

## Keeping Track of New Developments

Lots of people are engaged in corporate process change initiatives. Some are executives that detect a need for change and push for action. Some are process change professionals, Six Sigma team leaders, Business Analysts or BPM analysts, who analyze and design new processes. And some are support people in HR or IT who design new software applications or create employee training programs to support new processes. Lots of books have been written that seek to describe the techniques and skills required of process change professionals.

One of the roles of any good process analyst at any company is to keep track of new developments – new technologies, new methods, and new approaches – that might allow for the development of better processes at his or her company. This may seem obvious, but given the rate of change today, and the diverse sources of change, it's a vital role that is too often overlooked.

Let's consider one example. Joe works for a bank. He reads an article in BusinessWeek that discusses a new bank process that relies on artificial intelligence (AI) to provide tellers with rapid help in answering certain types of questions. Joe immediately thinks that the same approach might work at his bank, and goes online to research the new approach in detail and to build a case for making a change in the teller-customer process. Or consider Mary, who works for an airline. She sees a TV news story about an overseas airline that provides a way for airline passengers to send text messages to flight attendants to get service during long flights. The more Mary thinks about it, the more she thinks her own airline might offer something similar. Like Joe, she starts digging up more information and then sends it as a suggestion to her boss.

Obviously we've kept these examples simple. In fact, every organization has many opportunities, and limited resources. In effect, process groups must be constantly working to determine which processes would benefit most from improvements. If the organization is relatively mature, from a process perspective, they probably have a process architecture group that keeps an ongoing overview of the organization's processes, has some idea of what each given process contributes to the organization's bottomline, and has a tentative list of processes that would really benefit from an improvement effort. Of course, not all organization's are this mature. Many organization's move from one process initiative to another depending on who is interested in a specific process, and how much clout the interested parties have.

In addition, there's the ongoing rush of innovation that often takes organizations by surprise. Imagine that no one thinks fabrication process A can really be improved by much. Then, out of nowhere, some company announced a new chemical test that

allows a given reaction to be done in minutes instead of hours. To someone aware of the costs involved in fabrication process A, it's immediately obvious that the process can be done in half the time using the new chemical test, and that the savings will be considerable. Suddenly, a process that no one was focused on, because no one imagined it could be significantly improved, can be revolutionized and will save the organization lots of money. Moreover, it's likely that the first organization to do this will please its customers and gain in the competition for new customers.

Obviously lots of different people might notice the possible process improvements we have considered above. In the case of the chemical change, it's likely that an engineer might notice it first, reading about it in a chemical journal.

Returning to our focus on process professionals, however, let's think about how a process group might organize to facilitate this process. First, they need to make it an objective. The process group ought to monitor existing business processes and seek opportunities to improve those processes. Some of their work ought to involve looking for any way to improve critical processes. Some of their work ought to involve looking for break through technologies that might revolutionize how the company does business.

We have suggested some of the techniques involved. Any process person ought to read a couple of business magazines, with stories of what other companies are doing. In addition, they should read one or more technical magazines in the specific area in which their company is engaged. I mention magazines, but today's professional might just as well monitor websites, or follow the blogs of industry experts. They should also plan to attend a conference at least once a year to assure that they maintain a broad overview of trends in their industry.

Focus groups can be useful, and company discussion sites, online or in person, can help gather a variety of people to brainstorm new ideas and to discuss new trends and breakthroughs.

Most process books and websites put too much emphasis on how to improve a process, once you already know it's broken or needs to be improved. Process analysis is important, but in times like the present, when innovation is taking place so rapidly, and new possibilities seem to occur every month, thinking about how to change processes is also important. In my ideal company, each month a process team would sit down and consider how they might change or improve a half dozen different processes. Individuals would report possibilities, ranging from modest improvements to radical redesigns and the team would consider them, evaluate varying impacts, and then prioritize their work for the next month or quarter.

Business processes describe how a company does business. In today's environment, if you aren't constantly improving how you do business, you are going out of business. Process professionals need to be seen by management as right on the cutting edge of helping their organization's improve how they do business.

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