



## **DISTILLED WISDOM**

*Thoughts and Musings  
on the  
Art and Science of  
'BPM'*

By Gary Comerford

## Introduction

Over the last couple of years I have been keeping a Business Process focused blog (it can be found at <http://process-cafe.blogspot.com>). The articles that are posted there cover the whole range of BPM subjects from process facilitation to interviews with key vendors in the discipline and almost everything in between.

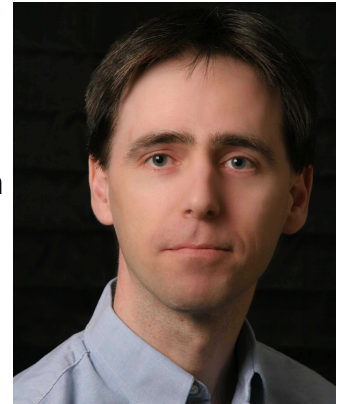
I have selected 22 of my more important and interesting posts and compiled them here into this small e-book which I am providing free-of-charge to you.

My hope is that if you are starting to look at processes in your organisation, or you have a project underway that attempts to either document, review or update your existing processes, you will be able to glean some useful information from the 'distilled wisdom' in these pages.

Enjoy.

Gary Comerford

*P.S. If you like what you have read here and would like me to come and help you put some of this in place, then please contact me through the Process Cafe website detailed above. I look forward to hearing from you.*



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## Comerford's Three Laws of Metrics

I work a lot with organisations that look at process and follow the standard company line:

*"Once we have our process in place we need to ensure we measure it. Let's put some metrics around it"*

"Excellent", I think "They've got their act together and know what they mean."

However, when it comes to the implementation of the metrics they don't seem to focus on the right things. I've had companies looking at submission processes (i.e. a process whereby something is submitted for review and approval) where they want to capture a metric for '*Number of things submitted*'. I've had companies looking at processes to manage performance where they weren't looking at the actual performance, they were looking at the ability of someone to meet an arbitrary performance deadline so they can say "*I met this compliance metric*"

Through all of this I have to ask myself why the company feels they wish to collect metrics. To distill it all down I use "Comerford's Three Laws of Metrics" to help focus thinking

1) **Metrics for the sake of metrics are a waste of time:** Essentially if you are gathering data about a process because someone said it's a good idea to gather this data then you are wasting your time. I don't care if you massage it, re-format it and stick it on an executives dashboard, if you're just doing it to show figures you might as well make the data up. It's more important in that case to gather some meaningful data about the process. So you managed to deal with 35 documents this month in your approval process. So what? What does this tell you about the process? It tells you that 35 documents went through it. How many of these were approved? How many rejected? What was the capacity of the process (in other words is 35 documents a lot for this process or a little)? These are the kinds of things you need to track

2) **A metric which says 'I said I was going to do it and I did it' is also a waste of time:** I worked with an organisation that had a performance management process which measured you on your ability to produce a certain document by a certain date. If you had your objectives completed and signed off by Feb 21st you got a little star, an 'Attaboy' and - more importantly - something that contributed towards your pay review at the end of the year. However at no point in this process was there a measure of the quality of the objectives, or even the effectiveness of the objectives. All they were concerned

about from a process point of view was 'Did we complete what we said we were going to do when we said we were going to do it?'

**3) If you are going to gather metrics, at least have a way of feeding them back into the process to effect change:** This is, essentially, the key part of the three laws. If you are going to the trouble of actually gathering data, tracking it and reporting it, where is the part of your metrics gathering process that feeds that data back into the process and permits a change? Going back to our submission process: We have 35 documents going through, each document takes 2 days to process, 20% are rejected, 70% are approved and 10% are re-worked and resubmitted prior to a decision. This starts to become meaningful data, but if we also tracked data such as "%age of resource time spent working on processing" and "%age of processing time spent awaiting decision" we have some key data to help change the process. If we found that it is only 8% of a resource time to process a document, it means that either we have more capacity than we need for dealing with these documents, or we can, alternatively, increase the throughput of documents. However if 95% of the processing time of the document is waiting for approval then we need to feed this back to the process to understand why we have a bottleneck: Too few approval resources? Inappropriate allocation of time for approval? Technical issues in the approval process? All of these can work to feed back into the process and effect change

How many of these seem familiar to you?

## **Stormchasing - the art of business process management**

I don't get a lot of time to watch television, but when I do, one of the first channels I usually turn to is the Discovery Channel. The main reason for this is the excellent documentaries and the second reason is for Storm Chasers.

In theory Storm Chasers as a concept shouldn't work. It is a reality TV series following a group of meteorological geeks chasing tornado's in the American mid-west. It generally consists of long shots of people driving SUV's as well as some - usually- very dark shots of clouds stretching from horizon to horizon. All this is usually done in quite inclement weather.

What keeps me coming back to watch is the same thing that attracts people to all sorts of reality TV - it's to see real people in real, unscripted situations trying to beat the odds. Storm Chasers has the usual mix of personalities some of which are guaranteed to start sparking off each other - but what they also have (and one the things that sort of attracts me more) is technology. Lot's of technology.

There are two key groups of people in the chase. One are meteorologists who are trying to survey tornado's and are attempting to capture information to help understand the forces behind these awesome spectacles. The other side are a small group of film-makers who want to take a huge IMAX camera into the eye of a tornado and film it. They - basically - have a large camera which they have mounted on a specially adapted 16,000 pound armour-plated SUV (That's right, 16,000 pounds).

Between them they use lots of electronics. The researchers even have their own Doppler radar dish on wheels (known as the DOW), as well as internet weather, lot's of complex weather measuring apparatus running through computers and computer algorithms. Yet they only seem to actually achieve their objective once every 6 to 10 tornadoes.

Why?

The reason is that they still need human intervention. The data is purely that - it is data. It is the actual state of play at a given situation. The forecast is purely that, it is a possible situation at a time in the future. The glue holding all this together is the human interpreting the data.

Now before you start wondering why I am giving you a report on some Discovery Channel reality TV show and click away I want to pose a simple question to you: How is the Storm Chaser's paradigm like managing your business processes?

Well, I see three similarities:

1) They both start with understanding what you already have. The technology and data they have is used to create an 'as-is' situation. They need to know what the current state of play is before they can start to forecast what the future will look like (or in their case where a tornado might touch down). Sure, there are schools of thought which disagree with collecting an as-is state, but I believe that in the world of business process (as in the world of Storm Chasing) you need to know where you are starting from to work out where you are going.

2) Both can use technology to the detriment of the ultimate solution. One thing that is constantly being referenced on the program is the all powerful nature of the DOW (The Doppler-on-wheels) which is revered as the key piece of technology that is driving them forward. Whilst lots of other items are used, the key decider about future direction is the DOW. Thus it has taken on a significance out of proportion with the actual value it delivers. This is particularly true given the fact that it is a data provider and still needs interpretation. To illustrate this fact, in a recent episode a rival group of Storm Chasers - armed with just a Dell laptop and wireless internet connection - managed to make exactly the same deduction about where a tornado would land as the DOW did. This is a prime example of relying too much on the technology as a solution to the problem rather than as a human enabler. How often do we do that in our day-to-day lives as process analysts? How many times have we relied on some magical BPM tool (or similar technology) as the solution to all our problems? And how often has this proven to not be the case?

3) They still need human intervention to make things work 100%. As mentioned previously, the ability of the technology to make a precise prediction about where a tornado is expected to touch down is minimal. Sure, there are general predictions but when you want to get a truck into the middle of a tornado, you need to be a bit more precise than 'general'. In order to finesse the location they rely on the experience and expertise of other people. They have a weather forecaster on board who isolates potential danger areas at the beginning of the day and then the team leader will make a decision about where to send the equipment to intercept based on that (except often he ignores the data and recommendation and goes somewhere else). Furthermore, despite the presence of several \$100,000's worth of equipment and vehicles all the data is being funnelled through the team leader to help make the prediction. So far his ability to accurately forecast - especially in a quickly changing environment - has been less than optimal. But this is a failing on behalf of the individual and his decision making skills rather than the human intervention itself. In the business world as well there are often decisions that need to be made

around processes to make them 100%. As with the Storm Chasers, these decisions do not always accurately occur within the system and rely on human intervention. Again - as with the Storm Chasers - management style and ability will predicate the success of these decisions.

I found it very interesting to see the parallels between the world of the Storm Chasers and the world of the business process analysts. Although I'm not sure I want to spend my working life driving a 16,000lb truck through the eye of a tornado for a living!

## Why your process project will fail

Here's the problem with most companies when they try to implement business process management.

Nobody owns the processes.

If nobody owns the processes then nobody owns the management of them, nobody has accountability for them, therefore nobody cares if they don't work correctly.

Now don't get me wrong: the project manager owns the project, the business sponsor sponsors the project, and the project team members do the work, but when the project has been implemented and the folks have moved onto the next big thing the company is left with a set of (hopefully) well defined processes which work well but which nobody has the job of looking after.

