



Improving Business Worksheet #5

Let's do some Process Mapping

A process map is normally a diagram, usually a flow chart, which shows how a business process works. When it comes to improving a business it is often necessary to look at all the things we do, and ask if we can do them better, cheaper and more efficiently. This is one of the ways we can help to make a business more profitable.

By drawing a process map we are able to easily understand how things are being done right now. But our goal is to create a process that enables us to do the job better. This will require a second process map. Then we need to work out how to get from one to the other.

The best question to ask about each step in any process is 'why?'. Why are we doing this?

In one company I worked for we were implementing a new computer system and had to create many process maps to understand how things were done. These were then used to help us design the improved processes which would be carried over to the new software. During the process mapping we discovered that invoices were being printed five times. That is right, five times! When we asked the sales department the reason for this large number of copies we were told that it was because various copies needed archiving in various departments. We had to keep asking the same question – Why? And you must keep asking that question when you are developing new processes and people insist that the old ones are always the best.

In the example I mentioned we found out that only one copy was needed, which was sent to the customer. All of the other copies were no longer required because the information was stored safely in the new computer system and could be reviewed at any time.

Someone I worked with once told me, actually when we were discussing this very topic, that in a company he had been employed in, one person's working week was entirely taken up with unnecessarily photocopying invoices so that they could be archived in a number of different filing cabinets. Within any organisation there will be similar inefficiencies, though probably not as obvious.

How do we go about creating a process map?

We should begin by choosing a process that looks as though it might have a number of inefficiencies within it which could be improved. As an example, let's look at the Despatch process in a small manufacturing company. It is always best to create a process map together with representatives of the departments involved in the process, otherwise there is a tendency for a small group of people to assume they understand all the steps in the process.

Then we need to determine where the process begins. So in this example we would ask 'Where does the Despatch process begin?' What kicks a despatch off. Probably it is some sort of Picking List being printed in the Sales Department. We would then ask what happened when the Picking List reaches the Despatch Department. Every business is different, but here is a small section of a process map for our example process. This example only covers a few steps, and when you create your own example you need to work right the way through the whole process.



Now in this short section of a process map there are just three steps, but each one has the potential for improvement and efficiency gains. Of course it may be that your business is already as efficient as is appropriate in many of the steps you examine, but it is likely that somewhere in any process there is scope for making changes that make a difference.

Let's ask some questions about these steps. Firstly, why are the Sales Administrators raising Picking Lists? Are they juggling lists manually, or are they allowing the computer system to print instructions automatically? If your business has spent a large amount of money on a computer system then you want to make sure that employees aren't trying to run the business manually. There are lots of reasons why the Sales Department might want to try and manage everything in that way, not least because it provides lots of work in juggling orders, but in many situations there are efficiency savings in letting the computer system take care of despatching orders on the day the customer is expecting them.

What about the products being collected from Stores? It depends on your situation, but it is not always most efficient to have Despatch staff collecting products from the Stores. Are there any efficiencies to be gained in having the Stores staff process the Picking List and drop off the products to the Despatch Department. This is only an example, and it is simply meant to show that each step in your process needs to be carefully considered. Here are a few of the questions you need to ask.

Why are we doing this?

Why are we doing it this way?

Who is doing this?

Should someone else be doing it?

Once you have your processes mapped you will discover that they become an important means of understanding your business, and improving it. When you have your improved processes implemented you can use the maps to help train staff and induct new employees. In fact they should be used as the basis of Work Instructions and other quality documentation.

A more complete example of a process map is attached to this worksheet. Whether you draw one by hand, or use some flow charting software make sure you map your processes and then improve them.

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Simplified Example Process Map

