

Process Innovations

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One of the problems with mainstream process management is that it too rarely addresses processes performed by knowledge workers. That is, we too often pick on processes that are administrative or operational in nature, and don't pick often enough on processes done by people with high degrees of education, expertise, and experience who manipulate knowledge for a living. These processes represent the sweet spot of our economy, and include things like R&D, marketing, executive management, strategic planning, professional services, and so forth.

Of course, there's a good reason why we generally ignore these activities as processes: because the knowledge workers want us to ignore them. They're used to being ignored—knowledge workers have a lot of autonomy in how they do their jobs. Their work takes place largely in their brains, so it's largely invisible to outsiders. They think, read, and talk as their primary work tasks, which becomes frustrating fast for anyone with a stopwatch and a clipboard. And if you ask knowledge workers to describe their work process, they'll often tell you there isn't one—that the work is too unstructured and variable to even discuss in process terms.

So what is a process manager to do about knowledge work processes? They're critical to the success of organizations and economies, so we need to get better at them. The so-called first-world economies now have plenty of competition in performing knowledge work, and our ability to do it well could determine the fate of the economic world. No less an authority than Peter Drucker has proclaimed on many occasions that knowledge worker productivity is the most important battleground of today's economic struggles.

I believe that if we're going to succeed in making knowledge work processes better that we have to grasp a key distinction (it will also help us with other types of processes, but it's absolutely essential for knowledge work). That is the distinction between *process* and *practice*. I first became aware of the difference after reading an important article called "Organizational Learning and Communities of Practice" by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid in a somewhat obscure academic journal.¹ After reading this truly seminal piece, I recognized my own process-oriented biases, and became a convert to combining process and practice ever since.

Every effort to change how work is done needs a dose of both *process*—the design for how work is to be done—and *practice*, an understanding of how individual workers respond to the real world of work and accomplish their assigned tasks. *Process* work is a design, modeling, and engineering activity, created by teams of analysts or consultants who don't actually do the work in question and who often have only a dim understanding of how it's being done today. A process is fundamentally an abstraction of how work should be done in the future. Process analysis may superficially address the "as is" process, but it's really only interested in getting to the "to be."

Practice work is more like anthropology—it's a well-informed description of how work is done today by those who actually do it. To really understand work practice requires detailed observation and a philosophical acceptance that there are usually good reasons for why work gets done by workers in a particular way. Just the



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acceptance of the practice idea suggests a respect for workers and their work, and an acknowledgement that they know what they're doing much of the time.

A pure focus on process means that a new design for work is unlikely to be implemented successfully; it probably won't be realistic. We've all seen examples of new process designs or models that don't have a chance in hell of working in the real world. On the other hand, a pure focus on practice isn't very helpful either—it leads to a great description of today's work activities, but it may not improve them much.

I believe that to successfully change knowledge work you've got to have a delicate interplay of process and practice. It's certainly true that some processes can be designed by others and implemented successfully—because they're relatively straightforward to begin with or because it's easy to use people or systems to structure and monitor their performance. Other jobs—particularly those involving knowledge, discretion, and outside interventions from groups like customers or business partners—are very difficult for outsiders to design and require a high proportion of practice orientation.

The worst offenders among purveyors of process management have tried to make the design of new processes a real engineering discipline. They focus heavily, for example, on the modeling language used to describe a business process, and less on what really happens in it. Some want to model a process quickly, and then automatically generate program code from the model to build the information system to support the process. Others describe in excruciating detail the most rational way to design a “best practice” process—again, with little understanding of why work is done the way it is currently.

One might occasionally get away with this sort of thing when the process is performed by low-level, poorly-educated, inarticulate workers. But try this with knowledge workers and you'll be put in your place. They know all the reasons why a new process design won't work, and they're articulate enough to describe those reasons to executives. And getting them angry is a big mistake, since they hold the organization's future in their heads.

What does it mean to combine a process and practice orientation? Here are some obvious implications:

- Involve the workers in the design of the new process. Ask them what they'd like to see changed and what's stopping them from being more effective and efficient.
- Watch them do their work. Talk to them about why they do the things they do. Don't automatically assume that you know a better way.
- Enlist analysts who have actually done the work in question before. If you're trying to improve health care processes, for example, use doctors and nurses to design the new process.
- Take your time. Devote as much attention to the “as is” as the “to be.” Knowledge work is invisible, and it takes a while to understand the flow, rationale, and variations for the work process.



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- Exercise some deference. Treat experienced workers as real experts. Get them on your side with credible assurances that your goal is to make their lives better.
- Use the Golden Rule of Process Management. Ask yourself, “Would I want to have my job analyzed and redesigned in the fashion that I’m doing it to others?”

¹ John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, “Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation,” *Organization Science*, 2 (February 1991): 40-57

