

The best thing?

If BPM is the best thing since sliced-bread—everybody says it is (me included)—and there are many benefits to be gained through such a management philosophy, you might reasonably ask these questions:

Why aren't all organizations striving to become process-centric? If process-based management is so good, why isn't everyone doing it?

In a sense, all organizations try to 'make things work better' and are doing process-improvement work, even if they don't call it that. Only a small, and perhaps growing, number of organizations are deliberately doing excellent process management and genuine continuous improvement.

High levels of BPM maturity are the exception; most reported analyses¹ suggest that just five per cent of organizations operate at the highest level of BPM maturity.

Why is it so?

Ford Prefect² might suggest it's an SEP. 'An S.E.P.,' he said, 'is something that we can't see, or don't see, or our brain doesn't let us see, because we think that it's Somebody Else's Problem. The brain just edits it out; it's like a blind spot.' Although Ford was a Betelgeusean visitor to earth, the idea is not entirely alien.

The absence of a systemic approach to process management and continuous improvement certainly is a blind spot in many organizations; it's an invisible management demand that won't be seen unless you know what it is, and want to see it.

Four explanations of why organizations hesitate to adopt process-based management—none of which diminish the very strong case for its adoption—are:

1. lack of knowledge
2. lack of compelling reasons
3. lack of urgency
4. lack of insight.

¹ Harmon, Paul 2016. *The State of Business Process Management 2016*. Accessed 11 May 2016. <http://www.bptrends.com/bpt/wp-content/uploads/2015-BPT-Survey-Report.pdf>

² Adams, Douglas. 1995. *Life, The Universe and Everything* (Part of the series *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). Del Rey Books, New York.

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everybody
doing it?

Lack of knowledge

The simplest reason is absent or faulty knowledge about what process-based management means. This is understandable as there is so much published material, often contradictory and confusing, about business processes and their management.

To have worth in an organization, process-based management needs a clear, widely agreed, and pragmatic definition of both its theory and the practice, along with practical and actionable plans.

Lack of compelling reasons

Knowledge alone will not be enough. Organizations don't make change easily. The gravitational pull of the status quo is strong. It is also true that organizations can change, and many successfully make significant transformations.

Organizations, and their managers and staff, need to clearly understand the compelling reasons for embarking on the process journey. Each organization will have its own set of strategic and operational drivers for change. Once that touchstone is firmly set, change is possible.

Lack of urgency

The most matter-of-fact reason why an organization, or more specifically its management, will hesitate to move to process-based management could be that the urgent displaces the important.

Meeting urgent demands of work that must be completed 'now' leaves little space for contemplating longer-term change, no matter how attractive the outcome might be. If the reasons for pursuing process-based management are compelling, then real commitments must be made and, more importantly, kept.

If an organization fully understands the power of process-based management, and has compelling reasons for seeking that transformation, then time and resources will be made available to allow its practical realization.

Lack of insight

There is an inherent constraint built into the common approach to management. For many managers, even some at quite senior levels, 'management' is a very practical exercise in managing current resources in the immediate timescale. Organizations reward managers for meeting targets of that nature and in that timescale. The trajectory is set and course corrections are not welcome.

Contrast that with the idea of continuous improvement. Rarely would an organization deny interest in continuous improvement, and yet most are not so keen on the obverse of that idea, that is, continuous problem-finding. If you want to continuously improve, you need to continuously find things that could work better. Do organizations celebrate problem-finding? Are managers promoted because they have a reputation for finding problems?

Perhaps unconsciously, organizations develop in their managers the idea that good management is about minimizing risk and making as few mistakes as possible. While a lot can be said for that, it has an additional and unintended side effect of narrowing the management horizon. That blinkered point of view ignores cross-functional management, favoring the organization chart over the process architecture and missing an important management insight.

If management is diminished to the urgent and current, if problems are treated as SEPs, if managers (and staff) are rewarded for preserving the status quo, rather than thoughtfully disrupting it, then process-based management cannot succeed and real, but unobserved, losses continue to accumulate.

Why bother?

Failure to succeed with process-based management has many costs.

The most obvious burden is the opportunity cost of not finding and fixing problems. This causes loss of customer support, internal inefficiencies, rework, and staff disengagement—a general lessening of organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

Beyond fixing problems, a bigger cost is opportunities missed, a burden that is all the heavier for being invisible. Without a systematic effort to find them, performance improvement opportunities, for both customers and the organization, will go unnoticed. Just because nobody is complaining about the performance of a process doesn't mean it can't be improved, and the improvement might be significant.

Another powerful reason relates to employee motivation and attitude. The most recent employee-engagement survey data from Gallup³ shows that a mere thirty-two per cent of US employees are 'engaged' at work; that is, they work with passion, are profoundly connected to the organization, and drive innovation. The remaining sixty-eight per cent are either 'not engaged' or 'actively disengaged'.

Such a waste! Staff who are keen to work and improve are outnumbered two to one by colleagues who do the minimum and would rather not be there. What if those un-engaged staff were positively supported to participate in continuous improvement?

Meaningful value can be placed on intangible items like missed opportunities and employee disengagement. Organizations often deal with the valuation of other intangibles such as brand recognition, image, goodwill, and trademarks.

Why bother? Because process-based management—

- enhances customer satisfaction
- improves efficiency
- fixes problems (often pre-empting them)
- searches out further opportunities for innovation
- supports a positive, engaged culture.

Isn't that an ideal agenda of an executive committee?

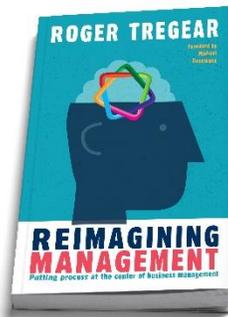
³ Gallup. 2016. 'Employee Engagement in U.S. Stagnant in 2015.' Accessed at www.gallup.com via <https://goo.gl/400VvX> on September 26, 2016.

In Practice...

There are many things you might do in response to the issues discussed in this Column. There are some challenges and they can be overcome; success is both possible and necessary.

Here are some practical steps you might consider to get started on the creation of sustainable process-based management and process improvement.

- Understand the process view.
- Find your compelling reasons.
- Amplify the urgency.
- Remove the blinkers.
- Reimagine management.



This Column is an edited extract from the book, *Reimagining Management*, to be published November 2016.]

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As a Consulting Director with Leonardo Consulting, **Roger Tregear** delivers BPM courses and consulting assignments around the world. Based in Canberra (Australia) Roger spends his working life talking, consulting, thinking and writing about analysis, improvement and management of business processes. His work with clients is on short and long term assignments, in organizational improvement and problem solving based on BPM capability development, and business process, analysis, improvement, and management. He is available to help small and large organizations understand the potential, and realize the practical benefits, of process-centric thinking and management. Contact Roger at r.tregear@leonardo.com.au.