

PROCESS MAPPING, THE SUPER SLEUTH

Process Improvement / Continuous Improvement takes on more importance with each passing day. It is critical to understand the building blocks underlying Process Improvement. The main cornerstone is Process Mapping, whether done manually, via automation or AI. This writing will not attempt to nominate one format over the other. It will simply look at the advantages of good Process Mapping and leave the path to its accomplishment for a future article.

So, why is Process Mapping needed? Could a company not rely on its already written SOPs? Well, no. The reasons include:

1. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are typically written in a narrative format. But it is a well confirmed belief that visual illustrations are more effective than narrative formats.
2. Most SOPs do not address the problem of workarounds or regular SOP deviation.
3. SOPs are usually a slower read, less easily understandable, especially to the uninitiated in their creation. Those attributes alone limit their effectiveness at critical junctures when time is of the essence.

Process Maps provide a superior tool for understanding the true process efficiently and rapidly. Visual illustrations register faster in the human brain. Process Maps consist of symbols, lines, and arrows, which present workflow steps in a clearer and more concise way. This helps even those without a lot of Mapping knowledge to follow the process flow without difficulty. Let us look at six good reasons to adopt Process Mapping:

Understand Current State to Build Future Success

The best decisions about a company's future are grounded in a deep knowledge of that company's current state. Taking the time to understand how the company functions today, and how well its daily tasks, its processes, and procedures work, provides the basis for what happens next. Good Process Mapping allows an organization to:

- Leverage the best practices from existing processes.
- Learn from past mistakes and determine what not to repeat.
- Measure how well improvements actually perform.
- Ensure that new initiatives, new processes, etc., are fixing problems, and not hiding, shifting, or creating additional problems.
- Save time, effort, and cost by optimizing existing processes rather than creating new processes from scratch.

You might say that a good Process Map is a super sleuthing power which can pinpoint the root cause of existing problems. Other valuable consequences include providing a transparent view by which to learn about how work is completed today, which is helpful for a dozen diverse reasons. Process Mapping also fosters team inclusion and innovation as everyone is invited to contribute to designing the initial process diagram and then share in the formation of whatever improvement is deemed necessary.

Taking the time needed to understand what is and what is not working, averts the time lost by making the same mistakes over and over.

Stay ahead of Risk Related Problems

Risk is dynamic, and organizations need both foresight and agility to stay on top of it. Good Risk Process Mapping pulls together information from across the enterprise and makes it effortless to understand.

In addition to identifying threats to operations and preventing work disruptions, regular and well-developed Risk Process Mapping identifies ways to improve compliance, saves time and resources when dealing with risk management issues or questions, strengthens the quality of each customer experience, and creates value for shareholders and the organization as a whole.

An organization can:

1. Map risk relationships among the organization's people, processes, places, systems, and third parties.
2. Gain an accurate view of risk so threats are more identifiable and can be dealt with before they escalate.
3. Automate busy work, making it easier to collect and maintain accurate information, understand dependencies, practice responses, and oversee risk across the enterprise.

Maximize Technology's Benefits

The greatest truth about Technology is that it is always evolving. Staying competitive requires that a company utilize the latest and greatest available technology to maintain a competitive advantage. This frequent change requires a constant need to assess the systems being used throughout the organization.

System updates, installations, and decommissions are always on the horizon and identifying all the user groups involved and how, when, and why they use each system, is key to a smooth and cost-effective transition. As an example, retiring a system prematurely can leave a gap in the data chain that could cause operations to come to a grinding halt. Or overlooking one key piece of what a specific system contributes to the overall functionality of the company can shut down an operation quickly.

Detailed Process Maps can provide a deep and wide understanding of how a business uses its systems. As processes are described, and systems identified, the company is also collecting an inventory of all systems used, as well as learning about who uses them and how they are used. This information provides IT with the pertinent information necessary to keep meeting the technological needs of a business.

Enhance Staff Productivity

Process Mapping can help an organization eliminate misperceptions and turmoil among its staff, helping to increase productivity. A properly trained staff that operates in harmony, understands and follows the same playbook, adheres to the same processes and procedures, enhances the company's productivity which translates to increased profits.

However, in many organizations (1) a pattern of poorly defined processes OR (2) the lack of an ongoing program to provide training on the company's processes and procedures along with clear and consistent communication of any changes, inevitably presages less-than-optimal employee performance and can crush employee morale.

Process Mapping is a team sport that calls all interested parties to the table to hash out how work is being done. At the table stakeholders are identified, roles and responsibilities of each group are clarified, and sequential steps of the process are documented and changes negotiated to improve work processes.

Process maps can also be used as training aids for employees and easily converted into standard operating procedures that describe step-by-step details on how to perform each task identified.

Improve Business Processes

Process Mapping helps to identify “pain points” or redundancies in a business process. Cataloging steps in a process that contribute to the problems can focus attention on specific areas which cry out for improvement.

Process Mapping identifies waste. Examples include manual processes that could be automated or eliminated, redundant effort, production bottlenecks, and rework. Process Maps make it easy to flag these activities because each step in the process is clearly documented. Once identified, waste can be eliminated, moving the company one step closer to getting the highest return on its investment in technology, people, and processes.

Safeguard Knowledge Capital

Knowledge capital is the greatest asset any company acquires. Knowledge capital is the skill set shared by employees on how to perform tasks or steps necessary for work to be accomplished. If these details are not documented, staff turnover or other absences could lead to unwanted slowdowns, work not completed, deadlines missed, money lost.

Process maps capture all the vital information necessary to keep operations functional. Functional areas, roles, responsibilities, systems and inputs and outputs of a process are documented providing clarity on how everything fits together as it should.

The process maps also serve as a communication tool for educating staff on how things work, increasing the value of knowledge capital and thus enhancing competitive advantage. In the absence of critical staff, these process maps are available to those who must step in to fill the shoes of an experienced team member.

As a final comment, Process Mapping is most effective when used as living documents that are reviewed and updated regularly to monitor and improve business operations. A good process map does not rest on its laurels, but is frequently and thoroughly reviewed, improvements made, changes documented as warranted by organizational growth or economic conditions. The information contained in a good process map is readily available and understandable, open to all who should be, must be, need to be, following its guidelines.

Decision making based on a solid understanding of its own internal workings is what enables an organization to remain nimble, to constantly amend and improve its processes and procedures as dictated by the economy, its competition, etc., and always be ready to weather difficult times and deal with the unforeseen or unplanned.

BASG has led various projects specifically targeted at reviewing, researching, and creating solid Process Maps for Clients. In each case the end consequences of Process Mapping such as laying a foundation for future growth, creating higher productivity and enhanced employee insight, maximizing technology usage, staying ahead of risk issues, and protecting knowledge capital left the company on a more stable path to success.

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