

The proof in the process

When it comes to embarking upon a journey towards improved service delivery, Director of Transact HR Ltd Paul Rains asks: What does it mean to be lean?

As Nicky Jackman, team leader at Communities and Local Government and the central government sponsor for the National Process Improvement Project illustrated in a recent article in this publication, there are various excellent examples where local authorities are embracing lean ways of delivering their services by going out and talking to the recipients of those services about what is really important to them.

This is not rocket science you may be saying to yourself, but it is a fact that many organisations, in all sectors, can tend to lose sight of this fundamental business principle until such time that sales fall, budgets are constrained, and voices from on high call for improvements and cost reductions to be made.

It is vital that when improvement is initiated, it is done so in a planned and methodical manner, not introducing short-term 'sticking plaster' process changes that may provide improved results in the short term, but if they are not automated, documented, integrated with other efficient processes, have the support of the staff operating them, or constantly benchmarked against the needs of the customer, then the 'improvement' will become another liability very quickly.

Like most things in life, you only tend to get out what you put in, and in the context of providing services that customers value (the output), then a lot of fact finding has to be undertaken to ascertain:

- What do customers really want? Achieved by eliciting the views of a statistically significant proportion;
- What services are they provided with at the moment?
- What can we therefore stop doing, and what are the implications of this?
- What new services do we have to consider offering, and how can this be done in an efficient and effective way?
- Of the services currently provided, how can their delivery be re-designed to reduce cost and improve efficiency?

Once a 'road map' of the service delivery journey to be embarked on is established, a detailed, documented set of

current processes needs to be produced – 'swim lane' diagrams are particularly effective as they can highlight where process outputs go back and forth between several departments – usually a sign of an inefficient process.

Analysing the graphical representation of current processes will then start to yield suggested improvements where process steps can be eliminated completely, performed in a more efficient sequence, or electronically by an IT system.

It is also vital to be able to demonstrate improvements that various measurements of service provision are taken, ie. the cost of providing a certain service, which should include staffing costs, IT costs, and any other overheads, such as office space, etc. Ideally costings per individual process within the service provided should be produced.

Armed with this information, a project team (comprised of the people who provide the current service, and need to make the improved one work in practice) can start to re-draw the process maps to produce something that is 'lean' and designed to meet the stated needs of the customer.

Input from someone experienced in process mapping and in creating lean processes (free from wasteful activities), is recommended, as well as from internal or external IT people who can advise on what process efficiencies existing technology can provide, or help to create a business case for purchasing new technology.

Once the revised processes have been mapped, costs of providing the revised service can be estimated, which should be significantly less than the existing costs over the medium to long term, allowing for some initial investment in new systems, and sign-off can be given to commence the roll-out of the new processes.

That is not the end of the improvement journey; the processes then need to be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that they continue to provide services that the customers value, in a cost-effective, efficient way.

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