I'm not saying that nobody is concerned about the processes, however. For example there will be somebody in the customer service department who will be looking at his objectives for the year and seeing that he has to manage customer complaints within a set period of time, and therefore he will do whatever he can to get this done. This may involve circumventing 'difficult' parts of the process (such as reviews or approvals or paperwork) or even creating sub-processes that help him work more how he wants to work rather than how the process was designed. And because nobody at a more senior level has been given responsibility for that process, that's how it will continue to be handled until suddenly all the parts of the process have been altered from their original design and now the whole (gestalt) process doesn't work.

So what went wrong? Governance!

Historically in companies (especially large companies) different parts of the organisation evolved along their own lines into what they felt was the best way of doing things. Finance did things their way, Manufacturing did things their way, Sales and marketing did things their way. Everything was fine because each part of the process evolved to work alongside the other parts. But at the end of the day Manufacturing were responsible for Manufacturing processes, Marketing were responsible for Marketing processes and Finance were.. well, you get the idea.

With the advent of business process re-engineering, or BPM or just plain process modelling, the demarcation lines between the different functions became less and less obvious. As we start to look at product life cycles, the functional view of processes no longer worked. Suddenly a single 'business' process starts to cover multiple 'functional' areas. Manufacturing and Marketing needed to start working together and be part of the same

process.

Which is where the problems started. Or rather, this is where a lack of governance caused problems to start appearing. Who owns a business process that covers Product Development, Manufacturing, Marketing and Sales? Who is held ultimately accountable - in their performance objectives for the year - for ensuring that the different functional silos work together on the process?

If you are in this situation now and cannot answer that question then your process improvement project will fail. The unfortunate thing is that even if you can answer that question, your process improvement project may still fail because the wrong person may be in that role or the supporting governance process to enable her to do that may not exist.

Process governance is all about managing expectations and arbitrating between different factions. It needs someone with senior level responsibility (ideally at a global level in a multinational organisation) who has the authority to say to several different functional areas 'No, this is how you will do it'. It needs a set of governing processes which can manage requests for change in a business process, and it needs representatives from all the affected areas to be included. If you miss even one of these things you will find it very difficult to get appropriate governance implemented.

That's not to say that it has to be a big, complex process, or that it needs to add a large overhead to the running of the organisation. At it's very basic you get all the players involved to review a proposed change, define what impact it will have and either approve or reject it. Majority rules. The more complex implementations of this are run by committee's with representatives from each area who negotiate the changes with each other. It can be as simple or as complex as you wish

But at the end of the day you need to be able to ask and answer the following questions

1. Who is the process owner for this overall process within the business
2. How do I get this process changed?

If you can answer these two questions you are probably well on your way to having good process governance.

## **It's a Trap! - “documenting” business processes rather than “managing” them.**

You know you've done it. The boss has said "Let's get our business processes sorted out" So you've drafted in some Visio guy who's put together your business process documentation. Now it has been printed off, bound up, reviewed and signed by the department head. Everyone is happy, right?

Wrong!

It's a waste of time and money doing this because it's just paying lip service to the whole concept of business process management, and will result (usually) in a set of documentation languishing in a drawer for years.

If you think doing this is going to help you become a sleeker, more efficient, business entity then you are sorely mistaken. This will actually have the opposite effect as your users. They will resent the time they've spent helping put the documentation together. There is no guarantee that it's the right process and therefore there's no guarantee it will actually be followed.

Actually you're not alone in doing this. Many companies have fallen into the same trap of thinking that a documented process is a defined and managed process. But it doesn't have to be like that. Let's look at ways out:

How to solve this issue

### **1) Don't go there in the first place.**

If at all possible try to make sure that you don't confuse documenting processes with defining and managing them. If you want to get some documentation of what your processes are, bring in someone who knows about facilitating processes and get them to do the work for you. But understand yourself WHY you are doing this. If it's just to say "I've documented the processes" then you're probably doing this for the wrong reasons. If it is part of a bigger review then this is slightly better. If it is a small step in a larger Business Process Management initiative this is the best reason of all

### **2) Don't take the documents as gospel.**

Given that you've spent the time documenting your processes, make sure this is the start of the process rather than the end. Look at how you can take the documented processes and use them as a basis for improvements. Don't look at this as the end state i.e the gospel according to St Swim-lane (the patron saint of process), but look at this as the first step in a journey to process salvation. Use the existing documentation as a springboard to build

a full process documentation set - along with a process management capability.

### **3) Ignore and start again**

I know it's painful to throw away things that you've worked hard on but the fact is that unless the process documents were put together under the authority of someone who knows how to document and manage processes, the chances are they will not be right. They might not fully reflect the process as it exists. They might not be a complete record of all the items needed for process documentation. They might not even be documented according to set documentation standards. All these factors mean that it is probably just as useful to throw them away and start again using someone who knows what they are doing. As in the previous suggestion, use this as a basis to build an internal process management capability

### **Build the capability**

Managing processes is much more than just documenting the work in Visio. Building a process management capability involves identifying and training individuals who can expertly analyse and document current state processes, who can design future state processes and who can appropriately work a tool to store all this information in. They can identify owners at a process level, implement a governance process and put in place appropriate metrics to measure the processes.

The next time someone asks you to 'just document our processes' you should be wary of this and understand the pitfalls and problems associated with it.

With an appropriate strategy - and a couple of rules about 'what' and 'why' - you should be able to appropriately manage this request and end up with a useful end product.

## **What happens if you win the lottery? (or 'The Single Point of Failure')**

Recently I did some work with a small distribution company operating from the South of England and Belgium. We looked at their general process set-up in an attempt to understand exactly how well they were organised to manage and improve their processes capability.

I was working with their head financial person who, it appeared, wore many hats. She was responsible for running the whole financial department, approving expenses, managing suppliers, creating monthly reports and even helping recruit and train new employees. It seemed that every question I asked about how the company operated appeared to come back to this single individual.

Alarm bells started ringing in my head immediately for many reasons. As an ex-auditor this situation was prime for an exploitation of 'segregation of duty' control failures. With a little bit of application this single individual could raise a phony invoice from a 'new' supplier, approve the invoice and pay the money directly into her own bank account. A little bit of judicious accounting or an unfortunate 'lost document' or two would leave her tracks completely covered and enable her to continue this for some time.

However this wasn't what worried me most. The fact of the matter was that she was a single point of failure in the company. I asked her the question "Who would take over your role and run this company if you won the lottery and left the next day?". There was no answer to this question. (Actually the question I used to ask in this situation was "How would the company cope if you got run over by a bus?" but this is now deemed to be politically insensitive..) The real answer to this question is that companies will, generally, cope, but their efficiency and effectiveness will suffer in the short to medium term, as will their customer service and, more importantly, their financial situation. Imagine if one individual knows the bank account details, the cheque book locations, the outstanding creditor balances and the key contact numbers at creditor organisations, and then all this information is lost. As bills fail to get paid creditors will start to withdraw lines of credit, causing cash-flow problems. This can lead to further inability to pay creditors and staff and, ultimately, lead to the companies failure. Granted this is an extreme example, but it can happen.

I've come across situations like this before and they are usually a result of rapid expansion in a smaller company where the supporting back-office infrastructure growth hasn't matched the rest of the organisation leaving small groups of people (or single individuals) with lots of knowledge and power. For the companies it is usually easier just to rely on the key individuals rather than to bring in and train additional people to help spread

the workload. The results (as we've seen above) can be disastrous.

If we translate this situation into a process one, what we effectively have is a very human-centric process where multiple workflows route through a single individual. This individual performs key decision making as well as holding knowledge of key business rules (and business relationships). The impact of removing this knowledge is easily imagined.

So how can we make sure this never happens?

- 1) Ensure every individual in the organisation has a back-up. This person has the same access, information and span of control and can take over the role in an emergency
- 2) Regularly hand responsibility over to the back-up individual to ensure they can cope with any issues that may arise
- 3) Re-design your business processes to allow multiple processing routes rather than channeling everything through a single person.

Now look at your own internal processes and imagine what would happen if everyone there were replaced by someone else in the organisation. Would your company survive? If it wouldn't, where are your single points of failure in the process?

Find them and fix them.

## 3 tips when implementing a process management capability

In my book "The Perfect Process Project", I focus a lot on the building of a process management capability. The concept is simple: unless you have resources who are trained and dedicated in managing your processes you will never be able to get the best from your organisation.

So how do you get a process management capability? Here are three tips to help you on your way. (I would also recommend reading "The Process Ninja" series of quick tips on how to be a Process Ninja)

### 1) Get someone senior to run this.

Ensure that as you build your process management capability within the organisation that you have support and leadership from a senior level. I have been in organisations where we did not initially have this support and - whilst it is not impossible to build without this support - it is extremely difficult to get the right sort of traction for the work you need to do. Ideally the top person operating your process management capability should be senior enough to cross several organisational boundaries - as good processes are not silo based. Whatever happens don't give this to Janice in accounts or Bob in Sales and Marketing. This needs to be at a much more senior level than that.

### 2) Allocate time and resource to get people trained

With all the best will in the world it is extremely difficult to start a functional group and get them up to speed and productive immediately. Time is needed both to find the right resource and to get them trained in the right areas. As far as training is concerned make sure you identify who you want trained on what and train them until they are happy with what they have to know. Skimping on training or 'training on-the-job' is not appropriate in this circumstance.

