Process Improvement Playbook:

Overcoming the Hurdles of Manual Processes in the Workplace
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The Manual Process Dilemma

Either you or someone you work with, perhaps your entire team or business unit, is experiencing the pains associated with outdated technology, or worse, collaborating and managing projects with spreadsheets or database software like Microsoft Access to get work done.

Customer-facing teams may not have accurate information to provide world-class customer service, or finance may be making critical decisions based on inaccurate, out-of-date data, impacting the customer experience and ultimately increasing risk to the business. And personally, staying late every Friday night trying to get that report to the boss, formatted - with all the most up-to-date information from various employees who emailed it to you after making changes you can’t keep track of - has got you pulling your hair out.

Or perhaps you’re wasting valuable time managing the process of employee onboarding, training, opening a new vendor purchase order, or herding timesheets coming into you via email from your field workers? These administrative processes are eating away at your bottom line every day, not to mention causing unnecessary added stress on workers who should be spending time on other more important tasks.

Regardless of the specific manual process you’re fighting week in and week out, it’s important to start on the right foot before you set out to improve them. This book will walk you through those steps, from beginning to end, and help get you on your way to process improvement nirvana.

Emily Lancaster, Service Provider Operations, Cisco

“At its core, process is simply an agreement between all involved in order to accomplish a common goal. Process is the plan, the contract, the directions, the instructions, and the recipe.”
Chapter 1: Getting Started With Your Process Improvement

How Do I Prepare My Business for Change?

“The Change Readiness Assessment

There are a lot of things that can go wrong in a process improvement project. Surprises can kill even the best laid plans. Taking the time to conduct a change readiness assessment before you build your project plan can help you “know what you don’t know” so you can nip problems in the bud before they have the chance to derail your process improvement project.
Getting Started With A Change Readiness Assessment

A change readiness assessment is a questionnaire that helps identify the current state of the organization or business unit’s capacity for the project being considered. Your first step is to design a survey to collect the information you need. You can conduct the survey via paper or an online tool, but you’ll want to make sure it’s anonymous so you get the frank and honest feedback that will be helpful to your process improvement project.

Developing The Assessment

You’ll develop questions or statements for each category along with a scale to determine how challenging each area will be for your project.

A simple scale like 1) Strongly Disagree, 2) Disagree, 3) Agree, 4) Strongly Agree works pretty well.

As you develop the items for your survey, it’s helpful to think about those issues that could contribute to project failure. Here are some sample items to get you started.
1) Leadership
- Senior leadership is aligned around the need for the project.
- Senior leadership agrees on the goals of the project.
- It’s clear who is the Executive Sponsor for the project.

2) Resources
- The project team has been allowed appropriate time to work on the project.
- The budget is sufficient to complete the project.
- Time allocated for project completion is realistic.

3) Culture
- Decision making is pushed to the lowest level possible in our company.
- There is a strong hierarchy that makes getting things done very difficult.
- It’s okay for anyone to offer solutions to do things a different way in our company (See example below).

4) Strategic Direction
- Everyone in our company understands how this project impacts the long term success of our organization.
- This project aligns with our company’s short term goals.
- Our company is good at sustaining changes over the long term.

5) External Drivers
- It is unlikely that customers will be impacted by this project.
- There are no regulatory issues that will affect this project.
- Trends in the marketplace are pushing us to change.

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**Process Improvement SPOTLIGHT**

**John Leuver,**
Summer intern, Southwest Airlines

Leuver’s QuickBase app which began as “a neat thing I got to do” was shared up the ranks through multiple regional directors to the VP of Maintenance Operations. It soon became approved system-wide as the corporate standard to track and manage maintenance employees and stations in need of new mechanics.
**Conducting The Assessment**

If your process improvement project will impact an entire organization, you will want your assessment to reach as many people as possible. Communicate about the assessment, what its intended purpose is, and what will be done with the results. Allow a few days for people to complete the assessment, but not so long that they forget about it. Typically, three to five business days works well. It’s a good idea to have the time frame overlap two different weeks to ensure you don’t miss people who may be unavailable during a given week.

**Scoring And Interpretation Of The Assessment Results**

Once the assessment is complete, review the results for each item. Depending on which category has the greatest percentage of responses – Strongly Disagree to Disagree vs Agree to Strongly Agree – use the information to identify activities that will help your project achieve its intended outcome. Build these activities into your project plan to increase your probability of success.
Chapter 2: How to Create a Project Communication Plan

How well you communicate throughout the lifecycle of your process improvement project can make the difference between success and failure. During the planning phase of your project, you need to create a high-level Project Communication Management Plan that defines the general communication requirements for your project.

