Practical Process

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Why Is It So?

So you've created your As Is models. You've spoken to the stakeholders, drawn the diagrams, collected the data, documented the problems, and discovered some opportunities. You know how things are done now, and have a good understanding of all the problems with the current processes. You know everything you need to get on with improving the processes, to create the To Be, and establish a new and better As Is.

Or do you …?

Are you sure you understand why the As Is is as it is? (Warning: do not try to say the previous sentence out loud quickly!) Processes often change for good reason. Life can sometimes be more than a little complex and users modify processes to account for the impact of the real world. Activities in a process that seem redundant, pointless, and wasteful, might there for good, if obscure, reasons. The things that you have identified as anomalies in your analysis of the current process might be what make it work. Or they might also be just plain silly with no redeeming features. Before leaping in to make business process changes, it is well worth the effort to be sure there are not going to be unintended consequences. We might usefully draw on the fields of archaeology, anthropology, and ecology.

What caused the As Is to be in its current form? It's time to put on your Indiana Jones hat and do a little *process archaeology*.

Dig around to discover the 'ancient history' of the process. How has the process changed over its lifetime? What internal or external factors caused those changes? Is there some method in the apparent madness?

People are usually the most complex element of any process. Perhaps *process anthropology* insights would be useful as well.

Nobody starts out to design and implement a poor process. Nobody deliberately makes changes to a process to make it less efficient or less effective. If there have been changes to the As Is over time, then they have been made, formally or informally, by people involved in the process. If the process looks a bit strange now, maybe there was a good reason that it got to be like that? Maybe there is something we can learn from our process analyst ancestors.

Or perhaps it is the external environment that has changed, and some *process ecology* analysis would be helpful.

What has been the nature of that external environment change? Is the change still happening? Could something similar happen again? What scenarios can be described for continuation or re-emergence of this change pattern?

As Is analysis is about improving our understanding of the process and the context in which it is executed. What are the root causes of the problems we see? What other problems does the history of the As Is show up?

A recent project uncovered people in a couple of different locations implementing a process in different ways, actually resulting in different answers to a financial calculation. The immediate,

and partly correct, conclusion was that the process documentation had too much ambiguity resulting in these defects. However, that same As Is analysis also showed that there were long standing problems with processes related to documentation, quality control, process governance, release management and training.

The apparent problem in one process may have causes in other processes. It is important to discover these interdependencies, if we are to make sustained improvement, and have sufficient knowledge to manage the process effectively.

Neither should we too quickly assume the "obvious" solution to removing the cause of a problem.

A classic situation in process analysis is the 'senior assessor' scenario. This can take many forms. A simple example is where an application for, say, insurance, above a certain value must be referred to a more senior assessor for approval. The obvious thing to check is how often such applications are rejected by the senior assessor. When you discover that they are almost always approved, the logical conclusion might be to take out this referred assessment step - and that might be the right thing to do. However, before you do that, it might be useful to also analyze the possibility that the senior assessor should actually be rejecting more applications.

There are six dimensions to the performance of a process, and we need to understand all of them if we are to usefully analyze, improve and manage any process. These perspectives are shown in Figure 1, and described as follows.

Inputs: all that is taken into a process and transformed into outputs.

Outputs: the results of process execution – the value delivered by the process.

Guides: things that guide or constrain the transformation of inputs into outputs.

Enablers: people, technology and facilities used to transform inputs into outputs.

Flow: detailed activities within the process that develop and deliver the value.

Management: governance of all aspects of the process; oversight of the other five process performance perspectives.

Figure 1: The Six Process Perspectives

In thinking about inputs, outputs, guides and enablers, we treat the process as a *black box*. We don't worry about what is going on 'inside', but focus on the context in which it is working. Then we make the process a *glass box* and look inside to see what is happening in the detailed flow. Lastly, we consider how all aspects of the process are being managed.

To properly understand a business process, and to know its strengths and weaknesses, we need to include more than a simple list of component activities in our analysis. Processes are complex things involving many variables, human and mechanical components, an operating environment (which might itself be changing), and a development history.
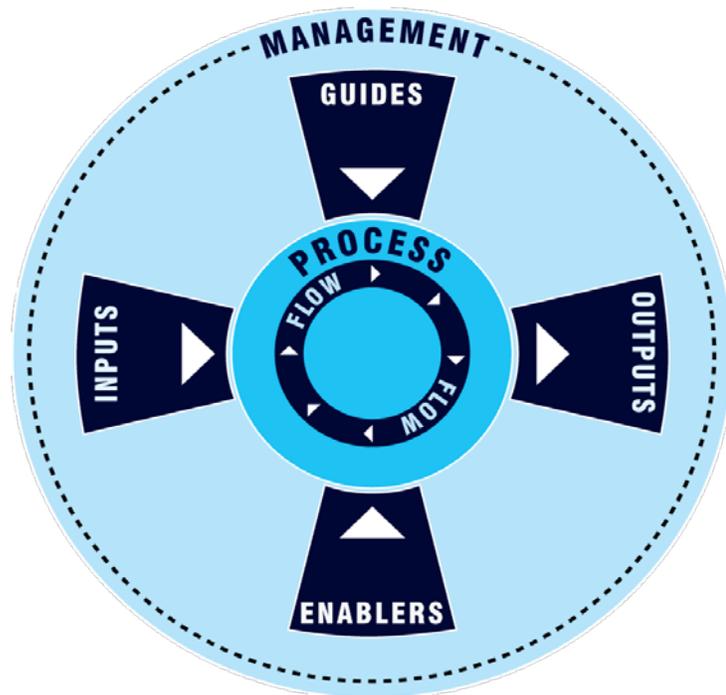
The As Is analysis will, obviously, be an important input into the redesign of the process, the To Be. We need to be sure that the To Be is actually an improvement on the As Is! It would be a bit embarrassing to discover that all we have done is come up with a flawed variation of the To Be that didn't work last time.

As Is analysis is a powerful tool to develop understanding about a process. We maximize our understanding if we analyze, not only *'how it is'*, but also *'why is it so'*.

In Summary …

- As Is analysis is about increasing our understanding of a process. This should also include its history and the internal and external factors that have shaped its development.

- We need to know as much about the context of a process, as about its internal details.

- An 'obviously silly' process step shouldn't be dismissed too quickly. It might be just plain silly, or there might be a good reason why it is so.

- Business process have six dimensions of performance: inputs, outputs, guides, enablers, flow and management. Each needs to be carefully considered.

- People change processes – sometimes for good reason.

- The temporal dimension of a business process is also important. In many respects the thing of last importance is how it is working right now, since our focus should be on improvement, i.e. on future performance.

- We need to understand as much as we can about the past, current and future context of the process, not just its internal workings.

- While we certainly need to understand how a process is designed and executed, it is just as important is to ask the question '*why is it so?*'.

Let's continue the discussion at the BPTrends Discussion group on LinkedIn or if you want to contact me personally, please do so at r.tregear@leonardo.com.au.

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