### 3) Get someone working on a project to analyse and update processes

As soon as you have your resources allocated and trained it is important to then start adding value to the organisation. One way of doing this is to start viewing the processes that the business has and create something like an Enterprise Process Model. The problem with this is that it takes time and the immediate value is not apparent. The next best thing is to start putting these process resources on existing projects and make sure they spend time analysing the processes that will be touched by the project.

Creating a process capability in your organisation is not an overnight thing. It can take months and sometimes years. The key to remember is that action - however small - is what is needed. Go for the low hanging fruits. And keep moving forward.

## **The Leonardo Da Vinci approach to process**

How would Leonardo Da Vinci approach process modeling? Would he be a good business process analyst?

Leonardo da Vinci was born April 15, 1452 in Vinci, Italy. He was an Italian polymath, having been a scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, painter, sculptor, architect, botanist, musician and writer. With this impressive list of credentials behind him, it would be interested to understand how he would have approached the business of process.

Leonardo's approach to science was an observational one: he tried to understand a phenomenon by describing and depicting it in utmost detail, and did not emphasize experiments or theoretical explanation. This puts him squarely in the field of a process thinker.

Whilst he never learned more than a rudimentary amount of Latin he possessed, to a prodigious degree, other skills of much greater significance; notably the ability to perceive, to record, to examine, to think and to speculate.

Which leads me nicely to the first point:

He was a big picture thinker - that's good. As a scientist, he greatly advanced the state of knowledge in the fields of anatomy, civil engineering, optics, and hydrodynamics. A lot of vital process information is missed because people don't think about the big picture relating to process: They think "If I remove this quality check in my part of the process it will speed up my throughput". But what they don't understand is that it will also create issues further on in the value cycle when that quality check results in rework during manufacturing

He was an illustrator - That's good too. People react differently to pictures. The saying 'A picture paints a thousands words' is never more true than when looking at processes. The ability to take a complex set of words and distill them down into an image or set of images that can explain the process to the masses is a skill that many process modeling companies have siezed on as key to their approach

He was a theorist - That's good as well. Process improvement is about the ability to be able to theorise what a change will mean to an existing process. Consider this. In any process the key questions to ask are 'What are the inputs and outputs', 'Where do the inputs come from?', 'Where do the outputs go to?' 'Who uses the deliverables?'. With an existing process it isn't too difficult to answer those questions - it's a matter of observation or following a trail. With new processes this is far more complicated. Having the ability to theorise what will happen when a process is implemented is key to

understanding how that process will work

He was both an artist and a scientist. This, I think, speaks more closely to Leonardo's ability. Sure he was an inventor with a scientific twist (he conceptualised a helicopter, a tank, concentrated solar power, a calculator, the double hull and outlined a rudimentary theory of plate tectonics), but this is also the man who painted the 'Mona Lisa' and 'The Last Supper'. What he was able to do was to take both sides of his personality (the artistic and the scientific) and meld them together to create the perfect role. This resulted in items such as 'The Vitruvian Man' - an artist representation of scientific measurements whereby the proportions of The Vitruvian Man correspond to known scientific measures. Often creating or defining a process is part science and part art. You have to know when to make the scientific decisions in the process ("The quality approval step goes here") and when to let some art play into it ("Gain understanding of the customer problem and document it") It is, fundamentally, the difference between a prescriptive process step and a less prescriptive one. Both work in the right place and at the right time.

So would Leonardo have made a good process analyst? Probably one of the best. However his range of vision and ability to inwardly digest large amounts of information and turn them externally to himself in order to apply them may have caused many people to doubt his ability. After all he did design a 'machine that would fly' back in the time when flight was considered impossible.

Maybe he would create a perfect process, but the world wouldn't be ready for it...

## The Hole in the system

One of the things that people are very prone to do with processes is to leave some sort of a 'hole' in the system.

I was reading one of the multitude of blogs I read daily when I came upon an excellent post from Havi Brooks at The Fluent Self. In this post Havi was talking about 'The hole in the system'.

Basically, she explains, most people define 'systems' around themselves but leave some sort of a hole in there which causes problems later on.

Specifically she gives 3 examples:

- 1) *"The baby-bathwater thing": Which is where systems are in place but are subverted because of some emergency situation*
- 2) *"The misguided assumption thing": Which is where systems are bypassed based on assumptions that would not have been made had the system been followed*
- 3) *"The 'not allowing for stuff going wrong' thing". Where systems only account for the ideal situation to occur and are not designed to cope with occurrences where things don't happen as designed.*

What struck me about the post (and the three examples quoted) is that they are pretty universal - especially when applied to business processes. When I look at processes in place in business today they tend to be designed from the point of view of 'this is what should happen' rather than 'this is what can happen' it's a subtle difference, but very important.

There are, of course, whole industries that have sprung up to deal with the different scenarios detailed above - things like decision management systems for example. But am I the only one who thinks that it might be a good idea to design your systems correctly in the first place? How many times have people fallen into the trap of designing a business process - for example - to match a specific piece of software functionality but then suffered when that software can't cope with a customer who comes in with an emergency (The 'baby-bathwater thing')? It happens all too often. This is not to denigrate business decisions systems at all, but merely to look at specific problems through a different prism.

I am a firm believer that processes should be designed to be tool independent. That way when you change your underlying ERP or CRM system (for example) you don't actually need to redesign your processes. Havi says:

*It seems to me as though most challenges that tend to come up in these situations have two sources.*

*Maybe the system is flawed. There's a spot where things get stuck, jammed, or fall through and get lost. Or a great system is already in place, but we're just not using it. Which is the flaw.*

Fundamentally Havi is speaking of the two bugbears that dog any system's implementation: Putting in a system that works but isn't used correctly or putting in a system that doesn't work correctly.

So how do we solve these two problems?

I would say we don't.

Or, more particularly, we can't. It is fundamental in human nature that we seek the easiest solution. Generally the easiest solution is that which needs the least amount of work, or that which produces the ideal result the quickest. This can be the kind of thinking that produces systems that don't work correctly. Alternatively we can spend time, money and effort in creating virtually foolproof systems only to then have the users bypass these systems when an 'emergency' arises. But let's also look at the opposite side of that equation. How many times have you rung the bank, or some other 'call centre' system and asked them to do something only to be told that 'the system won't let us do that'? This is an example of a system that has been designed to work in one way but which we now want to subvert by not following the process. The well designed system has had safeguards built in that will not allow you to do anything like this. But at the end of the day you end up as a dissatisfied customer. So is the system working correctly?

Yes it is. It is working absolutely as designed. But is it working in the best way for the customer?

I don't think so.

Perhaps the solution is to make systems more flexible? Maybe we need to try and ensure that users can perform the tasks they wish (regardless of what those tasks are) and then manage the fall-out using something such as decisions or rules based systems. But somehow I can't help feeling that this is tantamount to creating another 'hole in the system'

Thanks to Havi for the original post.  
(<http://www.fluentself.com/>)

## 5 take-aways for business process work

Amber Naslund over at Altitude Branding has produced a post based on an interview she did with Scott Monty from Ford Motor Company. The subject of their discussion was Social media and how Ford are approaching it. Amber came up with 5 takeaways from their discussion. I recommend reading the post alongside this one.

The reason I'm pushing her post is because I can see a large number of parallels between her take-aways and the world of business process management (lower case letters, rather than 'BPM' in upper case)

Let's go through them:

### **Strategy First.**

As Amber says:

*The tools don't matter a fig. They'll change, ebb, flow, and go away. But you have to approach social media from a holistic viewpoint: how is this going to touch and affect what I'm doing across the board, and what do we want to accomplish? (Don't forget that goal-setting is part of strategy).*

I believe the same can be said for business processes. Yes, you probably need some sort of tool to help you manage your process definition and evolution, and yes, Visio may well be what you end up using (although you know my thoughts on "Visio - the Devil's tool"), but at the end of the day it is the strategy for your process initiatives that is more important.

- \* Why are you managing your processes?
- \* What do you hope to achieve through doing this?
- \* How are you approaching the whole area of governance and capability?

These are the questions that you need to be answering before you can even start to think about the tools.

### **Individual faces matter.**

It is a sad truth today that in many organisations the big command from corporate "Thou shalt follow this diktat" is likely to alienate more people than it converts. It's worth remembering with business process management (and with pretty much any sort of human facing change) that adoption of the change is a human process. Faces matter in this case. You need to put a face at the head of the effort. Someone who is approachable and will listen to what people need to say. Not necessarily someone who will completely kow-tow to whatever is asked, but at least a face that people can talk to.

**Business Process requires commitment.**

A good business process programme will touch many areas of the business. As such it will require good management buy-in. The benefit of getting the management buy-in is that you can then start to focus on commitment from other parts of the business. I've worked in companies where business process change was pushed through in a bottom up approach rather than a top-down approach. Believe me, the difference is phenomenal and huge. It is much easier to push things forward with the right commitment at the top.