This plan should include:

- The plan’s purpose and approach
- Communication goals and objectives
- Communication roles
- Communication tools and methods
- High-level project communication messages

It’s also helpful to include any specific requirements or standards that govern your project, if applicable.
Creating Your Project Communication Management Plan

A communication plan isn’t created in a vacuum. Although there are some standard items you’ll include in your plan, such as Project Kickoff, Review, Status, and Team Meetings, it’s important to spend time gathering input from all stakeholder groups to ensure the plan is comprehensive. That said, it’s also important to note that changes may need to be made to the plan as the project moves forward. Here’s the general framework.
Plan Purpose And Approach
Include a high level description of the plan, why it exists and a general idea of how you will implement the plan in your project. Think of this as a summary section. It’s always helpful to do this section last – even though it’s first – because it helps you capture the essence of what you’ve detailed in the plan.

Communication Goals And Objectives
Define what you expect to achieve by communicating. This could be any number of things and is dependent on what your project will accomplish. Generally, these should be focused on educating and updating anyone impacted by the project.

Here are a few ideas:
• Increase knowledge about the project and why it’s important
• Create a dialogue among employees and key stakeholders to gain acceptance of the project
• Provide opportunities for feedback from stakeholder groups
Communication Roles
Communication won’t come from just one person during your project. Clearly define all roles and their corresponding communication responsibilities.

Here are a few roles to consider:
- Project Sponsor
- Project Manager
- Leadership/Management Team
- Steering Team
- Project Lead
- Project Team Member

Communication Tools And Methods
What tools you use and how a message is delivered will vary from project to project. The key to remember is to not get “stuck” using a single method for your communication messages. Your preferred tools and methods should be those where the receiving group will have the best chance for comprehending what you are communicating. Always keep your receiver in mind when developing the content of the communication and the method in which it will be delivered. Methods that offer opportunities for people to ask questions or provide feedback can provide real value for your project. Brainstorming a list of possible methods can get you started.

Here are just a few tools:
- Meeting summaries
- Surveys
- Status Reports
- Internet/Intranet Web Page
- Newsletters
- Informal Small Group Meetings
- Formal Presentations
- Brown Bag Lunch Workshops
High Level Project Communication Messages
It’s a good idea to include a matrix in this plan of the specific project management related communication, such as project kick off, status and review meetings. Define the key objective, topic of discussion, delivery method, frequency, audience, and role that owns responsibility for making it happen. This helps set the expectation and boundaries for project communication.

It can also be helpful to turn your matrix into an informative “at a glance” graphic that can be shared and used by anyone on the project.

Getting Started
It’s important to remember that each project will have a different communication impact and therefore a different communication management plan. Working from a basic framework will help ensure key components are included.

You can pick up a free template to help you get started here to give you an idea regarding the structure and content of your plan.

Other Requirements
If there’s a chain of command for specific communications, it may be helpful to define a flow chart to ensure everyone is clear on what’s required. You may also need to include a communication escalation process for critical project impacts.
But Wait! You’re Not Done Yet

In addition to the matrix of project related communication, you need to develop a Project Communication Action Plan to reach the broad audience of stakeholders for your project. Your action plan will dictate who hears what and when they will hear it.

It’s a detailed plan that includes:
- Stakeholder or Audience (who)
- Message or Topic (what)
- Communicator (from whom)
- Schedule or Frequency (when / how often)
- Delivery Method (how)
- Status
- Comments

Your action plan will be a working document that will change as your project communication needs change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Communicator</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>Delivery Method</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who will you communicate to?</td>
<td>What is the topic of the message?</td>
<td>Who will the communication be from?</td>
<td>When will it happen and how often?</td>
<td>How will the communication be delivered?</td>
<td>What is the status?</td>
<td>Other important information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I know it’s a lot of work, but you don’t have to start from scratch. You can get a copy of the Project Communication Action Plan template here.

Moving Forward With Your Plan

Proactively creating your Communication Management Plan and Project Communication Action Plan at the beginning of your project will take some effort, but buy you a lot of time down the road when you’re knee deep in deliverables. Managing it on a regular basis like you do your project plan will save you a lot of headaches and give your project a greater chance for success.
Documenting your processes

“There is an evil temptation to do something that is inefficient in the name of speed and ease in growing firms. This then becomes part of the SOP [standard operating procedure] by habit and accident. Taking a little time for process improvement now prevents you from wasting a lot of time in the near future.”

