

Capturing Knowledge with Processes

As regular readers of this Column may know, my personal interest is in managing business change via a process approach – for example, see my last Column (September 2013) for a process-based change management methodology **Goal-Oriented Organization Design (GOOD)**.

Some people wouldn't call the work involved in business change "processes" at all, since it bears little relation to the sort of workflows typically associated with the word. There is not much point drawing a business change process in BPMN, for example, since most of the important aspects will not be captured - and those aspects that are captured are so dynamic that such a diagram would become a maintenance burden rather than a source of guidance.

To capture a business change process in a useful way, it is more helpful to adopt the approach known as Virtual Team Planning (VTP). A **Virtual Team** is people that work together but don't sit together (they work for different departments or organizations) and virtual team **Plans** help such teams work according to the 5 principles of Human Interaction Management:

1. *Build dynamic teams* - in which people understand the responsibilities of each member, and are able to negotiate their own responsibilities
2. *Communicate purposefully* - via messages about a shared objective that lead directly to action
3. *Create, maintain and share knowledge* – not just about business transactions, as manifested in documents and databases (let's call this **domain knowledge**) but about how things get done (let's call this **organizational knowledge**)
4. *Manage time effectively* – by understanding the shared objectives to which your work items relate, and their impact on shared timescales
5. *Re-plan as you go along to adapt to circumstances* – by making it simpler to adapt the Plan to reflect agreed next steps than to let it go out of date

Virtual Team Plans can be displayed as work breakdown structures or GANTT charts, but unlike traditional management methods, VTP is not based on assignment of tasks. Rather, the basis is organizational **goals**. Each goal has its own Stage – a work stream in which people play Roles to provide Deliverables and/or contribute in other ways, such as by reviewing documents or commenting on progress. This simple yet powerful approach means that Virtual Team Plans can be changed easily at any time.

A key feature of Virtual Team Planning is support for work across multiple organizations, since VTP software provides each member with their own copy of the Plan, kept synchronized by standard email. Such cross-boundary work is typical of business change. Shown in **Figure 1** is an example Virtual Team Plan for transformational change in healthcare that involves over 30 different organizations.

