

Process mapping the key to improved performance

David Weaver, managing director of Leeds-based On-demand Process Solutions specialist, Logical Minds, gives some advice and tips for improving or optimising your processes.

MOST things involve a process, from someone being paid due to submitting a time sheet/invoice, producing a proposal/tender to the simplest of things, like making your perfect cup of tea.

The closer you can get to the ideal process the better.

1. Defining what process to look at first should be dealt with quickly. Choose something that is not only important to the business, but one that can be done quickly and which you feel could make you some quick wins.

2. Gain a true understanding of an existing process first, by process mapping it. This in itself can bring easy and quick returns.

3. What is a process map? It's best described simply as a picture using symbols to show tasks, their sequence, how they are done and their outcome.

4. Many people use whatever symbols they want on a process map – sometimes the fewer the better. However, there is a British Standard for them and several software tools to help you draw them simply. Microsoft Visio is a good start.

5. Accurately recording an existing process is essential; otherwise your intended project could have synergy with trying to build a house on sinking sand.

6. Imperfect or floored processes drive people mad and infuriate customers, so it really is worth the effort of getting the processes right for both internal and external reasons.

7. Create an open and honest approach with stakeholders involved in a process at an early stage as this will pay dividends in the long run.

8. Avoid getting get caught up in departments or business silos. The process may run through lots of areas within a business, so it's important to map the whole process.

9. Be patient; this type of methodology does take time and, most importantly, usually needs mindset and cultural changes from the business and its employees, but, in the long run, it really is worth it.

10. Once you have the process mapped out, check it several times with the many different people involved. Only move on when you are as sure as you can be that it is correctly mapped.

11. Measure all the elements of the existing process using time. This can then be used as part of a business case to show how much time can be saved compared to an improved or optimised process, if implemented.

12. Based on leading studies, understanding and ownership of an improved/optimised process by the stakeholders who carry out the process can bring up to five times the benefit to what you originally measured.

13. Process maps allow you to see which bits of a process your customers actually need and are willing to pay for. If you can answer this you can do what is called value stream mapping, by removing all the bits in a process that don't add value.

14. Remember that many processes in your business may have evolved over time, some due to your requirements, others due to your customers

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and others due to regulations and laws. Some things may have to stay for reasons beyond your control.

15. Keep asking why, why and why again. You can whittle away the bits that have sometimes just appeared by themselves over time for no logical reason.

16. The final/ideal process map can be used as a baseline for improvement/optimisation projects. Some may need minor changes and other larger, more complex transitions and implementation of solutions. Obviously go with some quick wins first, but be careful to consider the interdependencies and sequence of the things you want to do.

17. The final process map is also great for new staff as it allows them to have a picture and simple guide rather than loads of paper and text.

18. For any projects, agree timescales and key milestones with stakeholders, as this will help keep each project on programme. Lay out what you think but remember to be realistic.

19. Don't make programmes too short otherwise they just don't happen and don't make them too long as this can cause the whole project to lose momentum, once the initial push has gone.

20. Try to have regular interval meetings that stick to the point. Make people responsible as a team to deliver tasks and offer help whenever necessary. Most importantly, get people to bring up problems whenever they really can't solve them or get stuck and not just to leave them until the next meeting.

If you want to exceed customer expectations with ever reducing timescales and delivery, ideal and effective processes and, where necessary, solutions that help maintain and run them, seem to be key in today's market place. With so many things, such as business performance, profit margins, competitive advantage and client satisfaction, being totally dependent upon the processes that run your business, a lot of effort is needed, but the rewards are worth it.