

PROCESS UNIFICATION

Written by:
Adrian Reed



INTRODUCTION



There are many reasons why an organization might look to model its processes. One common reason is to investigate and implement unified (common) processes across different parts of the organization, or potentially even across different geographic locations. The logic here seems very sound. Taking an example, why would an organization need three different versions of a procurement process, surely it could compare all three, extract the best bits of each and create a shiny new, combined process that works more effectively and efficiently for everyone?

Whilst this is a very compelling argument on paper, those of us that have worked on process harmonization projects can attest to the difficulties that are often experienced in practice. There are many hidden dangers awaiting the unprepared. There may be differences which exist within the processes for very valid reasons. Even if there aren't, it is often hard for people to "let go" of their old ways of working, and an initiative looking at 'process harmonization' inevitably touches upon other aspects such as technology, data, organizational structure, role profiles and so on.

Teams that recognize and plan for the wider aspects of the change are far more likely to succeed, so it is well worth taking time to reflect on the initiative's objectives and prepare and plan accordingly.





PROCESS HARMONIZATION : WHO COULD OBJECT?

One of the biggest challenges with process harmonization initiatives is that the complexity of a process is often well hidden amongst the detail. At a high level, the decision to move to a common process sounds like a “no brainer” and it may be reasonably easy to get agreement from senior managers. Yet it is important not to underestimate the organizational and cultural changes that might be required to support and sustain the change, and it’s important for us to uncover and consider the relevant complexity that may be hiding.

Building on the example mentioned in the introduction: it is quite likely that everyone in an organization would agree (in principle) that it is a good idea to have a common, streamlined procurement process. This might have benefits such as reducing costs (as orders can be pooled and a list of preferred suppliers can be maintained), reducing effort (as a centralized system will support the process, with built in approvals and reporting) and better supplier management (as suppliers’ information and performance can be logged and managed in a single place).

As a “one liner” this sounds very desirable, the process will produce outcomes that are better, on balance, for the organization as a whole. It is very easy to imagine that an executive would agree to this in principle. Yet, even though the change is for the ‘greater good’, it is quite possible that it might create outcomes that are seen as undesirable or even negative for individual areas of the business. Unification and rationalization often requires compromise, appreciating that not all parties will achieve their favored outcome. It will be better overall, but this might have some negative outcomes for a few stakeholders.

Building on our example, imagine a company-wide decision is made to rationalize stationery ordering. A wide range of items will be available through a single supplier, and specialized items will be sourced on request. This approach might save significant money (as a discount can be

negotiated with the supplier based on volume), yet it is quite likely that some teams might be very wary.

Imagine the small “branch” team in a remote rural location. They have bought their stationery (via the petty cash process) from a local stationery shop for decades. They don’t keep stock, and they know the owner of the shop well. They feel that they might pay a bit more, but they like to support their local economy. Currently, they keep the petty cash records entirely on paper, reporting only monthly totals (by category) to head office. This causes problems for head-office, who can’t track what is being purchased, and there is a fear over this lack of transparency of spending.

It is likely that something as seemingly mundane as ordering stationery could cause conflict in this situation. The branch team may accept that in every other office, centralized stationery ordering makes sense. However, they may appeal for an exclusion, given their special circumstances. Perhaps they even have good grounds to do so...

A challenge is that every team has its quirks, and as human beings it is probably fair to say that we relish having control. We also love hoarding information, and when information is centralized, this can cause resentment (“I used to keep a simple spreadsheet for stationery ordering, now there’s a central system it’s more complicated to see what I ordered last time!”). Being aware of these human factors, and considering not just the process impacts of unification, but also other angles will help us plan for success. We can also ensure that we address as many of the stakeholders’ needs as possible (“Ah, OK, I see that the new system has a ‘previous order’ section; that’s even better, I can easily re-order now!”).

A mantra that has often been uttered is “Proper Planning Prevents Particularly Poor Performance”. This seems as relevant to process harmonization as any other type of initiative. So what can we do to prepare?

STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS

An important start point is to identify the stakeholders that have a vested interest in the processes that we are going to alter. It's likely that some stakeholders will be immediately obvious, for example those that are involved in the day-to-day operation of the process. Yet it's important that we cast the net wide to ensure that we do not miss other important stakeholder groups.

Building on the earlier example of improving a procurement process, we would likely identify the internal stakeholders (including those that order items) relatively easily. However one external stakeholder group that warrants consideration would be the suppliers themselves. If we were aiming to rationalize the supplier list, have a standard approach to ordering and so forth, it would be absolutely crucial to ensure that this interfaced well with key suppliers' processes. Else we risk creating a situation where we pass on inefficiencies elsewhere in the supply chain (e.g. a situation where our process works very well for us, but it creates a real pain for our suppliers; who therefore have to increase their prices to handle all the extra administration or who aren't able to respond promptly, causing bottlenecks and delays). We might have missed this entirely had we not cast the net wider.

For each stakeholder that we identify, it is worth considering the type of interest that they have in the process, and their level of interest and power. This will help us to consider the 'key players' that we ought to be speaking with regularly, as well as those who have a more passing interest who we might keep informed in other ways.



SETTING EXPECTATION: CLEARLY AGREE THE OBJECTIVES AND CONSTRAINTS

It would be easy to see and describe process harmonization as some sort of panacea that will solve all of the organization's ills. This can particularly be the case when the new process will be supported by new IT systems (often IT is presented as a 'silver bullet', which is a dangerous expectation to set!). Whilst it is certainly true that there can be significant benefits overall, it is crucial that stakeholder expectations are set clearly from the very start.

A crucial but often overlooked consideration is to ensure that everyone has a common view on why the initiative is taking place in the first place. If there isn't a conscious effort to discuss, agree and communicate the core objectives, it is likely that different perspectives will emerge. Perhaps one stakeholder might think it's purely about "cutting costs". Another might think it's about "digitization of services" and yet another might think it's about "reducing pain points for those involved in the process" or "improving customer experience". Any one of these might be achievable, and they are certainly not mutually exclusive. Yet four different perspectives on the desired outcome will likely lead to ongoing wrangling over scope. Someone focused on "digitization" might not understand why a process that is utilized only occasionally remains on paper. Someone focused on cost cutting might feel that we should focus only on the "big wins".

Forming an overall problem statement, and a brief set of critical success factors and key performance indicators can be useful. Asking the question "how will we know if we've been successful?" will often lead to a lively debate. Having this debate up front will prevent problems and wrangling further down the line.

As well as the overall objectives, it is crucial we achieve a clear definition of what we actually mean by "harmonization". This sounds like such a trivial

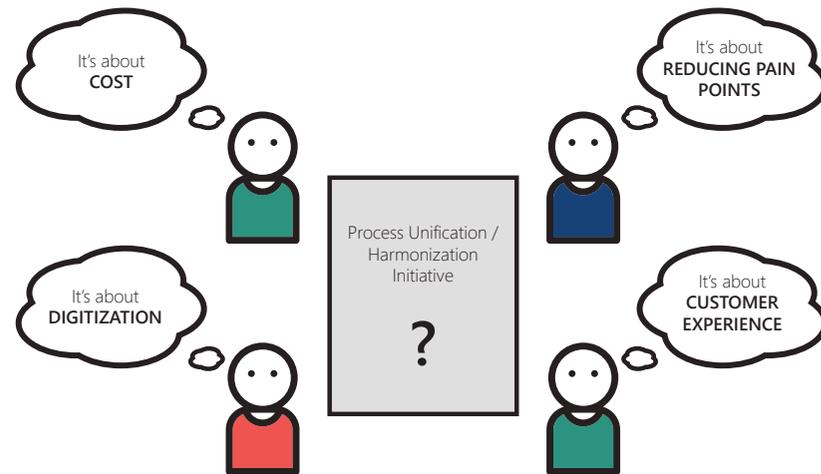


Figure 1: Different perspectives on an initiative can lead to disagreement and conflict

statement, but experience shows that it is an important area to address early else division and conflict might emerge.

