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What are the Key Steps to Using a Process Framework?
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In my previous article, we discussed some of the reasons why organizations use process frameworks. However making the decision to implement a process framework is only the first step in a long journey. Organizations have to lay out the activities it needs to engage in to make sure the framework will help it achieve its typical goals of developing standardized processes or as reference for process and performance improvements?

What activities are organizations using?

To understand how organizations apply and implement process frameworks, APQC's survey asked respondents to indicate what activities they conducted when implementing a process framework. Figure 1 lists the top six activities that the majority of organizations used.

Top Six Implementation Steps

Figure 1

Map All Relevant Processes

Process maps ensure standardization and create an accurate snapshot of all the steps involved to accomplish work. Organizations use process maps to identify non-value added tasks, as a framework for process assessments and process measures, and facilitate training of new employees. However, two elements can limit process mapping: (1) not determining which processes need to be mapped (relevancy); and (2) not getting buy-in on the mapped process.

When organizations try to map everything, or simply perform incentive mapping, the organization rarely has any idea what they are going to do with the maps, how they are going to modify the maps in the future, or how they will communicate the existence of the maps to the people who conduct the processes. It also keeps the focus on the wrong aspects of process management; it does not ensure that the process maps are for things that create value. Though mapping is a useful tool, mapping indiscriminately wastes resources.

The important aspect of relevancy is simply spending time on processes that create value. If the organization has pre-established goals for its process management that align with the organization's strategic goals, this is simple. However, if the organization does not have aligned goals, determining relevancy becomes more difficult. To ensure efficiently allocated resources, organizations will start their mapping efforts either based on a specific strategic objective or focus on the processes that have a direct impact on customer value, such as the customer purchasing process.

Adapt the Framework to Meet Organizational Needs

Because process frameworks are based on what's accurate for most organizations they tend to require adjusting for:
- industry differences,
- regulatory or geographical restrictions or differences,
- changing terms that reflect the organization's terminology,
- matching activities to how the organization accomplishes work, and
- creating definitions for level four tasks—this is the level of frameworks that typically require the highest percent of changes, because this starts to move from the "what" to the "how."

As soon as the organization is ready to adjust the framework it should keep a few key guidelines in mind when developing new processes or tasks:
- limit processes and tasks to short phrase (six words or less),
- ensure all processes and tasks are unique (e.g. build plan), and
- avoid jargon and acronyms.

Identify Process Owners

The governance of process management often dictates the efficiency and, ultimately, embeds process management into its practices. Hence, to ensure effective governance, organizations assign owners to all of their key processes. Process owners are typically managers, directors, or executives with a deep familiarity with the processes they own and communicate regularly with process champions and process workers who work within the process itself. Process owners are accountable for the measurement and performance of their processes and assist with process changes as needed. The key is assigning accountability to a single individual with leadership capabilities and authority in the organization.

Assess Current State of Processes

Organizations will often assess the current state of their processes when implementing a process framework for a few reasons:

1. identify process gaps or redundant processes,
2. determine which processes provide value, and
3. engage employees in process activities.

In other words, assessing the current state helps provide a baseline for process improvement, performance management, and engaging employees to think in process terms. There are several ways organizations can baseline their current state: benchmarking, surveys, workgroups, and value stream assessments. The method applied depends on the available performance information, business process maturity, and the amount of employee engagement needed.

For example, Elevations Credit Union wanted to understand its current processes and documentation before it went forward with its process development and mapping exercises. Elevation's process maturity was at an initial level because it did not have available process measures and knew that it would need to engage employees in its process journey. Hence, Elevations took each task and activity within APQC's Banking Process Classification Framework (PCF) and turned it into a survey, asking employees to report performance of the activity or task and, where applicable, if documentation exists. Elevations stressed the importance of keeping the survey simple and engaging, so it combined a five-point scale (1= we have established process that we consistently follow and measure to 5= we don't have a process, we just get it done) with function-specific lists of processes. Elevations then used the survey results to get employees to really embrace the change. It started establishing employee buy-in through a series of workshops for each process group to document the flow of processes.

Build Cross-Functional Process Maps

When first beginning to map processes, organizations often have trouble visualizing how processes that cross multiple functions and involve disparate groups of people fit into their organizational architectures. However, cross-functional process maps help organizations understand the full value stream of their processes (inputs, outputs, and interdependencies) and indicate all relevant stakeholders, ultimately improving the organization's business process management capability. Without cross-functional processes that include common goals, optimization in one part of the process may come at the expense of another. Furthermore, cross-functional process maps help:

- improve the organization's ability to keep the focus on the customer,
- reduces business silos, and
- improve interdepartmental handoffs.

Prioritize Process Improvement Opportunities

Process improvement is a systematic approach that helps an organization optimize its underlying processes and achieve more efficient results. Process improvement includes a series of actions by a process owner to identify, analyze, and improve existing business processes within an organization to meet new goals and objectives, such as increasing performance, reducing cost, and improving cycle times.

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As noted earlier, conducting a current state assessment helps organizations understand the performance and value of its processes. Hence, process frameworks provide a common framework for measures and organizational capabilities. When used as the framework for heat maps, organizations can identify performance or capability gaps for improvement opportunities based on external or internal baselines.

Furthermore, by centralizing improvement management efforts with a process framework, the organization can prioritize improvement efforts based on potential value, identify overlaps and synergies between improvement projects, and align improvement efforts to the strategic goals of the organization.

What activities are not being used?

Though organizations use several process management tools and best practices, they are still missing out on opportunities to maximize the implementation of process frameworks (Figure 2).

Bottom Seven Implementation Steps

Note: The values in this graph do not add up to 100 percent because it was a select all that apply question.   N = 78

Figure 2

However, this is not surprising given that almost half of the survey respondents (48. 7 percent) indicated their process management maturity level was managed. The definition of a managed level of maturity is an organization with some organized processes that are standardized and measured. In managed-level organizations, the established process management discipline helps ensure that organizations retain existing practices and perform and manage projects according to documented plans. However, their processes are typically not quantitatively predictable, standardized, consistently documented, or take into account cross-functional interrelationships across the organization.

Hence, most of the respondent organizations do not have enterprise-wide performance measures that allow the organization to quantitatively assess and monitor its processes or participate in more sophisticated activities such as internal and external benchmarking as part of their current-state assessments or process improvement efforts. Because managed organizations only have some processes standardized, they do not have the standardized documentation necessary to build a knowledge map that will connect people to the "right" information for each step in its process.

The next Article will explore the common challenges organizations face when implementing a process framework. It will also explore some methods for overcoming those challenges to improve adoption.

Author

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