White Paper

A Practical Guide to Planning and Running Process Improvement Workshops

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Craig is known throughout the business world as "The Process Ninja" – he is a passionate advocate of business process management.

His talent for making things simple has resulted in a proven track record of saving organizations millions of dollars whilst simultaneously improving the customer experience.

Named as one of the top process bloggers in the world by both the Process Excellence Network and Processpedia, Craig's work has been featured on the BNet, Telstra, Flyingsolo, BPM Leader, PEX Network, iDatix and Orbus Websites as well as in the Herald-Sun Newspaper.

Contact Craig to discuss how he can improve your organization.

This useful guide details a step-by-step approach to planning and running effective process improvement workshops. It is intended as a practical guide for Business/Process Analysts to ensure workshops are run in a practical manner which will rapidly take the organization to an improved future state.

In summary the guide includes the following:

- Why organizations should utilize process improvement workshops
- Common mistakes in planning and running workshops
- Key activities required to plan effective workshops
- A practical approach to facilitating effective workshops

Why Run Workshops?

I run a lot of workshops – I find that they are the most efficient way of getting to the heart of processes and improving them. I've seen people spend months conducting in-depth interviews with staff only to have projects shut down before they're even close to identifying improvements. This is avoidable. What can be accomplished in a well-structured workshop can eliminate weeks or even months of unnecessary activity "walking the process". It also gets staff involved in changing their process for the better. In essence this helps with change management as the staff feel involved from the outset. It's not an outsider changing their process – they feel they are in charge of their own destiny.

Common Mistakes

Dictating the to-be process

I find it abhorrent when process consultants walk into a business and start to design to-be processes that they think are correct. I believe that a good process consultant facilitates the to-be process, but they never dictate to the customer what that process should be. Often the to-be process may be obvious to the process facilitator - but it is vitally important that the customers come to their own conclusions on what the process should be (with the help of the facilitator).

One of the great benefits of the method I use is that it actively involves the workshop participants in designing not only the as-is process and the to-be process but it helps the customer define the actions required to get from the as-is to the to-be.

It's the facilitator's job to guide the customers in the right direction, not push them.

Planning too much

Against my will, I was once made to write a 25-page document on how to run some workshops – it delayed the project by 3 months. Workshops aren't complicated so don't make them. Create a spread sheet with all your workshops, times, rooms booked and attendees. That's all you need – don't over bake the cake!

Rushing workshops

Give yourself more time than you think you need. Don't rush a workshop's output for a deadline. Take your time and focus on getting it right – you are laying the foundations for the work that follows.

Planning the Workshop

Pick your workshop room carefully

Find the biggest room – you'll need it! Book your rooms as early as you can. Ideally use the same room each workshop day so you don't have to waste time shuffling materials around. Giant process maps are best left on walls!

Identify all staff involved with the process

It's really important to get a cross section of all staff involved in the end-to-end process. Both managers and customer-facing staff should be involved. Managers may have a skewed high level view of the process which doesn't always match reality.

Pick the right attendees

It may sound warm and fuzzy to ask the business who they want to attend but chances are they'll send you people who aren't busy rather than the staff you really want. What you want are people who know the process and who have a real drive for making things better. This is better than people who know the process inside out but do not have the creativity to come up with new ideas. Ideally have a list of workshop attendees in your head before you seek manager approval.

Consider group dynamics

Having managers or senior staff in a workshop can cause staff to clam up - so avoid it. Managers need to trust their staff (who know the processes best) to get on with it without their intervention.

Figure 1: Essential Workshop Materials

Create a slide pack

To guide you through the workshop a brief slide pack will help you focus on the key stages and will help you to avoid missing anything. Steer clear of onerous text based slides – a schedule and a photo that depicts each stage of the workshop will keep you on track.

Arrange facilities and materials

Here's what you'll need to run the workshop, and why:

- Laptop and projector – to display your slide pack
- Large sticky notes – to identify different channels or roles in the process
- Medium sticky notes – to write down tasks in the process
- Marker Pens (medium nib) – for attendees to write out tasks on sticky notes
- Blu-Tack – to stick brown paper up on the walls
- Sticky tape – to stick post it notes down flat once you've finished (essential if you roll up the paper!)

- Sticky note tabs (of a variety of colours) – for sticking onto tasks to capture process diagnostics such as customer interaction points or timings
- Scissors – to cut sheets of brown paper to size
- Camera – for taking snapshots for process mapping later on

Talk to attendees prior

Explain to staff the process you are looking at and what you want to achieve. It will make them feel more comfortable. Let them attend in casual clothes and arrange to start the workshop a bit later than a usual work day to make them feel relaxed.

Schedule it!

Run the workshops over 2 days – the first day to analyze the current state, the second to design the new (future) state process. Have a gap of at least a few days between workshops in order to give attendees time to think up new ideas. Give all attendees as much advance notice of the workshops as possible by scheduling early. Ensure that you have plenty of breaks during the workshops to prevent innovation fatigue!

Have a spreadsheet and scribe ready

Set up a spreadsheet to capture all the output from the workshop. This should capture details such as process tasks, systems, staff, diagnostics, timings and improvement ideas.

Arrange to have a scribe present to capture the process details in the spread sheet. Your job is to focus on facilitation not typing!

The day before

Set up the room by sticking up 3 sheets of brown paper as long as you can along the wall.

