

Process Innovations

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A decade ago, I asked a manager about how the quality movement had spread within his company. "Hey, get with the new program!" I was told. "We've moved on to reengineering—you should be asking me about that." A few weeks ago, we asked an executive at a major financial services firm about process management in his company. "We do Six Sigma," he said. "That's all we're interested in—process management in general doesn't interest us."

These comments are indicative of a significant issue for the fate of process management (and for the research institute we've just started at Babson on process management!). It's almost as if these individuals were saying, "I'm a Catholic—not interested in religion," or "I drive a Honda—cars are irrelevant to me." In a business context, an equivalent response might be, "I'm a fan of 360-degree feedback, but human resource management doesn't matter at all." Or perhaps, "I like cost of goods sold, but accounting leaves me cold."

Process management has for decades been a series of enthusiasms for particular process-oriented movements. A company or manager may be focused on Six Sigma or total quality or process management software or reengineering, but may never generalize that concern into a broader focus on identifying, understanding, and improving business processes.

I will argue shortly that this is the wrong way to think about process management, but let me first admit that this may not be an entirely negative phenomenon. Maybe the greater the number of process-oriented fads and fashions that pass through organizations, the greater the number of people who are exposed to some form of process thinking. Perhaps as successive waves of process enthusiasms crash upon the shore, the overall level of water (process understanding and orientation) will rise.

As another possible benefit, it may be confusing to some employees for organizations to convey that there are multiple flavors of and approaches to process management. Let's face it—people and organizations have only so much bandwidth, and preaching about the wonders of process management takes more of it than just pushing Six Sigma. Some people also wouldn't like the greater ambiguity of a broad process management orientation. Just as a relativistic approach to religion ("all religions are equally valid") may weaken religious belief overall in some individuals, it may be helpful for some people to believe that their process management religion is "The One True Church."

But there are, of course, downsides as well, and I think that overall they make fad-focused process management a huge liability for organizations. I'd argue for a more "catholic" approach—not the religion based in Rome, but a broad, all-encompassing faith in the virtues of process thinking and the varieties of process technique.

One problem with the narrow perspective on process is that the fads prevent process management from becoming an ongoing aspect of business. Some perspectives on business are now permanent, such as financial management, functional management, and people management. They are incorporated into organizational structures, performance measurement, and business school



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curricula. They have their faddish elements too, but the fads come and go without any detrimental effects on the ongoing perspective. Process management isn't at the level yet of these other perspectives, and the short-term flavors of process management make executives shy about a long-term commitment to processes.

Adopting only one approach to process management also means that an individual or organization may be unaware that there are other, better tools in the process toolkit for the need at hand. For example, neither TQM nor Six Sigma methods incorporate much in the way of process-oriented information technology. Just as regrettably, many of the companies implementing BPM technology don't do much to improve their processes or to eliminate defects before they install the software. Any company would probably be better off if it could employ all the available tools and techniques to meet its process needs and objectives.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all is that when an organization becomes disenchanted with a particular process approach, the risk is that all process management will be abandoned—at least until the next fad comes along. We all remember what happened when too many companies were disappointed with their reengineering initiatives. Not only reengineering, but processes in general disappeared from these firms for years. It is sometimes inevitable that firms and people in them will become overly enamored of a particular process technique or method, but this shouldn't keep an organization from plugging away at process management in general.

So what should organizations do about this problem? First, get rid of any zealot who says, "We do Six Sigma. That's all we're interested in—process management in general doesn't interest us." Second, spread the wealth a little across process management in general. If you get a lot of money from your company for Six Sigma training, shave a little off the top for exploring BPM technology, or even offer an advanced course in "Using Process Technologies to Reduce Process Defects." Begin to develop a network of people who know something about the different variants of process management. Create an official process management toolkit for your organization.

But maybe you already do such things. If so, I'd love to hear about it. I am looking for organizations that have successfully implemented a continuous, generalized approach to process management. I'd like to know what you have done to create this broad approach, and how you integrate the various process management flavors into the mix. If you fall into this advanced category, you deserve a higher level of fame!

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