**Keep your feet on the ground.**

Amber says :

*It's very easy to get swept up in the idea that everyone and every business ought to be using the latest and greatest shiny new tools. But those aren't always the best, or the most practical, especially considering that most customers are operating in the mainstream and have never heard of some of our more fringe tools ..*

This is even more apparent when you come to something like business process management. This tends to work on a 'hype-cycle' basis (see this from Gartner regarding the hype-cycle) - where people tend to get caught up in the fever of what can happen and then expect it to deliver more than it will. The ability to keep one's feet on the ground and link your efforts to a reality rather than a dream are paramount to making things like this work effectively.

**Measure based on your goals.**

I've written before about the issues with measuring processes. I've also written about Comerford's Three Laws of Metrics. So it's easy to understand why I have an affinity for this particular take-away.

It all comes down to the simple question of "Why are we doing this and can we prove that it is adding value?". If you can't measure whether you are being successful in what you are doing, you can't measure whether this is something that needs to be continued. Nobody wants to be in a situation where you are actually removing value from a value chain, or adding overhead unnecessarily.

Again, as Amber states:

*The entire point of measuring is to learn. Analyze how you've done against your goals, but don't stop there. Figure out what's next. Where to keep fishing, where to cut bait. And don't discount the anecdotal evidence of what you're doing. It matters, too.:*

Sage words, and ones we would all do well to listen to....  
(<http://altitudebranding.com/>)

## What's "Best" in "Best Practice"?

How does "Best Practice" come to be? Is it just an example of "most common practice"?

It's a question I often ponder when confronted by "guru's" who talk about following "Best Practice". Oh, don't get me wrong, I think there are certainly bad ways of doing anything and, therefore, there are better ways of doing something. But does this constitute a "Best Practice"?

The problem I have with "Best Practice" is that it isn't always "best". Often times it's one company succeeding in a business then being approached by others wanting to know how they've done it. The company provides examples of their 'practice', it gets assimilated by the inquirer and disseminated to others. This becomes "Best Practice".

But let's review this. When somebody (usually your competitor) comes calling looking for "Best Practice", do you actually give them what they need? Do you provide them with your trade secrets? (When you're at trade shows how open are you? I know companies I've worked for have had strict 'non-disclosure' practices when not amongst internal people). You end up providing them with some stuff that shows how things work basically but doesn't give away the farm (as they say). So how can this provide "Best Practice"?

It doesn't.

ERP manufacturers (and similar) tend to try and define a 'set way' of doing things which allows them to define their software along those lines: Check out any CRM product for example and you'll see that it mandates a particular way of operating (within boundaries). Major accounting or order processing systems are also similar.

So is this really "Best Practice"?

I put it to you that "Best Practice" is actually a combination of sub-optimal process definitions married together with a predefined logic flow mandated by a program.

Consider this: Nobody actually has a "Best Practice". By definition it comes from the collected will of the participants. But even then there are usually many ways of doing something - so much so that it is actually 'common' practice. This will result in a best practice being an amalgamation of various ways of doing things. On top of that the way things are done will, oftentimes, be influenced by the software someone is using to do that thing. If this software mandates a particular methodology then this will influence "Best

Practice"

Think of a situation where everyone was doing something one way - "Best Practice" - when it was discovered that this was the wrong way to do it.

- How about trying to motivate people by paying them more. It was considered the way to motivate people until it was discovered that money is a hygiene factor not a motivator (i.e. they prevent dissatisfaction only when present instead of increasing satisfaction)
- What about smoking? Look back at films, TV series, adverts and even literature of the last century. Everyone smoked. It was considered a "Best Practice" to be seen with a cigarette in your hand or hanging from your lips. This went on for years and years. Then someone discovered that it wasn't actually good for you and it stopped becoming a best practice.
- Did you know, for example, that up until the 1950's it was best practice when driving a car to not wear a seat belt. It was thought that the best chance of survival was through being thrown clear of an accident.

So I put my initial question to you again

What's "Best" in "Best Practice"?

## The kittens and the business rules..



*My Kittens Moe and Zeke*

So, for various reasons over the weekend I ended up feeding 6 felines. 2 were mine (10 months old), 1 was next doors (17 years old, arthritic) and 3 belonged to a friend (2 young 'uns of 18 months old and a very infirm 18 year old cat who's been given The Last Rights 3 times by the vet)

Why do I tell you this (and what's it got to do with processes?) Well, in principle the process of feeding a cat is quite straightforward:

- 1) Locate cat food dish
- 2) Open cat food container
- 3) Dispense appropriate amount of food into dish.
- 4) Give to cat

This works for all cat's, regardless of age etc.

However, the problem comes when the cats have special medical needs. For example: My two are straightforward. I follow the process above. End of story.

But next doors cat has need of medication for her arthritis. It's a syringe of goo (4.5ml) that needs to be squirted on her food once per day

And the three cats that my friend has are peculiar too. The old one has completely different food than the two younger ones. It's special food to help the renal problems he has. Plus he needs lactose on it to help some other complaint. The lactose is 1/2 spoonful administered with all meals.

The two younger ones have normal food like my two. But here's the problem. The older cat doesn't like eating his food and prefers the younger cat's food. And the younger cats would rather eat the renal food with the lactose on (go figure!). So they need to be separated and watched to ensure no cross contamination.

How does that effect the process?

Well it causes issues. If we change the process to deal with the arthritis medicine, it won't work for my two (or the two younger ones of my friend), however if we add a decision to the process to deal with the discrepancy, we then need to complicate the process through the addition of a separate process for 'food with medicine' vs 'food without medicine'. This works (and it works very well) but it wouldn't deal with the need to separate the cat food between the older and younger cats.

I can't help feeling that there should be a different way of looking at this.

This is where decision systems and business rules come in. This is also where the proceduralisation of a written process takes over.

Let me explain.

What happens in a particular sequence of events is the process. The three items I listed at the top of this post, for example. How that actually gets implemented is the procedure.

In the case of the process for feeding the cats I would modify it to look something like this:

- 1) Locate cat food dish
- 2) Open cat food container
- 3) Dispense appropriate amount of food into dish (as per business rules).
- 4) Add medicine (as per business rules)
- 5) Give to cat (as per business rules)

When the detail behind this is understood for each occurrence of the process then we get a procedure. This can be governed by 'business rules' as well. In essence we end up with three procedures related to the same process

- one for feeding my cats (business rule says 'no medicine')
- one for feeding next doors cat (business rule says 'Arthritis medicine, 4.5ml once per day)
- one for feeding the three cats (business rule 1 says 'Renal food for old cat', business rule 2 says 'Lactose on renal food', business rule 3 says 'Feed old cat and young cats separately to ensure appropriate food is eaten')

So it appears that a fairly simple process can - with the addition of appropriate business rules to aid decision making - be turned into a set of more comprehensive procedures.

Where could this apply to your business?

## **The parable of the wind and the sun - is this your BPM project?**

*A story is told about the North Wind and the Sun. It seems that each claimed to have the greater power over mortals and a dispute arose.*

*"I am much stronger, " said the North Wind. "I blow and blow and can even cause great oak trees to tumble to the ground. Surely I have a greater power over man."*

*"Indeed not," said the Sun, "for without my warmth, a man would surely die! Consider the oak tree. Without me it would not grow to be so tall."*

*And so it was that the two decided to try their powers upon an unknowing traveler, deciding to see which of them could soonest strip him of his cloak. The North wind furiously blew down upon the man, and caught up his cloak, believing he could wrestle it from him in one single gust. But it was soon apparent that the harder he blew, the more closely the man wrapped himself up in the garment.*

*The Sun then said, "I shall try my hand at this venture." So he looked down upon the traveler and beamed his light ever so gently upon him. Eventually, the man unclasped his coat as it draped over his shoulders. The sun then shone down with his full strength, and before he had gone much further down the road, had taken off his cloak so he could complete his journey.*

Pretty neat little story eh? I bet you can guess where I am going with this too, can't you? You would be correct too. -How many times are your BPM projects like the wind in the parable? A lot of effort. Some brute force. Determination to make things happen against their will. But ultimately unsuccessful?

How many of your BPM projects are like the sun? A less direct approach. Working with the end user rather than against her. Breaking down barriers to resistance and change gently by making it easier to move to the new situation rather than stay in the old situation. How much more successful do you think that sort of approach will be?

Of course it's all common sense. But the problem with common sense is that it isn't that common. If it was, why would there be a large number of projects with high failure rates as a result of not applying it? It is obviously easier to be 'the sun' in this scenario rather than 'the wind'. So why do so many people try to force change onto people in a way they don't want?

Is this something you or your company is guilty of?

## **Golf and Process: Separated at birth ?**

With the start of a spell of decent weather here in the UK I went out and played a bit of golf yesterday (Don't ask about how well I played, it was just practice... Right!)

As I approached the 16th hole (short par four with a huge oak in the middle of the fairway), it struck me how playing golf and managing processes have a lot in common

Bear with me on this.

From the outside golf looks like an easy game. It looks as though little is going on: men and women wondering up and down fields and smacking a ball with a stick. But in fact lots is happening that is not totally visible (understanding the lie of the land, calculating yardage and club selection for example). Inside the golf game there are parallels between the process project and the round of golf: Each works to a set of rules (although for the project these rules are not always followed correctly!) and each has metrics to decide how well it is doing (Strokes taken, Greens in regulation, Fairways hit, sand saves etc. vs Processes defined, process owners allocated and trained, etc.)