Set up chairs so that they all face the brown paper rather than behind desks. This helps to make the session less formal and more interactive. Ensure that your projector screen is set up in a manner which makes it easy for them to pivot around and see.

DO NOT put any existing process maps up on the wall! This limits their thinking!

Running the Workshop
Day 1 – Current State Analysis

Why am I here?

Never assume that the attendees know why they are there. Chances are that there will be someone who hasn't read any of the material you've sent them or someone who has just crawled out of bed. The introductory speech is your chance to explain why they've been chosen and to set the scene as to the great adventure they are about to go on. This is your opportunity to put your marketing hat on and sell the dream of an exciting new world that only they can build. Explain that they are the process experts and that you are there to help them improve their business and the lives of their customers.

Ice breaker

Ask all the attendees to introduce themselves – both their role and personal life. Keep things light-hearted by asking them to tell something unique about themselves such as a hidden talent.

Define the process scope

Set the scene by talking about the scope of the process – i.e. where the process starts and ends and some of the channels and trigger points of the process.

Define the customer outcome(s)

It's critically important to define what it is that the customer really needs as everything in the process must be in alignment with the customer need. Stand in the customer's shoes and identify:

- What process the customer thinks they are involved with (it may be different to the actual process!)
- What the customer expects to happen during the process (both good or bad!)
- What does the customer really need? (Summarize this in a one line customer outcome statement).

Define current process tasks

Give each attendee a pack of sticky notes and a pen and ask them to individually write down their own interpretation of the process in verb-noun format (no collaboration!) This will take some time (up to about 30mins in some cases). Once all attendees are finished ask the attendees to count their sticky notes. The person with the most is then asked to stick them up in order on the brown paper. Work through each attendee asking them if they have any different tasks.

Merge all the individual processes together to create one agreed end-to-end process.

Don't just consider "sunny day" processes where everything goes right - consider everything that can go wrong. Look at the paths from every business rule in your process. Consider all process permutations and trigger points of the process.

Once the process has been agreed, number each task. This makes it easier to check tasks against the spread sheet and easier to map the process against photos of the maps. Note: don't be concerned about the order of the numbers – it's irrelevant as long as each task has a unique reference number.

Add diagnostic information

Process diagnostic information is any information that is inherent in each task that may aid analysis. For example a typical set of process diagnostic information may include:

- Role (staff member performing the task)
- Average time taken to complete the task
- Systems used
- Customer Interaction Points
- Hand-offs between staff or systems
- Business rules (decisions or system controlled logic)

Once you have an agreement on the current state process, ask the staff to annotate each task with the diagnostic information using the small post-it tabs. Use a different coloured post-it tab for each type of diagnostic.

Wrap up

When all the diagnostic information has been added, thank your attendees for their help and briefly explain what they will do on day 2.

Once the attendees have left, stick the tasks down on the brown paper using sticky tape. This prevents them falling off or curling up if you need to take the brown paper down.

Running the Workshop
Day 2 Improving the Process

Recap

On day 2 provide a 5 minute re-cap on what was done on day 2. Explain to the attendees that day 2 is their time to get creative, to come out with new and innovative ideas – that nothing is crazy, stupid or "pie in the sky".

Innovation Brainstorm

As a start to day 2 it's good to wake the attendees up with an innovation brainstorming exercise. To do this split the attendees into two groups – this creates a little healthy competition! Ask each group to come up with twenty different ideas as to how they can improve the process. Stress to them that they must come up with a minimum of twenty ideas (but they can come up with more than twenty if they want to). Ask each team to pick a spokesperson and to play back their ideas to the other group.

Eliminate or Improve

Next, using the ideas from the innovation brainstorm, work through each step asking if it can be:

- Eliminated, or
- Improved

Encourage the attendees to question everything and to rework the process with the focus on eliminating activities (whilst focusing on the customer outcomes required). If they say that something can't be eliminated or improved ask them, why, why and why again. Coax, cajole, prod, suggest – but never tell them what they should do. Don't be afraid to get a bit tough with attendees when it comes to eliminating or improving tasks. It can take a bit of time to get them to think creatively as they have been used to doing things the same way for a long time without challenging why.

If a task is eliminated draw a large cross on the sticky note. If a task is improved put a small tick on the sticky note, if there is no change, mark the sticky note with a dash (-).

Ask the scribe to document all potential improvements against each task in the spreadsheet action plan, clearly noting which tasks are eliminated or improved or if they stay the same.

Once you have worked through every task in the process ask the attendees to have a quick look over the process to see if there is anything else that could be eliminated or improved. Sometimes ideas may pop up halfway through that can then be re-applied to earlier parts of the process.

Wrap Up

Be sure to thank your attendees for their participation and to explain what you will do with the output from the workshops – after all, the workshop is simply a means to provide the information in order to deliver real improvements to the business, and most importantly its customers.

After the attendees have left be sure to photograph the whole process for later analysis (and process mapping or modeling if required), but be sure to keep the paper process maps for future reference.

Conclusion

This guide has provided advice for planning and running business process improvement workshops that are quick and effective. Nothing, however, is set in stone and all businesses are unique, so I encourage you to use this information to create even more effective ways to deliver value via workshops.

For further tips, tricks and educational material on business process improvement, please visit my process blog at www.theprocessninja.com

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