thorough close-outs, routine photos, and a required “why” are the habits that make that possible. Plants that adopt them stop reacting to the same failures and start preventing them with data they can trust.

Which of these habits is the biggest gap in your current process, and what would it take to close it in the next 30 days?