Let's look at the guys who do this for a living (golf, I mean). The Lee Westwood's, Justin Rose's, Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson's etc. If you look at their stats you will see that they are all pretty good, but there is a huge discrepancy between individual stats.

Take Tiger, for example. Everyone sees him as being a long hitter. But in actual fact he's not even in the PGA tour's top ten hitters (he's actually somewhere in the mid 50's with an average distance of 287 yards). When it comes to accuracy (number of times a drive lands in the fairway) Tiger is way, way down in the list landing only 58% of his drives on the fairway.

In fact looking at his stats overall, the picture is not too promising. He's not the best driver, he's not the most accurate shooter, he's not the best putter, and he's atrocious at sand saves (Getting out of a bunker and putting he next shot in the hole), but he is good where it really counts: Scoring average and money earned. In both those stats he's number 1.

<b>T. Woods</b>	<b>STANDARD STATS</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Driving Distance	287.7	56th
Driving Accuracy Percentage	58.93%	138th
Greens in Regulation Pct.	73.26%	1st
Putting Average	1.735	8th
Eagles (Holes per)	96.0	2nd

Birdie Average	4.31	2nd
Scoring Average	67.73	1st
Sand Save Percentage	47.62%	120th
Total Driving	194	94th
All-Around Ranking	328	5th
Reg Season FedExCup Pnts	17,745	1st
Money Leaders	\$4.425 m	1st
Par Breakers	25.00%	1st
Putts Per Round	28.63	42nd
GIR Pct. - Fairway Bunker	80.0%	2nd

*Stats courtesy of PGATOUR.com*

So what has this got to do with process, you may ask!

Well, anyone who has watched Tiger play will know that he has a set routine for every shot. He plays every shot with the same level of determination and preparation. In other words he has a process that he follows for every shot. He also has a process he follows for practice on the range. He has a process he follows when he is out playing practice rounds. He has a process he follows when on the practice putting green. Every part of his game has a particular set of rules, inputs and outputs which guarantee the best possible outcome.

The interesting thing here is that Tiger's processes in detail are obviously not the best (for example if he's 138th on tour in driving accuracy it means that the process for managing direction in his shot's is not optimised. For that he should look at someone like Olin Browne who has the best driving accuracy on tour, hitting almost 8 out of ten fairways), but overall, Tiger's processes get him where he needs to be: Number 1 in the golf world.

Now let's look at another major player: Justin Rose

<b>J Rose.</b>	<b>STANDARD STATS</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Driving Distance	280.8	109th
Driving Accuracy Percentage	64.48%	70th
Greens in Regulation Pct.	63.49%	76th
Putting Average	1.858	184th
Eagles (Holes per)	378.0	111th
Birdie Average	2.62	184th
Scoring Average	70.85	74th
Sand Save Percentage	64.52%	7th
Total Driving	179	73rd
All-Around Ranking	815	108th
Reg. Season FedExCup Pts	1,416	109th
Money Leaders	\$331k	111th
Par Breakers	14.81%	183rd
Putts Per Round	29.76	155th

GIR Pct. - Fairway Bunker                      61.5%                      16th  
*Stats courtesy of PGATOUR.com*

This tells us that his driving accuracy is way better than Tiger's, his sand saves are way better than Tiger's, his total driving is way better than Tiger's and yet, when it comes to the places that count - Scoring average and money earned - he is way behind Tiger. Again I think this is down to process. Justin obviously has processes in place the same as Tiger but it is possible that they are not working the same for him as they are for the world number one.

Let me see if I can show you an analogy.

If I was running a call centre which was measured on throughput of customer calls I could easily design a process that allowed for all calls to last a maximum of 2 minutes each. Operators would be trained to either solve the issue immediately or drop the caller back to a queue to be dealt with by someone who is better suited to answer the question. When the stats at the end of the month appear it means they have met their objective of each answered call lasting 2 minutes or less. However, the customer is not happy because they have been shuttled back and forth to different people who couldn't answer their question.

The problem is that folks are measuring the wrong things in the process. Tiger and his team are obviously not too concerned about the fact that he is wildly inaccurate off the tee because they know that his ability to land the second ball on the green is the best on tour (literally). This means they have identified the right things to measure and are measuring them appropriately. (Remember Comerford's Third Rule of Metrics: "If you are going to measure something at least find a way of feeding this back into the process to affect change"). Justin Rose's coaches are looking at his stats and trying to improve all of them, thereby ensuring that none of them are getting any better. Justin drives it just 7 yards less than Tiger, lands it in the fairway 5 percent more often but misses the green on the next shot 10% more than Tiger. This makes him 76th in the stats list rather than first. This is what's causing the issue. Once they are both on the green, Tiger only holes one more putt in ten than Justin does, but because he's on the green more often than Justin it means his scores are lower: Almost three shots per round lower. Couple that with four rounds per tournament and there is a 12 shot difference between the two players. That's enough to put Tiger at the top and Justin down in 108th place.

So the question I pose to you is : 'Are you trying to optimise all your process at the expense of knowing where the main benefit needs to be?' Couldn't we all benefit from knowing that even though some of our processes are suboptimal, we have identified they key ones and made sure those are working well?

## Ryanair's process issues

A couple of months ago over on the 'Flying Cafe' blog, I wrote a post about what I considered to be a misleading airline ticket pricing strategy. The airline - Ryanair - had advertised a 'free flight' which ultimately could have cost me as much as £105 including taxes and the 'additional charges' they levy.

This follows a discussion on the Linked-In Business Process Group where Steve Towers was positing that Ryanair's business model had improved as a result of a proposal to remove check-in desks at the airport. He called this the removal of a 'Moment of Truth' in the process. I argued against this saying that Ryanair may have a cost saving business model (although their profit percentage has decreased steadily over the last 3 years despite rapidly increasing revenue), but as a model for creating satisfied customers it leaves a lot to be desired.

Well this week I actually took the flight and I wanted to post a few thoughts on some of the process issues I picked up whilst flying with them.

I checked in at Bournemouth Airport for a flight to Southern Spain. I had one bag and a set of golf clubs. The bag had been paid for as part of the check in (an additional charge over and above the original ticket price), but the golf clubs had not. The process was as follows:

- \* Queue up
- \* Give details to check-in lady
- \* Show passport
- \* Check one bag in
- \* Take second bag (golf clubs) round to another desk
- \* Queue up
- \* Give details to second check-in lady
- \* Pay for second bag
- \* Receive confirmation slip/receipt
- \* Take second bag (golf clubs) back to first desk.
- \* Queue up
- \* Give confirmation slip/receipt to first check-in lady
- \* Receive boarding card
- \* Take clubs to a third check-in area
- \* Show boarding card to guard behind glass screen
- \* Drop clubs on conveyer belt - hope they get treated well and arrive at destination.

16 steps including three queue's to check in one bag, one set of clubs and receive a boarding card. Multiply this by 180 people on a plane (although not all of them will have additional charges to pay) and pretty soon you can see

the issue with this particular process. Compare this with a similar flight I took to the US a couple of years ago:

- \* Queue up
- \* Hand passport to check-in lady
- \* Put bags on belt
- \* Select 'Aisle' or 'window'
- \* Receive boarding pass
- \* Drop clubs on an oversized baggage belt nearby

As you can see this was significantly less hassle and more efficient.

Of course looking at this from Ryanair's point of view there is no efficiency to be gained by changing the process. There is no financial gain to them, merely improvement in their customer service. However Ryanair have made it perfectly clear that their priority is extracting the maximum amount of revenue from each customer rather than providing a peaceful and efficient service to them. Therefore a change to the check in procedure would not benefit them at all.

For those of you who know about these things, is this similar to the modus operandi of Southwest Airlines or do they tend to go more for customer service as well as cheap fares?

*(<http://flyingcafe.blogspot.com>)*

## Raiders of the Lost Process.

Sometime in the mid-1980s three gentlemen sat down in a room in Southern California and held a "facilitated session" to design a new product they were looking at. Each of the gentlemen in the room had had success designing similar products in the past and it was felt that combining the expertise of all three of them would result in a world beating product. They were correct - the product they designed went on to become one of the bestselling products in its market. But we'll cover that in more detail later.

Recently a document has been released which details conversations that took place in that room in California back in the mid-1980s. Having read the document I was pleasantly surprised at how similar their session turned out to a standard process facilitation session, of which I have run many. Of the three people in the room one was quite obviously "the leader". He had very firm ideas about how he wanted the product developed but, at the same time, he was willing to listen to the views of the other two gentlemen in the room. Of the other two gentlemen in the room, one of them was obviously very experienced in his particular field of endeavour. The other one had a very particular skill which, though not apparent in the end product, was actually a key component of the process.

The three gentlemen in the room were: George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Larry Kasdan. The product they were creating was "Raiders of the Lost Ark". I fully recommend any movie buff to spend a couple of hours reading through the 126 page document to understand the thought process that goes behind creating a blockbuster movie. It is very enlightening.