- Doug Troy Of Illuminate360
Chapter 3: Keep Your Processes Organized in a Process Library

Management of business processes can get out of hand if you don’t have a way to organize them. Setting up and monitoring a process library helps solve this problem.

You don’t want to start documenting your business processes without having a plan for monitoring and managing them. Before you start, it’s a good idea to begin with the end in mind.

Use the “C cubed” concept to help you organize your efforts.

**Categories** – Determine how you will categorize your business processes.

**Controls** – Identify who can do what with the documented processes.

**Coordination** – Establish a team to manage ongoing activities.
There’s no “one” right way to categorize business processes. What’s going to work for your business may be totally off-base for another. The key to categorization is to use a method that makes good, logical sense to the people who will be using it.

If you create some fancy method that boggles the mind of your workforce, you’ll end up with a dusty old process library that never gets used. And that’s never a good thing.

Here are a few ideas for methods to categorize your processes.

**Functional Area –**
There are clear and distinct functions in most businesses that can be used to categorize the processes in your library. Common functions include finance, customer service, marketing, human resources, IT, and operations.

**Division/Department –**
Setting up categories by division or department may make sense for you if there are clear process boundaries.

**Value Chain –**
A popular system developed by Michael Porter, the value chain separates a business into strategically relevant activities that focus on the direct sources that provide a competitive advantage.

“Most people spend more time & energy going around problems than trying to solve them.” - Henry Ford
Determine What Controls Should Be Established

Once you have your business processes defined and finalized, they’ll be placed in your process library. This repository should be accessible to everyone who needs the information, but have controls in place.

You may decide on giving one role master rights and universal permissions, along with providing different access and permission levels for other roles that have different requirements. You may also want to further identify key roles for specific categories of your process library to lighten the load on the master librarian.

Also consider defining a governance policy that details controls along with quality standards and review processes.

Be careful not to create a monster here. Keep it as simple as you possibly can while setting controls that will help you manage it properly.
Establish A Team To Coordinate Process Management

Finalizing your business processes and adding them to a library isn’t the last step you’ll take when you are setting up a process focused business. It’s actually the first.

It’s a good idea to establish a team that will coordinate ongoing process management. Often team members are designated from key functional areas to ensure the broad spectrum of the company is represented.

This team would establish the initial controls and governance, then meet on a regular basis to discuss and resolve ongoing process management issues.

“Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things.” - Peter Drucker
Who does what when and how do they do it? An all important question for any business.

That means you have to document your business processes and improve them as your company grows. It’s never too early to start. Whether you’re a company of 100 or 1000, having your business processes documented can help.

So where do you start and how do you do it?
The Flowchart Process

When a company is working hard to get processes documented, it’s normal to use a basic flowcharting process just to get things down on paper.

Start by doing a brainstorm of all the processes in your company. Think in terms of those major processes that help your company function – sales process, customer service process, payment process, collections process, fulfillment process, hiring process, payroll process, etc. Then start breaking them down by identifying the steps that must occur for the process to have a successful outcome. Once you feel you have enough information, document them.

Using flowcharts to document processes is an easy first step and most people are familiar with them so there’s a short learning curve. As you ramp up, they can be used as learning tools to train new employees who come on board.

You could have an entire catalog of processes for your company. Although they do a good job at defining how things flow, flow charts don’t show who does what, how things are handed off between departments or staff, and whether there are duplications of effort or other inefficiencies that need to be fixed.

Here’s a sample of what the “Pay Employees” process might look like in flowchart form.
The Swim Lane Diagram – Or Cross-Functional Process Map

That’s where the Swim Lane Diagram comes in handy. This type of flow chart shows how people or departments are interconnected and who “owns” what part of the process. Made popular in the 90s as the Rummler-Brache Method for performance improvement, and also known as the Cross-functional Process Map, swim lanes have become a mainstay in the Business Process Reengineering (BPR) effort.

You might have been invited to a “swim lane meeting” and wondered what in the heck that was all about. It’s simply a meeting focused on documenting business processes in a swim lane format.

Why is it called a swim lane anyway? If you visualize a swimming pool at a swim meet where each competitor has their own roped off lane to swim in, that’s what this type of diagram looks like. Each lane identifies an individual, department, or function having a role in the identified process. Steps of the process that are owned by that role are placed in their own swim lane.

Let’s take a look at the “Pay Employees” process in a swim lane format.

Notice how specific steps are now allocated to the roles performing them in the appropriate swim lane.