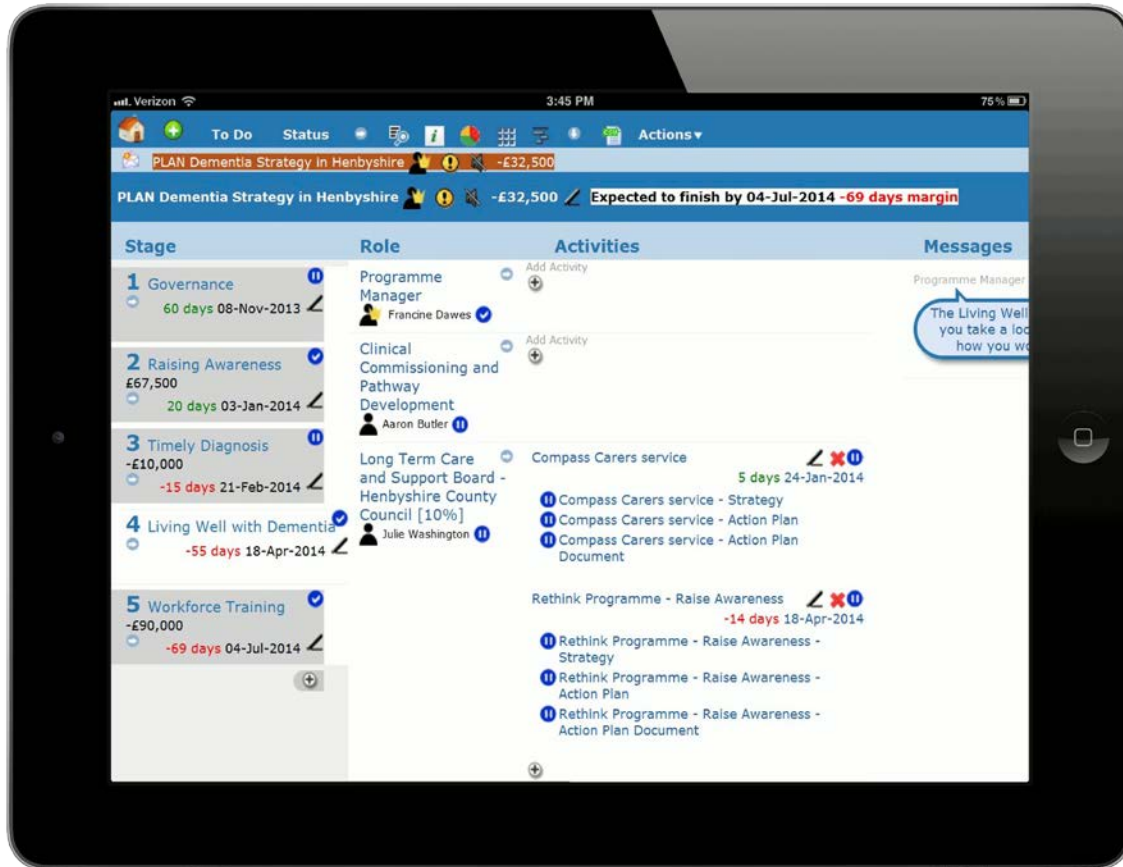


Figure 1: Virtual team Plan for transformational change in healthcare

A particularly important aspect of business change is creating, sharing, maintaining and re-using knowledge – and doing so successfully means making it an automatic part of daily work. In other words, knowledge management must become an inherent part of business processes. This is relatively straightforward for domain knowledge (transactions), but more of a challenge for organizational knowledge (how things get done). Process understanding has now advanced to the point where routine work of the BPMN kind is being captured (and automated as far as possible) in most organizations over a certain size, but high level work of the business change kind is still very poorly documented.

One reason for this is that some people regard such knowledge as a key part of their value to the organization, and feel that they may become disposable if they share it too freely. In fact, this tends to be an unproductive strategy for career advancement, since business leaders regard people who build fiefdoms in this way as a business risk, which like any other risk they will act to remove.

A deeper reason is that standard means of documenting processes do not capture how high level work is actually done in practice. For example, project plans created using office applications describe what people intended to do, rather than what they really ended up doing. By contrast, Virtual Team Plans make it simple to capture lessons learned from experience, since Plans that have been adapted on the fly to exactly match circumstances can be re-used as templates to provide best practices for similar situations (see **Figure 2**). Gartner calls this dynamic creation, re-use and improvement of best practices "design-by-doing".

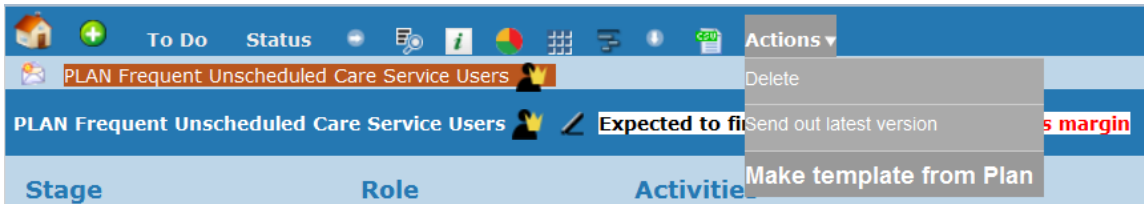


Figure 2: Making a template from a Virtual Team Plan

Reusing Plans as templates enables the preservation of critical business information. To give an example, the *impact* of a specific aspect of business change can be captured by associating financial amounts and descriptive text with a deliverable representing that aspect.

Figure 3 illustrates how a negative amount of money can be associated with a deliverable "Infrastructure Requirements". Such a negative sum may represent either a fixed cost or a risk that extra expenditure will be required. It can be qualified by assigning **likelihood** (which is used to calculate probable expenditure) and **importance** (which can be used by a manager to identify areas of key concern).

