

Process Streamlining

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So, your processes are established and stable, but are clearly inefficient and you are not meeting your performance expectations. You have applied 'Continuous Process Improvement', but you really seem to be standing still. Is there anything that you can do to improve performance before launching into a major Process Re-engineering Programme? There is, and to find out what, read on.....

Origins

In 1991, H James Harrington published a book called Business Process Improvement . It described a process improvement methodology that employed a technique that Harrington called 'Process Streamlining' because he felt that it implied "the trimming of waste and excess....contouring to provide the smoothest flow, the least resistance to progress and performance with the minimum amount of effort". This was a series of fairly low-tech approaches to improving process performance that could produce low impact medium gain performance improvements.

In the ensuing two decades Harrington has produced a number of books on Performance Improvement, culminating in an updated and more formalised approach to streamlining published in 2011 . This later approach is reviewed in the article on Process Re-Engineering, whereas this article will focus on applying streamlining to get small but significant changes in an 'immature' organisation.

The author 'cut his process improvement teeth' with Harrington's approach back in the 1990's and is confident that benefits will arise from its use, both through personal experience and through the experience of others.

Process

Business Process Improvement essentially consists of six stages:

- **Setting the Stage:** This stage is about setting objectives and gaining Senior Management commitment to the work about to be undertaken;
- **Organising:** Having gained commitment and direction, the next stage is to identify the targets, confirm the approach, engage the stakeholders and assemble (and train) a team;
- **Flowcharting:** Having selected a process, it should then be mapped;
- **Understanding Process Characteristics:** And having been mapped, time should be taken to understand how the process works and performs;
- **Streamlining:** This is the meat of the methodology, and is covered in more detail in the next section;
- **Feeding Back:** having implemented the improvements, evidence must be
- **Organising:** Having gained commitment and direction, the next stage is to identify the targets, confirm the approach, engage the stakeholders and assemble (and train) a team.
- **Flowcharting:** Having selected a process, it should then be mapped.
- **Understanding Process Characteristics:** And having been mapped, time should be taken to understand how the process works and performs.
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- **Feeding Back:** having implemented the improvements, evidence must be gathered to demonstrate performance improvement, and the improvements fine-tuned to optimise the gains.

There is nothing unusual about this approach: as with all effective process improvement methodologies, it is based on Deming's Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) cycle, but as always, to gain the desired improvement, each stage must be completed in order.

Streamlining

There are 12 tools employed within streamlining. None are new, in fact many are decades old, but used in combination they will improve process performance with little technical effort. It will be seen that many of the tools overlap; even so, it is worth working through the tools systematically to ensure that nothing is missed (although you may wish to change the sequence of application).

Bureaucracy Elimination

Excessive Bureaucracy adds unnecessary activities, delays and blockages to a process. It often results out of psychological factors such as:

- Paranoia about being blamed for errors
- Poor training

- Distrust of anyone
- Lack of work
- Inability to delegate
- Lack of self-worth
- Thrill of checking for and finding miniscule mistakes
- Unwillingness to share information

Such Bureaucracy should be identified and eliminated, reducing process cycle times and improving user satisfaction.

Duplication Elimination

Look across the process at parts being carried out by different departments or teams. Are activities being duplicated? Interfaces between teams should be of particular interest, for example, is a product being checked before it leaves team A, and again when it is received by team B?

Value-Added Assessment

Activities and tasks should be assessed to see if they add Customer Value (used to produce the product), Business Value (used to manage the business) or no value. Those of no (or low) value should be eliminated or automated where-ever possible.

Simplification

As time goes on, the work environment and business needs change, leading to the process being modified time & time again. Eventually the process will become complex and less efficient. Process should be viewed with this sort of evolution in mind, and (re-)simplified where-ever possible. The types of things that will occur are:

- The fragmentation of tasks
- Creation of bottlenecks
- Complex memos & other documentation
- Meetings with unclear or restricted purposes
- Similar activities
- Creation of unused data

Process Cycle-Time Reduction

Long cycle times delay delivery to the customer & increase storage costs. Particularly in the case of bespoke software, the customer can change their mind many times between start and finish. There are a number of changes that can be made to speed up cycle time:

- Develop parallel as well as serial activities
- Change the activity sequence
- Reduce interruption
- Improve timing
- Reduce output movement
- Ensure the process is being carried out at the right location

Error Proofing

The best way to correct an error is to ensure that it doesn't occur in the first place. There are many ways in which this can be achieved. A 'soft' approach is to ensure that employees are correctly trained. A 'hard' approach is to design tools that can only be used for the specific task that they are employed on. The most common & simplest approach to error-proofing is the employment of Checklists.