It's possible to imagine a continuum, a "slider" if you will, with complete harmonization to a rigid process at one end, and completely decentralized and separate processes at the other end.

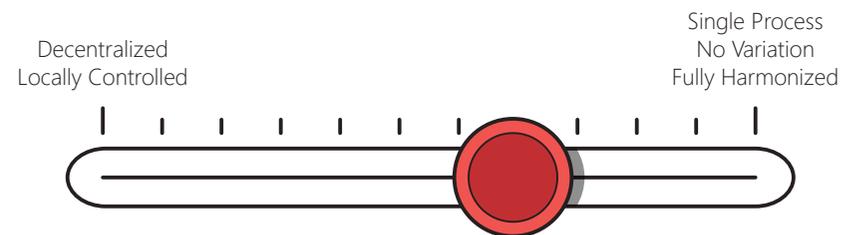


Figure 2: A conceptual 'slider' to create conversation around process harmonization

SETTING EXPECTATION: CLEARLY AGREE THE OBJECTIVES AND CONSTRAINTS (cont...)

There may be cases where it makes complete sense to position the “slider” to the far right of the continuum. I would be quite keen to know, for example, that my income tax is dealt with identically whichever office happens to be processing it. Yet other times it might be somewhere nearer the middle. A “Europe wide” procurement process might be 80% standard, but I would imagine there will be unavoidable regional differences. These might relate to the reporting of tax, compliance, or even the cultural norms relating to how relationships with suppliers are managed.

Deciding, up front conceptually with a slider (or a similar visual metaphor) can lead on to more detailed conversations. It is crucial to decide the criteria under which regional customization or variance from the “standard” process will be accommodated, how it will be debated and who has the ultimate decision making authority. We might start with a set of principles, perhaps decision that the only variations will be due to “significant cultural, regulatory or legal differences”. This will provide useful guidance, but there will undoubtedly be later debate over what constitutes “significant” and “cultural” differences! Setting out further examples or detailed criteria can help, but as mentioned above making the process for deciding transparent from the beginning will ensure that there is a clear understanding how any inevitable disagreements get resolved. We “decide how to decide” in advance, which will ensure we are as objective as possible and will hopefully reduce the risk of analysis paralysis when issues are raised.



ANALYZING THE PROCESSES AND INVOLVING THE PEOPLE

Having set the objectives and agreed the decision mechanisms, the hard work starts. It's necessary to understand the current processes and then define the new "harmonized" process. Analyzing the "as is" process first will help us get a sense of how the work is currently carried out, and also any workarounds, exceptions or nuances that will need to be handled by the new process. It'll also help us to understand the needs and wants of those that are involved with the process—and this understanding can help us to define a process that fits with the stakeholders' needs. When looking to harmonize, it is also possible to pick out elements that are particularly good from each process and ensure that (where appropriate) they are utilized in the new process. Of course, this isn't as simple as "cut and paste". Work needs to go into ensuring that the components of the process fit together well and the process flows... we must avoid a "Frankenstein process" which takes the best elements from each area but actually performs badly because the pieces don't interact well!

To find out information about the current process, potential improvement areas, and to define the new process it is usual to hold a series of workshops and interviews, as well as carrying out document analysis, observation as well as using other techniques such as scenario analysis. It is rarely a simple activity, often requiring discussions and negotiations between different teams. We can refer back to our stakeholder analysis to ensure that the right people are involved, consulted and informed. It is much more powerful to 'co-create' a new process, rather than work in a silo. This will also help drive adoption; people quite rightly feel more 'ownership' for something they have helped to create.

In the 2012 Harvard Business Review article entitled Understanding Fear of Process Improvement, Brad Power observed that:

“ People resist change that is imposed on them. But if they help define the changes, they will own them.

(Power, 2012) ”

This is as true with process harmonization efforts as other types of project, so stakeholder involvement is key.