But that isn't the point of the post. What I want to talk about in this post is the process of facilitating a session such as this. I'll do this by making reference to certain incidents which occurred during the story conference for "Raiders of the Lost Ark".

George Lucas, the boss, had decided in his own mind that he was going to make a movie which was based on the old 1930s republican serials. He wanted a sympathetic hero, lots of action, and cliffhangers every ten minutes or so. Stephen Spielberg, the wunderkind director coming off *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, was anxious to make sure that the movie have lots of visual appeal for the audience. Lawrence Kasdan, the writer, was interested in producing a screenplay which had good characters, good plotting, and would make a good movie. In theory the three individuals in the room had everything needed to create one of the highest gross movies of all time. This, indeed, is exactly what they did.

Reading the transcript of the session it is obvious that Lucas is driving the process. He has gone into the session with an almost fully formed idea about

the story and the various plot points. Spielberg spends most of the first third of the session listening, with only the occasional clarifying question. Kasdan says very little. However, once the overall plot is laid out (a plot which will subsequently change very little) both Spielberg and Kasdan start to interject their own thoughts and comments into the narrative. Lucas, anxious to keep his vision intact, does initially responded with counter arguments, if only to later realise that the expertise of the other gentlemen in the room is improving the end product whilst still adhering to his initial vision and concept.

What is also interesting to observe is a few of the cycles that the group go around. One of the discussions concerns "the girl" (who later turns out to be Marion Blackwood in the movie) and how she should be portrayed. She was initially identified as being a "double agent" and everybody agreed that this was a good idea. But, as the discussions developed, she moved away from being a spy and more towards being the genuine love interest. This parallels the kind of discussions a lot of groups have during process facilitation session's where an understanding is reached about the function of a particular activity or task within a process, only for this understanding to be changed at a later point when further information comes to light.

Another interesting phenomena from the session was the introduction of plot points which would not used at this point but were recycled later. An example of this is the love interest being a spy, as mentioned above. This plot device was used in the sequel to the movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom". During process facilitation sessions it often happens that somebody will throw something into the mix which appears to be relevant to the conversation, and can be pursued by the participants for quite a while, before the group comes to the realisation that this is not a relevant topic of discussion and it gets shelved. However, the mere fact that this has been discussed does raise the profile of a particular activity, and identifies the fact that it can't be ignored and has to be placed somewhere within a process flow - even if that is not the process flow currently under discussion.

Now let's try reconcile his back to standard process facilitation criteria. If you read my post on facilitating a process session, I make reference to a number of key criteria: Get the right people in the room: Go around in circles: Capture everything. From the three paragraphs above you can see that in this particular instance the right people were put into the room (Lucas, Spielberg, Kasdan), they did go around in circles (the discussion of the girl), and they did capture everything (the mere fact that this document exists as a reference indicates that everything was captured, and was later used in the subsequent movie to identify some of the set pieces that appeared there). In addition to that I talk about taking a lot of time, and it is obvious from reading the discussion (which was transcribed from a number of audio cassettes) that the three individuals concerned were in no hurry to rush to a conclusion.

I also talk about making sure you understand terminology. There are several occasions in the conversation when Kasdan and Spielberg ask for clarification from Lucas about phrases or terminology that he has used. A lot of this surrounds the actual Ark of the Covenant itself, where Lucas has obviously done some research and knows more about the mythology of the Ark than the other two gentlemen in the room.

So, my question to you, is: if the three of the greatest filmmakers in the world use process facilitation techniques to create a blockbuster movie, why don't you use them to help define your processes?

## **Chicken Little and the economy**

The world is ending!

Unemployment is up! The economy is down! Companies are failing left, right and centre! Pink slips are being handed out willy-nilly! Consumer confidence is low! The Christmas rush is leaving many retail outlets with a let down feeling! Sales are down! Income is down!

Oh doom and gloom - the sky is falling on my head!

### **Chicken Little**

The 'Chicken Little' school of economics has been rampant over the last month or so. The US financial markets, the bail-out of the big three car makers, the general 'credit-crunch' (as we call it here in the UK), overall dropping of consumer confidence and doom-laden headlines have started to make everyone believe that the world as we know it is coming to an end.

Well I'm here to tell you that it isn't.

Don't get me wrong, I'm sure it will be difficult. I'm sure that the companies who are laying people off are doing it for the right reasons (business is a business after all and not a charity), but I think that a lot of where we are today is a matter of our reaction to events rather than actuality.

### **The Burger Seller**

Let me tell you quite a well known story, that goes something like this:

*A hamburger seller had a prime selling spot on the beach. From morning until night he used to ply his trade. People came from miles around to buy hamburgers from him. Every week he used to decorate his stall, get the best ingredients in and serve whoever came for the food. One day a friend of his came from the nearest city and saw what was happening.*

*"Hey" said the friend "You really shouldn't be taking all this trouble and spending all this money. Don't you know there's a recession going on?"*

*The burger seller thought about this for a while. The next week he didn't put up fresh decorations on his stall. He didn't buy the finest ingredients, electing instead to buy cheaper ones to conserve money. He cut down his opening hours to save on running costs. Lo and behold his income dropped. Customers stopped shopping at his stall. The guy from the city came back a couple of weeks later and asked him how things were going.*

*"Oh, don't ask! Sales are down, customers aren't buying. I'm starting to lose money here. You were right" the burger man said "There is a recession!"*

The story is a silly one but it does illustrate one point which is that attitude has a lot to do with how people weather this storm. Remember the last big worldwide recession was the starting point for a lot of today's biggest companies. Apple and Microsoft were both founded at that time and Google was a benefactor of "the dotcom bubble".

### **Opportunity**

This is actually a time of great opportunity. The ability of someone to leverage this situation and launch a great idea for a product or service is phenomenal. Sure there may be a couple of rough years as the business is launched, but these will serve as an excellent foundation for when 'the good times' return.

But the other side to this situation is that businesses are currently in a prime situation to start looking at how they do things and improve that. In times of plenty, inefficiencies are allowed to creep in and are not removed. (For example when money is tight, one of the first things that people do is stop company travel, or at the very least restrict it to economy/coach class only. Why is this? Are they saying that at other times of the year they are allowing people to spend the company coin profligately? Surely ALL company travel should be important and therefore a diktat like this should be unnecessary?) Focusing on these inefficiencies is one way of reducing overhead or increasing sales.

### **Business Processes**

This happens through Business Process management. Consider this: If you think that your company is working to the best of its process ability, that all processes are fully documented and that every process is fully optimised, owned and measured, I would warrant that you are in a very small minority.

I have yet to encounter a single company that could not be improved through the judicious application of some staple process analysis and review techniques. Ask yourself the following questions and see how many you can answer 'yes' to:

- \* Does every process in your organisation have an owner with authority to mandate change to that process?
- \* Is every process appropriately documented and managed by that owner (or people working with him)?
- \* Do you measure the effectiveness of your processes and feed that measure back into the process to affect change?

These three questions are fundamental to the appropriate management capability of a companies processes, and not one of those questions actually addresses any individual process to understand if it is working appropriately.

For some real-life examples of what companies do that can reap dividends of

fixed processes refer to these two posts about "The way it's always been done" (post 1) (post 2)

**Summary**

There is no doubt in my mind that things are going to be tough over the coming months or even years. I submit, however, that focusing on the right things - in this case streamlining and reviewing your business processes - is the best way to ride out the storm and set your business up for success as it comes out of the other side.

## **Oops! - Business Continuity?.....**

So I'm sitting here in the dark. Not by choice, but because there is a large power cut in the area. Everything appears to be out. I'm trying to work out how extensive the outage is, but for my purposes I'm totally without power.

Which also means I'm without heat. My heating system - although gas powered - relies on electricity to run the timer and to provide the initial spark. So as long as the guys sort out the problem within a reasonably short period of time I should be alright. Otherwise it could get cold.

Luckily the Macbook is all powered up and I can make a few notes ("*when life gives you lemons...*") although I can't post this immediately because my router is not working.

I figured now was a good time to break out the candles so I can actually see where I'm going. I fumbled my way to the kitchen using the light from my cell phone and found the candles in the drawer. Hah! Now.. matches.

No matches!

I'm not a smoker so I have neither matches nor a lighter. Never fear I'll use the gas ring on the cooker to light one. ... except that the cooker - like the heater - runs on gas but relies on electricity to provide the initial spark. Damn!

I've found a torch in the meantime. It's a small 'penlight' torch which works off a single LED bulb. Very bright but, unfortunately it doesn't throw the beam too far because the batteries are running low.

The other 'big' torch that I have near the front door ready for emergencies is still awaiting the four very large and incredibly expensive batteries it needs to operate.

So, basically, I'm stuck in the dark and the cold using the screen from my Macbook to see by.

Which got me thinking (as these things do) about business continuity planning. I, quite obviously, have an excellent disaster recovery plan (candles, torches etc.) but this has never been tested. (To be fair the house is prone to power outages but this usually occurs during the day when light and heat is less of an issue). As a result I am in the same situation that a lot of businesses are in when it comes to their BCP.

I'm stuck.