Upgrading

How much time does old equipment waste? Old versions of software that isn't fully compatible with newer applications? Are you using long-hand forms to identify products when bar-codes would be much quicker? There are many areas where upgrading factory and office tooling would be of benefit, but are seen as cost overheads. Make sure you correctly assess and promote the benefits arising out of such investments, as their implementation will improve both process efficiency and staff morale.

Simple Language

Ensure that documents use plain language where possible, and that the level of complexity is appropriate for the audience. Use acronyms and abbreviations with care. Bear in mind that some people are visual and like diagrams, whereas others are non-visual & like written detail. Concepts will be easier understood and instructions better followed.

For example, better designed forms will reduce errors, decrease the time spent filling them in and reduce processing time after submission.

Standardisation

Standardising process documentation will increase understanding and ensure consistency of application.

Likewise with other related documentation. If common components can be standardised (such as the document control section, or the structure & sequence of presentations or papers) then they will be easier to complete and quicker to understand.

Supplier Partnerships

As stated before, process interfaces between teams & departments are prone to errors & inefficiencies; even more so when it comes to the involvement of external entities. Ensure that requirements, inputs, processes, timings and so on are correct. Make supply chain management a process and discipline within your organisation if it is of high Customer Value. Working effectively with your suppliers will reap dividends.

Automation and/or Mechanisation

There will be many areas where automation looks to be of benefit, from the employment of robots on a production line through to implementing workflow for documentation management. Wherever identified, its introduction will be best run as a separate project.

Note that for software, there are a number of ground rules best observed:

- Automate the existing process: all too often a tool is bought and the process altered to fit the tool; rarely a successful strategy.
- Don't choose 'oddball', bespoke or highly modified systems: the maintenance overheads may kill any benefits.
- Commercial companies have used their expertise and money to build an effective system. Why build your own or change something that works? If it doesn't support your process, it's the wrong tool (see above).
- Ensure that the system is easily and frequently upgradable: No point in improving process performance today if you are going to have to the same (or worse) issues in the future. This is another reason for not having a bespoke or heavily modified software tool.

Big Picture Improvement

There will come a point where streamlining has been applied and there are no other 'low-level' gains to be made. Harrington said that you should step back, look at the big picture and define the perfect process before continuing. The authors view is that this is the point at which management make the decision whether or not to move into the world of Business Process Re-engineering and Six Sigma.

How an existing Agility 2.0 Based Management System supports Process Streamlining:

Agility 2.0 is a process mapping tool, and is designed to support the employees working at the coal face through the provision of easily understood and easily accessible procedures, guidelines and templates; it is a repository of knowledge that can be easily retrieved. It is also ideally suited to support the Process Streamlining environment:

Project Definition: Agility can be used to define the Process Streamlining activities the same way as any other process. The framework, complete with procedures, tool and technique guidelines and templates can be documented and held in an accessible and consistent format.

Project Governance: Projects can be set up within Agility and the basic process tailored for their specific instance of use. Project documentation can be stored in and accessed from Agility's Internal Documentation Management System without recourse to any other software.

Project Execution: The third stage of the methodology, Flowcharting, will have already been undertaken in Agility 2.0 as part of establishing a Management System, both at the process (overview) and at the Activity and Task (process map) level. The information made available this way can then be used in stage four; characterising the process. At present Agility 2.0 does not directly support activities such as Value Assessing or cycle time recording, but it is relatively easy to record this information separately as part of the project documentation. The improved processes that arise out of the Streamlining phase are easily captured and published within Agility.

Project Implementation: Agility allows for the piloting of solutions (by restricting access to only those that are trialling the new process) and the easy deployment of new or changed processes.

Project Control: The use of process maps makes compliance auditing simple, and the statistics reports generated out of Agility allows process map usage to be monitored. User feedback on the processes is captured within Agility, and can be used to review process quality and performance.

Is the AgilityBMS for You?

Continuous Improvement will help stop your process performance deteriorating through the use of preventive and corrective action, but is unlikely to make significant impacts on the overall performance.

The use of streamlining will focus the organisations efforts on improving, rather than maintaining, process performance through a number of simple but effective exercises. Streamlining initiatives need to be run as projects, but the resource involved is kept low and the disruption to the organisation is minimised. It won't give the breakthroughs in process performance that Process Re-engineering or Six Sigma might, but its return on investment is likely to be as high and realised sooner.

And as an introduction to the disciplines required for more formal, complex and expensive methodologies, it is an ideal and relatively inexpensive starting point.

The Author is a member of BusinessPort's Process Improvement Team and deploys these principles into corporate clients on a global stage.



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