It is also vitally important that we are transparent with our stakeholders. Impact analysis becomes crucial; if a certain part of change will be better for 95% of stakeholders but worse for 5%, it is important to engage carefully with the 5%. If the changes come as a sudden surprise to them, it's quite possible they'll develop workarounds... and these might affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the process overall. Finding some kind of "win" for them is desirable—just because one element is slightly worse for them doesn't mean that other areas won't be significantly better for them. Managing expectations and avoiding surprises is key.

OVERCOMING THE CONFLICT

However much we might like our process initiatives to run smoothly, it is likely there will always be challenges along the way. With any kind of major process change, it is likely that at least some conflict will emerge. It is important that the conflict is acknowledged, and that those raising concerns are provided with the opportunity to be heard.

In an ideal world it would be possible to facilitate agreement by consensus, but with strongly held positions this may not be possible. Going back to our decision criteria—where we “decided how to decide” can be helpful here. Applying the objectives criteria set early, and reaching a conclusion via the agreed route will hopefully lead to a situation which all stakeholders feel is fair, even if it might not have been their first choice.

Of course, we should strive for consensus and work hard to achieve it, but this approach provides us a practical and objective way of handling conflict when consensus isn't possible.



'In an ideal world it would be possible to facilitate agreement by consensus, but with strongly held positions this may not be possible.'

SPEAKING A COMMON LANGUAGE

During the initial elicitation phases, it's likely that fairly informal process modeling techniques will be used. Sticky notes, arrows and diamonds can make a very useful start. But as the process gets refined, and as we need more precision, it's important to use a process modeling approach that everyone can understand.

One approach that merits our consideration is Business Process Model and Notation (BPMN). This is a rich approach that allows a single model to be viewed through different 'lenses'. It allows the articulation of some extremely complex concepts — but also allows the same model to be 'abstracted' to a much higher level. This overriding concept of a single model with multiple views is a powerful one: senior stakeholders may want to see a “process on a page”, whereas operational stakeholders may need to see the detailed activities. Technical stakeholders implementing technical changes may need to see even more detailed logic, and BPMN allows diagrams to be created for all of these stakeholders. It is crucial, of course, to give the right diagram to the right stakeholder. A senior stakeholder might be very confused by a detailed and busy BPMN process diagram! It is also crucial to ensure that stakeholders are guided in how to interpret the diagrams, particularly if they have not used BPMN before. Training could be considered here, or at the very least an interactive walk through. Simply providing a “legend” of the symbols used can be a useful starting point.

CONCLUSION

Harmonizing business processes can be beneficial for organizations, however hazards await the unprepared. Careful planning can help avoid this, and stakeholder identification and engagement is crucial. It is beneficial to 'co-create' (rather than impose) process changes, so that people feel a genuine sense of ownership, and also so that we can ensure that the core business needs are met. Utilizing a modeling approach such as BPMN can help to ensure that people stay on the same page.

This type of process harmonization will probably never be easy—but with sufficient up-front thinking and planning we can avoid the common pitfalls, leading to a more likely route towards success.



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Readers interested in the topics discussed in this e-book may find the following resources useful:

Cadle, J., Paul, D. and Yeates, D. J. (eds) (2014). **Business Analysis**. Swindon: BCS Learning & Development Limited.

IIBA®, (2015). **Guide to the business analysis body of knowledge**. Toronto : Ontario: International Institute of Business Analysis.

Power, B (2012) (2012). **Understanding Fear of Process Improvement in Harvard Business Review**. [online] Available at: <https://hbr.org/2012/09/understanding-fear-of-process-improvement>

Reed, A "Adrian Reed's Blog" [Online] <http://www.adrianreed.co.uk>





© Copyright 2018 Orbus Software. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, resold, stored in a retrieval system, or distributed in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

Such requests for permission or any other comments relating to the material contained in this document may be submitted to: marketing@orbussoftware.com

Orbus Software
Portland House, Bressenden Pl, Westminster, London SW1E 5BH

+44 (0) 20 3824 2907
enquiries@orbussoftware.com
www.orbussoftware.com