A business continuity plan is a set of tested instructions (a process, no less) for managing during a disaster of some sort. The key in all of this is that

BCP's have to be tested.

In my case it's no good having a power outage only to then find out that I have candles but no matches, torches but no batteries, and heating but nothing to start it with. In the big scheme of things this isn't a major issue for me. I can sit for a while, wrap up warm and wait for the utility company to sort things out. If nothing is fixed within a couple of hours I can drive to somewhere with heat and power and stay there (assuming this isn't nationwide - and as the trains are still running I have to presume this isn't the case)

But if I was a company, with customers, orders, employees and deadlines something like this could be terminal. BCP's are meant to be plans to allow your business to continue (the clue is in the name). If it comes to the crux of the matter and you can't run your business in a disaster than you are in big trouble. (O.K. in a disaster of Hurricane Katrina levels the last thing on your mind will probably be restarting your servers and raising invoices, ... but still).

Most businesses only find out that their BCP's are not working when they come to use them for real. They find - like me - that they don't have all the resources they need to continue, that the plans they have set up to take over various functions rely on items or people that are not available and that they are now officially in trouble

When was the last time you tested your BCP? Do you even have one? Are you concerned? You should be. Otherwise you might find yourself sitting in the dark trying to find a match.

## "The Way It's Always Been Done" (or how an aversion to change can hurt your business)

If you search this blog thoroughly you'll find reference to the following story, but I wanted to repeat it because I think it highlights a fundamental point when looking at processes: The need to ask yourself "Why?"

*A well known UK insurance company was trying to compete with the new on-line insurance companies that could issue a policy document in three days. The current standard for this company was 33 days. A project was launched to understand why. Analysis indicated that after the policy is reviewed and approved (1 day) it was sent to a warehouse in Cardiff, Wales for storage. The state of the art warehouse was temperature and humidity controlled by computer, and stored the policies for 30 days prior to sending the final documents out to the end customers.*

*Further analysis at the warehouse indicated that the reason this step was taken (and had been brought in from the previous manual system when the computerised warehouse had been implemented) was not entirely clear. Everyone who was interviewed was very positive about the investment in the computer controlled warehouse and was anxious to tell stories about the speed and efficiencies that were gained by not needing men in fork-lift trucks searching for documents from the vast stores. Nobody seemed to know why the documents were stored for 30 days, though. Tracking down the longest serving employee in the company it was determined that was how it had always been done because this step was necessary to allow the policy to dry.*

*"Allow the policy to dry....?!?!?"*

*Apparently back in the mists of time when policies were printed in ink on parchment they were stored for 30 days to allow the ink to thoroughly dry. In today's modern world this step was no longer needed. It was removed and suddenly the insurance company was able to mix it up with the new boys.*

The story was told to me by Steve Towers from the BPMG at a BPM conference a number of years ago. Now I have no idea if this story is apocryphal or not and - frankly - I don't care. The reason I like it (and the reason I have retold it dozens of times in the intervening few years) is that it does identify a key problem that occurs when people look at streamlining processes and making them more efficient.

'That's the way it's always been done'

This is the curse of modern society (ironically enough). People are hesitant to change things that have traditionally been done because they think that this will - in some way - cause bigger issues.

I come from a background of heavily regulated industry. This is the sort of place where you need to have 24 people review a document before it can be officially approved. When electronic signatures were introduced into the process it was still felt that all 24 people needed to review each document despite the fact that research showed that, in fact, only about 5 people in each case had input into the review, the others either didn't review it or took so long to review it that the whole approval cycle took forever to complete. Reviewers were added so that they couldn't later come back and say '*Well I didn't know anything about this*'.

When we looked at the problem through a different lens we were able to say 'Suppose this document was stored in a central place and you were informed when it was updated, would you be happy to take that as proof that you were informed, given 3 working days to come back with issues and - if nothing is heard - we take it that you are aware and up-to-date?' By adding in this 'Implicit review' step we were able to do several things.

- 1) We were able to minimise the number of folks reviewing the actual document.
- 2) We were able to substantially reduce the approval cycle time for a document.

The key was to ignore the way things had been done previously and concentrate on why we need to do things a certain way now.

So take a look around your own organisation and ask yourself the question "Why are we doing these things? Is it because this is the way things have always been done?"

You might be surprised.

## **“The Way it's Always Been Done” - (Take 2) : The Horse and Cart**

In my earlier article on "*The way it's always been done*" I talked about the insurance company that stored documents for 30 days 'to let the ink dry' because that's the way it had always been done.

I got a call from my father recently who had read this post and said it reminded him of something he heard in a similar vein.

Many years ago a local dry cleaning company near him got bought out or taken over. The first thing the new owners did was send in the "Time & Motion" boys to work out if the business was operating the most efficient way. ('Time & Motion' sort of dates the story a bit, but the principle is still sound).

On investigating the business they came across something they couldn't understand:

The business had a delivery truck which would take out the dry cleaned clothes/sheets/napkins etc to the local businesses, drop them off and pick up dirty stuff to be cleaned for the following day. When the T&M guys charted the route the driver went they noticed that he took a very indirect route which would cross and double back on itself several times. Their calculations indicated that the truck was actually covering almost 3 times the distance a more sensible and direct route would take.

When they asked the driver why he took that particular routing he replied (you guessed it) "That's the way it's always been done". So of course a little more investigation was required.

It turns out that this route had been set in stone many years ago. So long ago, in fact, that the delivery truck at the time was actually a horse and cart. First thing in the morning - when the horse was fresh and the cart was full, they were able to tackle some of the steeper roads in the area to make deliveries. Later in the day - when the horse wasn't so fresh, but the cart still had a heavy load (remember the deliveries also picked up more items for cleaning) the horse would labour to climb the steep hills, so the route was taken which would minimise the climbing it had to do. This resulted in a the tortuous path which criss-crossed and double backed. When the transfer to motor vehicle had taken place years back no-one had questioned the routing and the new delivery driver had gone exactly the same way.

I don't have figures around this but I imagine the savings in fuel, time and wear and tear on the vehicle would have justified the cost of running a T&M

study into this aspect of the business.

Yet another case of business process analysis being something that you can't afford not to do.

Where's the 'horse and cart' in your business?

## Flying - a complicated process?

In a recent post I talked about the linkage between golf and process. My contention was that good golf is process based to the point where measuring the appropriate item and focusing on improving the process around that item can reap dividends.

Now I want to expand on that by giving an example where this is not appropriate

Flying.

Last year I got my Private Pilot's Licence and I now spend as much time as I can afford in the 'wild blue yonder' learning as much as I can about the plane, navigation, Air Traffic Control, circuits, VP propellers etc. etc.

It struck me recently that flying is very much process based and usually it is when processes fail that aircraft accidents occur.

Let me give you an example: Most Controlled Flight Into Terrain (CFIT - basically a plane hitting a hill, mountain or rising ground) is a result of several factors: Tiredness, lack of concentration, spatial disorientation, flight into poor weather, lack of communication, wrong pressure settings on the altimeter and poor flight planning. Basically all of these can be solved through an appropriate process.

**Tiredness:** Business Rule "Don't fly on less than 8 hours sleep"

**Lack of concentration:** Process step "Follow appropriate check lists when operating"

**Spatial Disorientation:** Process Step "Follow Instrument readings to remove disorientation"

**Flight into poor weather :** Decision "Is weather bad? If yes then turn back or land immediately"

**Lack of Communication :** Process Step "Always contact ATC and keep them informed" plus "Read back all clearances and permissions"

**Wrong pressure settings on Altimeter :** Business Rule "Review Altimeter setting regularly and confirm setting with ATC"

This is, actually, a rather flippant approach to what is a very complex matter.

Flying is controlled by processes. Check lists, standards, licenses, ratings, reviews, evaluations etc. All of these things apply to pilots worldwide - from folks like me who have less than 100 hours experience on a single-engined plane right through to the guys with thousands of hours flying 747's across the globe. We are all subject to the same standards when it comes to flying.

All of these standards boil down to one thing: The correct way to operate a flying machine. In other words the *process* of flying. Every plane has a Pilots Operating Handbook (POH). The POH mandates performance envelopes for just about every factor regarding the plane itself: How much fuel it can carry, how much fuel it uses at what speed, how fast it can climb, how high it can climb, what is the best speed to glide the plane in at if there is an engine failure, what's the fastest speed this plane can fly without damaging the structural integrity. In the process world these parameters are either business rules or decision criteria.

Likewise, a pilot has a set of criteria to govern how he flies: Is he approved to fly this type of plane? If he is, can he fly in bad weather, or at night? Can he fly a plane with more than one engine? Can he fly a plane where the cockpit is primarily computer screens rather than the traditional dials?

Even before getting into the plane the pilot has a list of items that need to be carried out - the pre-flight checklist: How much fuel is in the tanks? Has the engine compartment been visually checked for oil leaks? Is the oil level in the engine between acceptable limits? Are the flying surfaces free to move? Is there damage on the leading edges? Do the wheel supports have sufficient travel in them? Are the pitot tubes blocked? Are all the radio aerials attached correctly. Do the flaps extend fully? Does the fuel pump work? Do the radio's work?