Maximum Financial Impact (£):	<input type="text" value="-120,000"/>	
Likelihood:	<input type="radio"/> 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5	Importance: <input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5
Expected Financial Impact (£):	<input type="text" value="-48,000"/>	

Figure 3: Defining the impact of a deliverable.

Similarly, a positive sum can be used to represent either revenue or anticipated benefits. If an impact has aspects that cannot be captured via a financial sum, text can be used, as shown in Figure 4.

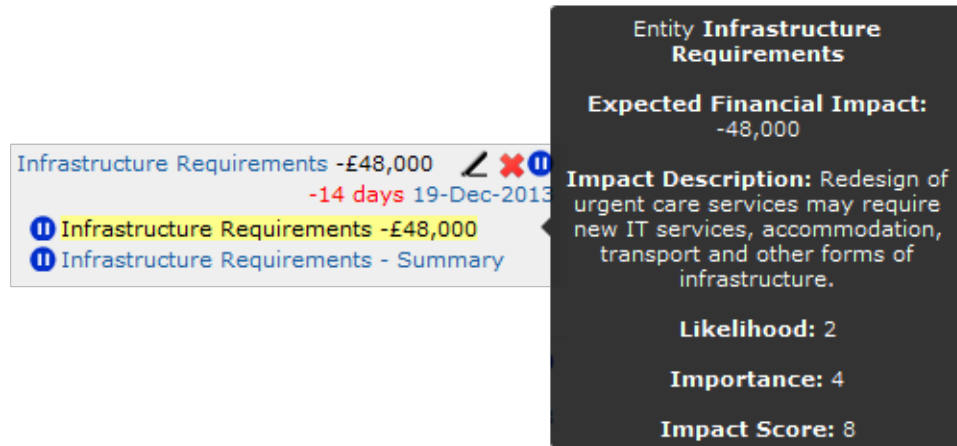


Figure 4: Viewing the impact of a deliverable.

Because VTP integrates planning with execution, the likelihood of a deliverable can be adjusted whenever required, and automatically treated as 100% once deliverables have been provided (and 0% if the manager no longer requires them or requests that they are discarded).

Associating impact data with deliverables in this way means that it can be rolled up and presented at multiple levels (Activity, Stage, Role, Plan, across multiple Plans) to provide executives with dashboards that display critical business information and allow drill-down to details for areas of concern.

Critically, the information displayed via such dashboards is a real-time source of truth, since it is based on the actual status and value of deliverables in an online, interactive collaboration system. By contrast, most executive dashboards display figures entered at the end of a reporting period, judiciously doctored by managers to present a picture with which they feel comfortable.

Conclusion

Knowledge is power, and knowledge of how things get done (organizational knowledge) may be the most powerful form of knowledge. It is now well understood how to capture organizational knowledge for routine work (for example, using techniques such as BPMN) but less well understood how to capture such knowledge for high level work such as business change.

Capturing high level organizational knowledge successfully means making its creation, sharing, maintenance and reuse an *automatic* part of daily work. This can be done via the technique of Virtual Team Planning, which enables not only broad brush understanding of the shape of high level processes, but also the preservation of high value details such as impacts, costs and benefits.

By making these details visible at multiple levels, VTP turns a network of partner organizations into a virtual real-time enterprise in which efficient and effective feedback loops cross seniority levels and management boundaries, without the distortions inherent in traditional approaches to management.



Keith Harrison-Broninski. Keith has been regarded as an IT and business thought leader since publication of his 2005 book *Human Interactions: The Heart And Soul Of Business Process Management*. Building on 20 years of research and insights from varied disciplines, his theory provides a new way to describe and support collaborative human work. Keith speaks regularly in keynotes to business, IT and academic audiences at national conferences, most recently in Poland, India, the Netherlands, the UK, Finland and Portugal.

Keith Harrison-Broninski is CTO of Role Modellers, a Gartner Cool Vendor. The company's product, **HumanEdj**, is cloud software for Virtual Team Planning that provides unique support for large-scale, complex collaboration across multiple organizations.

More information about HumanEdj is available at www.rolemodellers.com and about Keith at <http://keith.harrison-broninski.info>.