This format makes it much easier for you to identify steps that can be changed to improve the efficiency of the process. From here, you can create a “To Be” map that reflects those changes. Here’s an easy 10 step process to help you get started.

One thing to keep in mind is that the swim lane doesn’t show everything, so you’ll want to dig deep to find and fix those hidden inefficiencies in the process as you move forward.
How to Ensure a Successful Process Improvement

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.

As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it.”

- attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupery, author of The Little Prince.
There are many obstacles to watch out for when embarking on a process improvement initiative in your business.

Just because something should be done, doesn’t mean it will be done. Here are three of the most common roadblocks that can stall your process improvement efforts and how to get around each.

Don’t want to learn how to overcome roadblocks? Skip to Chapter 6: How To Develop Metrics for Your Business Processes.
Roadblock #1: Leadership Is Not Aligned
This can come in different varieties. There may be one executive who’s very supportive while the rest refuse to get on board, or they each have a different idea of what success looks like.

How To Get Around It
Your best strategy here is to tie your improvement into business results. Show your leadership how it ties into your company vision and strategies, and how it will impact the bottom line. You may need to break this down for each of them, by their specific area of responsibility, so they can visualize what will happen and actually see what’s in it for them. Make sure you communicate in the way that is most palatable for them. If they’re detail oriented, break it down. If they’re bigger picture, focus your communication on key outcomes not details.

Roadblock #2: Process Improvement Considered an Event
Some companies leap from one “flavor of the month” to the next trying to find the best thing that will work in the business. And it’s no wonder. We’re bombarded today from companies and consultants who share their method for improvement as “the one thing” that will propel the business forward.

How To Get Around It
Communicate how the process improvement intersects with and supports company strategy and demonstrate the long term value of the change integrating with the company vision. Complete and share a high level plan that shows how the change will impact different areas of the company (from Chapter 1 of this eBook), and what improvements will take place as the change becomes more concrete over time. Make sure you’re clear that process improvement is a continuous improvement effort that will ebb and flow as the changes take hold in the company.

Roadblock #3: View Process Improvement as a Tool
Often, companies will look to process improvement as a single problem solving tool. They identify a problem, decide that improving the process will resolve it, make the change and then move on. This rarely ever works to create long lasting change in the company. Culture change must take place before the problem is totally solved.

How To Get Around It
Process improvement is about change in a company. And change is one of the toughest things to do because it requires people to shift their behavior. To overcome this resistance, you need to ensure that it is communicated widely before it ever begins. This should take place at all levels of the organization and make it clear what the impact will be to each area. It’s important that your communication focuses on what’s in it for them to break down the barriers that can stall your efforts. It’s also important to get as many people involved from the beginning to make the transition easier. That means creating cross functional teams that will carry out the change effort. Typically, when people help create the change, they’re more likely to embrace it and help others see the value.

Process Improvement Spotlight

Heather Bryant, data entry specialist turned technical solutions director, Sodexo

“People come to us with old processes, paper Excel-based processes. We transform those into applications. We’ve revolutionized monthly reporting and connected and integrated even those minimal areas where work groups overlap.”
Chapter 6: How To Develop Metrics for Your Business Processes

Often business processes just happen and there are no measures developed to monitor how they’re doing. Knowing what’s working and what’s not based on the goals you’ve set in your business is a key ingredient for success.

“Access to data is probably my biggest hurdle. As a business analyst and project manager, I need to be able to gather and analyze data against the projected benefits. If that data is either unavailable or is difficult to tie together though the business, then the task of process improvement becomes exponentially more difficult to categorize and relate back to the business as a KPI.”

- Sal Vilardo, Business Analyst at EMC2
The Critical Few Versus The Useful Many

The best place to start is by zeroing in on what needs to be measured. Smith focuses on the “critical few versus the useful many.” More is not better, and can often muddy up the waters when trying to track down exactly what’s impacting a specific outcome.

When he’s helping managers clarify what should be their “critical few,” he approaches it with a problem solving perspective using three key questions.

1. How are you doing?
2. How do you know?
3. Where must you improve?

Sounds simple, huh? Well it’s a bit more complicated than it looks because people can be pretty vague when answering these questions. Using your critical thinking skills to get the real answers is important. Learning what keeps them awake at night will help you get the most important information.
1. How are you doing?
A typical response to this question could be well, okay, or good. Make sure you find out what “well, okay, or good” means to that person. Dig deep by asking probing questions such as, “Are all complaints equal?” In other words, would a complaint from the company president, customer, or partner all have the same weight? If not, that could mean you’ll need three different groupings to measure your processes, prioritized by level of importance.