The list extends once the pilot gets into the cockpit: Are the dials functioning correctly? Are the circuit breakers set appropriately? Is the compass deviation card present and up to date? etc. etc. etc

Even when talking on the radio there is a set protocol to be followed (In fact you can't use a radio without having passed a specific exam and been granted a Radio Telephony Operators certificate).

All of these things work together to reduce the possibility of misunderstandings, omissions, errors and issues.

But of course problems still occur. So why is that?

Mainly, because there are human factors involved. A large proportion of aircraft accidents have an element of human error as the attribute. The worlds worst air crash (*which occurred between two 747's on the runway in Tenerife in 1974*) was caused by a pilot hearing what he wanted to hear on a radio and not what was actually said. This was because he wanted to hear a take-off clearance rather than a delay. A delay would put the crew past their flight window and result in them not getting back home that evening. He heard a take-off clearance and went, unaware that another 747 was taxiing up the runway at that point. The two planes collided in fog resulting in 583 fatalities. At it's basic level this was a process failure because the pilot did not

read back the correct clearance and this resulted in a communication error.

Let's come back to earth (so to speak) and talk about something a lot less drastic, but still as dangerous: Carb Icing. Without going into too much detail, propeller planes that are not fuel injected have a carburetor. The carb feeds high pressure air into the engine to allow it to work. However the mere fact that it is high pressure (it is forced into the engine through a constriction rather like putting your finger over part of the end of a hosepipe) means that certain physical forces come into play regarding temperature. The long and the short of it that under the right conditions (i.e when you have lots of moisture in the air and cold air in the carb - or example when you reduce engine power), a large lump of ice can form in your carb and stop your engine. Not what you want! To combat this, engines have a carb heater which can be turned on to remove the ice blocks. They generally work like a treat. However they can't be left on too long as they reduce the efficiency of the engine. Therefore there are key moments when you can add carb heat to be most effective.

The process says you add carb heat when reducing power on a warm day. The process says you add carb heat when making final checks for landing (although you don't keep it on). What the process doesn't say is that you add carb heat during taxiing over wet grass on a cold day. However this is another occasion when ice can form.

So is the process wrong? No.

The 'rule' attached to the process says that carb heat should be applied 'whenever conditions for carb icing are present'. Training should indicate that any occasion which would allow moist air to enter the carb under conditions where the temperature is low should warrant carb heating. The problem is that the conditions for carb heating are not always known and understood.

Believe or not carb ice can form in an engine when the outside temperature is 20 degrees celcius. It can also form very quickly so action needs to be taken ASAP. I learned to fly in Florida with very high ambient temperatures, but was still taught to add carb heat at the appropriate time.

All this could lead us to think that even if the process works correctly there are always circumstances where things can fail. This is, of course, absolutely true. What happens when all the process and procedure is followed and there is a technical issue with the carb heater? Answer: The engine will probably starve through lack of oxygen, stop working and you will be forced to follow a different procedure that of an emergency landing.

*"But isn't flying a skill rather than a process"*: I would maintain (in a similar way to my golf analogy of recently) that the skill comes in the application of the process to the best ends. Good pilots are those who have technically

applied the process to a finite degree of skill. The guys who know exactly the correct approach path to bring a plane down at it's POH operating speed and bleed the airspeed off until it stalls right onto the ground without a bump or a jump. These are the guys who are following the process in exactly the right way. The pilots who drop the plane from a height after realising they are going to overshoot the runway, slam the wheels onto the tarmac, bounce (or 'porpoise') three or four times down the runway and then wear the brakes down trying to stop before reaching the end are the ones who haven't followed the process correctly.

Being a good pilot actually means being a skilful process follower!

## **Visio - The Devil's Tool**

In a recent post I talked about the elements of a good process model. Or more particularly an effective process model.

But surely a process model is whatever it is supposed to represent? By that I mean 'Can't we put whatever needs to be put into a process model to make it do the job it's supposed to?'

The short answer is "Yes"

The long answer is "Absolutely not!"

If you're putting together some sort of diagram that can explain or illustrate something to users (whether these are existing users or potential new users), you need to make the diagram as clear and informative as possible. This means adding in (or subtracting) whatever information will help you achieve that. In many cases this means a process modeling package is not the appropriate tool. Visio probably is.

I've spoken before on this site about the use of Visio for process modeling (and, incidentally there is a section on this in the new eBook I am writing 'The Perfect Process Project'). To recap, my advice is "Don't use Visio for Process Modeling".

However, as a communication device that can show lots of unconnected things in a clear, visual manner, Visio is an excellent tool. Remember, though, that it is a drawing tool not a modeling tool. The diagram you draw in Visio should be based on an existing carefully modeled process from within the modeling tool of your choice.

With Visio you can add in little figures to represent your users, you can format the model to ignore good process notation standards, you can drop big chunks of descriptive text all over your diagram. In short it is the correct tool for putting something out there that is informative without being totally accurate (and by accurate I mean referring to established notation standards).

However I would advise against this.

The reason is simple: Expectation setting.

If you make it clear or known to your users that within your project it is acceptable to produce non-standard process models, then this expectation will then have to be met and managed. Similarly, if you make it known to your project that it is acceptable to define and manage process models in a drawing tool rather than a modeling tool then this expectation will also have

to be met and managed.

It's all very easy to say "I know Visio, I can use it. Everyone in my organisation can use it and it's cheap (at least compared with most Process Modeling tools on the market at the moment)" But remember the objective of your project is to define & manage your processes as well as to produce the pictures that illustrate these.

Experience has taught me that letting inexperienced users draw their 'processes' in Visio is a recipe for disaster.

Don't do it.

You will end up with non-standard diagrams, superfluous objects, lack of consistency, missing notation standards and other similar issues.

You will also end up with a set of pieces of paper that are not connected, diagrams that don't link, activities that are repeated but named differently, deliverables that are missing from one diagram but appear in other diagrams and a myriad of similar issues.

Don't do it!

## Over half your processes are not working!

I recently linked to an article from Online Recruitment which detailed the findings of a survey held of IT directors.

This survey indicated that 52% of the directors interviewed admitted that more than half of their current strategic business processes could not be easily shared across the organisation. A further 27 per cent said that between 25 and 50 per cent of their critical business processes suffered in this way. In other words up to 75% of the respondents said that up to 75% of their processes had problems.

So I asked myself "Am I surprised?". The answer was "Yes. I'm surprised the number was so small!". I've mentioned before in posts how processes become 'manipulated' or altered in day-to-day processing through various reasons, the most common of which is lack of process ownership. This leads to barriers being created between processes, hand-off's being missed and data being corrupted or lost. Very few businesses have the required senior level sponsorship to make business process management live and breath on a day to day basis. This is the very reason, I believe, why so many companies now find themselves in this situation.

Or at least it's one of the reasons. The article goes on to mention how it believes that poor business rules and out-of-date systems are also contributing factors. I am always hesitant in blaming business process failures on poor systems as I believe that a process should be designed in such a way as to be tool independent (that way when you change your software you don't have to re-design all your processes, just the 'implementation' of those processes), however there is no escaping the fact that historically, business processes that are designed around a system are prone to become less efficient as the system gets older and older and the underlying business needs change.

So what should be done about this?

Well, the article states an opinion from Jim Close, Senior VP and Country Manager (UK) of Software AG -who ran the survey - which is that companies should be doing a business process MOT (this being a UK term referring to the Governments mandate that all road vehicles over 3 years old should be subject to a yearly inspection) , even going as far as to say:

*...this is a major indicator of a company's long-term viability, to the extent that it should be considered a significant indicator for investors. If a company can't measure its business operations and adapt as the market changes, then will it survive? Investors should be asking their operational executives about the adaptability of their operations.*

There is no doubt in my mind that any company which is not focusing on understanding, managing, and improving it's business processes is missing a huge opportunity to improve itself. I actually quite like the idea of a regular check. although I suspect this is something of a pipedream at the moment - businesses just won't see the benefit of this when compared with the cost and time needed to perform the review. However, as Jim Sinur says in his blog - "Process is free" so maybe there is hope for us yet.

So what should you do if you are in the situation that 52% of the IT directors above found themselves in? Panic? Hand in your resignation? Soldier on painfully through the problems, the complaints and the low-points?

Well, those are all possible alternatives. But my immediate suggestion to you would be to do a mini-MOT yourself:

- 1) Identify the pain points in your process: If you could only change two things about the process what would they be? Is your process too slow? Too many people involved? Too bureaucratic? Identifying these would immediately give you the option of proposing a solution that would reduce the pain
- 2) Identify the 'white-space'. It is a widely held belief that many process problems are related to hand-offs between groups, departments or other processes, the so-called "white space". If you can identify the top two or three problems resulting from hand-offs in the processes you identified above you are starting on the right track
- 3) Put together a plan to alleviate the issue identified in the previous two points. This will release pressure on your process in the short term, build up good will with your customers (internal and external) and enable you to focus then on a longer term strategy for improving your business processes.

52% of IT directors not having faith in their processes is a damning indictment of the way our businesses are evolving, but with a little application and some careful thought, this needn't be the end of the world for businesses and their customers.

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