

## Process Pragmatics

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First of all, **Process Owner** (PO) is an exceptionally unpleasant and deceptive name for a rapidly emerging and very important role. Emanating from the distant past, out of the quality and management science worlds, the title has stubbornly persisted into today's process-centric environment. Now, of course, the PO doesn't "own" either the process or the people who work within the process. "Ownership" connotes property rights, which more often than not confuses organizations trying to strengthen their processes, and process performers just are not vassals. Another problem with the name is the fact that, in many cases, Process Ownership is not a singular role at all, but a complex governance structure, populated by many individuals participating in the shaping and managing of a process. Further complicating the matter is the fact that there is really no clear standard job description or set of responsibilities for a PO. In reality, there are as many role variations as there are practitioners.

A much better title for this position would actually be **Process Steward**, which reflects a more accurate relationship between person and process. The lack of standard nomenclature has caused a proliferation of ingenious titles. Over the past decade I have also seen titles such as Process Managers, Process Czars, Process Directors, Chief Process Officers, Process Leaders, and Process Martyrs. In the end, far and away the most prevalent title is still PO. However, awkward, it is exceptionally hard to dislodge a word or phrase once it has wormed its way into our vernacular. So we are stuck with the name, Process Owner. No getting around it.

Whatever the baggage of the title, the importance and relevance of the role cannot be denied. Consider these examples:

At a large chemical company, members of the executive team wear two hats and carry two titles. In addition to their day jobs as business unit leaders or staff leaders, these senior managers also serve as process executives charged with optimizing their processes across their complex enterprises. Over the past two years, each has significantly improved process performance while driving redundant costs down.

Typically three or four layers removed from the CEO, each Process Owner at a major high-technology firm leads one of the company's nine major processes, having overseen the entire portfolio of improvement projects for that process. Project success rates have doubled while the number of initiatives has remained stable.

At a large service company composed of several restaurant chains, Process Owners, of multiple and differing reporting levels, coordinate across boundaries to share best practices and common process designs.

So what do these examples of Process Ownership have in common? In other words, what is truly core to this role? The answer is that in these and other

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organizations, Process Owners are responsible for improving the performance of their process. Their role is inextricably linked to the results of their process.

In the course of improving process performance, the five most dominant activities of a PO are:

1. **Improvement** – upgrading the design and the execution of the work within the process using a robust toolkit of techniques and technologies; ensuring that the voice of the customer is clearly articulated, heard, and manifested in the process design; and managing the portfolio of improvement projects designed to enhance performance
2. **Boundary Management** – improving the coordination between and across processes
3. **Metrics** – crafting a measurement architecture to define the process's outcomes in alignment with the organization's strategy and a thoughtful set of feedback loops to ensure the right results are being achieved the right way
4. **Collaboration** – driving the maximum standardization of a process across an enterprise and creating as much common design as the organization's strategy requires and its culture will permit
5. **Advocacy** – serving as the voice of the process in resource allocation, training development, strategy formulation, and other forums

In executing these responsibilities, there is a wide diversity of ways in which the role of a Process Owner is manifested. Some examples would be

- A single powerful Process Owner
- A pairing of a senior part-time Process Executive with a more junior full-time PO
- A Process Council of SMEs and process leaders acting as surrogates for a Process Owner
- A PO and a Process Council
- A PO for every business unit and geography, with or without coordination

Selecting the best form is a function of strategy, process maturity, and urgency.

Finally, while there is no single way to structure the role of the PO, there are a number of clear ways to ensure that the PO fails. These include

- Selecting a junior PO with no formal or informal power
- Not linking process solutions to strategy
- Making technology choices without PO involvement
- Initiating too many process improvement efforts to coordinate
- Hiding behind business unit, functional, or geographic silos
- Having too many coordination meetings and not executing real improvement



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- Turning process focus into an ideology instead of a tool for results.
- Letting a “we’re different” or NIH culture prevail

Over the next few years, I am confident we will see more and more organizations formalize the role of the Process Owner. We will see increased standardization of the job definition and acceptance of its critical contribution to an enterprise’s success. In time it will become normalized and well understood without lengthy explication.

Who knows, maybe then we will even see a better name for the role as well.