2. How do you know?
Explore the “method for knowing” how things are going by questioning how things are tracked today and what would be the best way for the future. Often the method for tracking today is low tech and time intensive, such as email notifications or manual records. Determining what might work best for the future can be a bit trickier. Although the people who are closest to the issue are the best sources for this information, they often get paralyzed by fear, uncertainty, and doubt (aka the FUD factor) when asked to declare what will work best. Seek to mitigate the FUD factor by being aware of their concerns.

F = Forcing them to accept measures you think will work best causes fear
U = Uncertainty may reveal negative consequences such as accuracy issues
D = Doubt that management will respond in a positive, not punitive way

3. Where must you improve?
Typically, a company creates both operational and customer experience metrics, and they can get out of sync – operational metrics show everything is working fine, but the customer experience metrics show everything is working fine, but the customer experience metrics tell a different story. Smith has found that this is most often caused by not measuring the right things or not measuring the right things right.

Based on that experience, he developed an indicator called the FVI (FACE Value Index) which holds a Yale patent. A high FVI is a good indicator of harmony with the established KPIs. He believes that every measure should address the FACE components.

F = Fast
A = Accurate
C = Cost Effective
E = Easy
Use A Two Step Process To Determine Metrics

When determining metrics for your business processes, begin with the three key questions to narrow down the "critical few." Then use the FACE components to establish your metrics. Two to three metrics in each component should be sufficient to determine how you are doing.

“The biggest challenge from a tools perspective has always been usability and collaboration. For any tool to be successful it needs to easily fit into the workflow and help people communicate and collaborate seamlessly. Many tools are designed to help by defining a particular process or workflow but lack the adaptability to be used with all methodologies. More importantly they lack the ability to be configured for modified methodologies that are in place for a particular industry or business domain. Whenever a tool tries to force a change in how people work it will lose adoption and require additional training and education to combat the entropy that naturally ensues.”

- Doug Troy, previously VP of Operations, Illuminate360 on his process improvement approach quoted from The Fast Track blog by QuickBase, Inc.
Conclusion

Congratulations, you are well on your way to process improvement nirvana! Whether you are just getting started with process improvement or are working to improve inefficiencies, you should have an artillery of strategies to improve your workflows.

Now you can start spending more time completing tasks that move the needle for your business, and less on the manual processes weighing you down. By following the steps outlined in this eBook, you have the know-how to successfully set yourself and your team up to overcome the manual processes that eat up your valuable time, and instead focus on using your skills to be the hero for your team!

In this eBook, you learned:
1. How to Create a Change Readiness Assessment
2. How to Create a Project Communication Plan
3. How to Keep Your Processes Organized in a Process Library
4. How to Document Business Processes for the Best Outcome
5. How to Overcome Roadblocks and Empower Employees
6. How to Develop Metrics For Your Business Processes

Improving your process is easy with QuickBase
Learn how business users can improve processes at a faster rate, lower cost and with better outcomes by building business applications without writing a line of code using QuickBase.

Start Your 30-Day Free Trial with QuickBase Today

Contact us to discuss your current process and let us help you reach nirvana sooner!
About QuickBase

Launched in 1999 and headquartered in Cambridge, Mass., QuickBase Inc., formerly a division of Intuit, is a newly independent company focused on helping businesses of all sizes drive productivity and digitally transform their organizations. The platform’s unique low-code interface enables users to create custom applications faster and easier without learning code. Today, QuickBase is used by more than 6,000 customers, including half of the Fortune 100, across a variety of industries and use cases. The company was divested from Intuit in March 2016 and is backed by Welsh, Carson, Anderson & Stowe. For more information, please visit: www.quickbase.com.

Special Thanks

QuickBase wants to thank Denise O’Berry for much of the content in this eBook. Denise O’Berry gets a lot of joy from helping businesses improve day-to-day operations that impact the bottom line. Not only does her advice come from the heart, it comes from years of experience working as a team member, team leader, manager and owner of her own company. She has truly walked in your shoes. Find her at DeniseOBerry.com and on Twitter @deniseoberry.

Start Your 30-Day Free Trial with QuickBase Today

“Process improvement” can be interpreted to be an insult, a threat, or a beacon of hope. How well the concept of process improvement is accepted by your audience is dependent on the level of trust and buy-in achieved before you know the answer.”

Emily Lancaster,
Service Provider Operations, Cisco