

White Paper

Running Effective Process Analysis Workshops

WP0183 | March 2015



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It would be very convenient if, when conducting Process Improvement initiatives for an organization, we could simply pull copies of the relevant existing “as is” process models from a common repository and start our work. It would be even more convenient if we could rely on these as being accurate and authoritative ‘sources of the truth’. Whilst many forward-thinking organizations are striving to document and manage their processes in this way, in reality there will still be cases where process documentation is unavailable, inaccurate or out of date. Furthermore, there may be process documentation that doesn’t reflect what really happens on the ground.

Against this backdrop, it is therefore extremely valuable for us to liaise with a range of process and business stakeholders when we are embarking on a Process Improvement initiative. Engaging with a range of stakeholders enables us to understand the end-to-end process and any perceived problems as well as understanding the wider business context. In order to make the most of our time with stakeholders we’ll be aiming to elicit information, problems and requirements from them. There are a wide range of elicitation techniques we might consider; workshops being one of the core, often used in combination with stakeholder interviews as well as observation.

A well run and facilitated workshop provides us with the opportunity to hear a wide range of views, from a range of stakeholders. It provides an excellent opportunity to break down organizational silos and for stakeholders in different departments and teams to work towards a

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common goal. Workshops can be energetic and fun – we can map an end-to-end process out on a wall and discuss the problems, the challenges and potential solutions. The flip side of the coin, of course, is that as well as collaboration and creativity, workshops can be a hot-bed of conflict! For our process workshops to succeed, we need to be well prepared. We need to facilitate fairly and with purpose, and drive the workshop to a useful conclusion. This white paper provides some tips, techniques and considerations for anyone considering running a workshop.

What is a workshop?

I suspect everyone reading this article will have attended or facilitated at least one workshop in the past, but it is still valuable to take a step back and consider what a workshop is. Or, to put this another way, what differentiates a workshop from just a regular “meeting”? Starting with a formal definition helps to address this question...

IIBA's Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABoK®) guide defines a Requirements Workshop as:

“...a structured meeting in which a carefully selected group of stakeholders collaborate to define and or refine requirements under the guidance of a skilled neutral facilitator”

Whilst IIBA's definition refers to a requirements workshop, the definition holds true for a workshop discussing processes and process requirements also. There are many other definitions available, but the core essence is that a workshop needs to be collaborative, with a shared goal (in our case, defining or refining a process), and there needs to be strong and purposeful neutral facilitation.

It therefore follows that for the workshop to be successful, we must pay careful attention to who we invite and how we facilitate. A successful workshop is built on a foundation of careful preparation and planning.

Holding a successful workshop: Why, Who, How

There are several steps to planning a successful workshop. Careful preparation starts by thinking about why the workshop is necessary, who to invite and how to run the event. Some of the key steps are summarised in the diagram below, these points are discussed in the remainder of this paper:

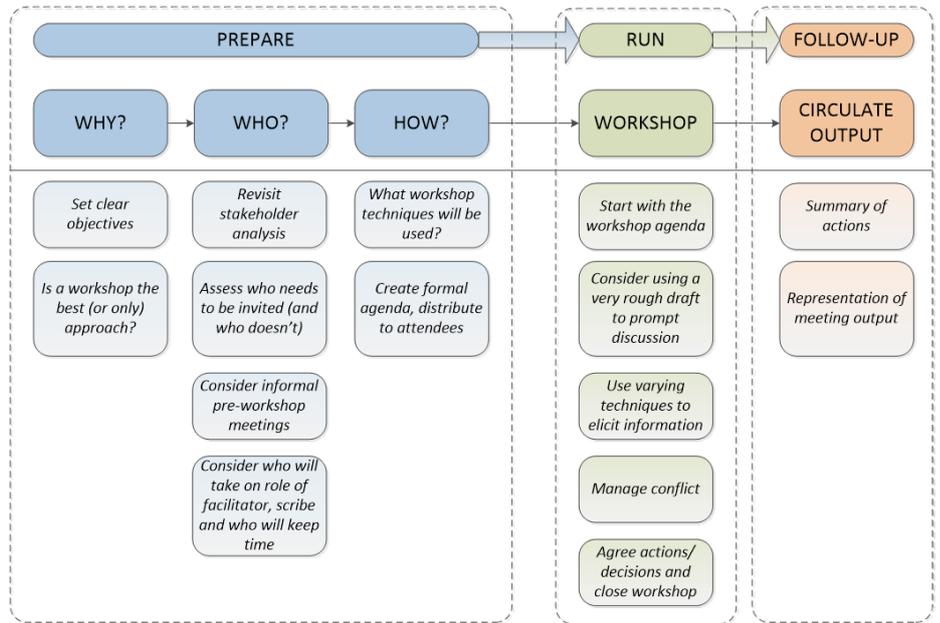


Figure 1: Workshop considerations
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Start with 'why?'

At the early stages of workshop planning, it is essential that we have a clear and agreed idea of why the workshop is necessary and the outcomes we are hoping to achieve. It is also worth considering whether a workshop is the best (or only) approach. Lengthy workshops with many attendees burn resources (a half day workshop with 5 attendees plus a facilitator burns 3 person-days) so it's important that we make sure they are as productive as possible. With some careful pre-planning we can avoid these pitfalls and ensure that our well organized and well facilitated workshop is a success. This starts with a clear agreed workshop purpose.

When defining the workshop purpose, it can be extremely useful to set a measurable objective. A useful way to frame this can be to form a sentence starting with the phrase “By the end of the workshop we will have...”. An example is shown below, in figure 2:

By the end of the workshop we will have:

- Reviewed the first draft of the “as is” Sales Order process and be confident that it is accurate
- Identified and documented the main problems with the process
- Identified a range of potential solutions/ideas for improvement
- Planned our next steps

Figure 2: Example workshop objectives

This statement acts as a succinct, concise and precise definition of the workshop’s purpose, and can help us prepare for and run the event itself. It can also be used before and at the beginning of the session to check that everyone is on the same page, and at the end of the session as a form of ‘acceptance criteria’ to judge whether the workshop has been a success, or whether a follow-up meeting may be necessary. Creating this concise summary of the workshop’s purpose will help us to consider who we will need to invite.

Who: The Goldilocks Effect

Much like the fictional bowls of porridge in the age-old fairy-tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, it’s important that we get the invitees of a workshop just right. Too many, and we’ll find that people will struggle to get enough ‘air time’ and struggle to make their key points. We might not make sufficient progress – particularly if we’ve invited people who don’t really need to be there. Too few on the other hand, and we may risk missing key opinions and information. We might find other interested stakeholders much later who had a valuable contribution to make – and by not consulting them earlier we may have missed some critical detail. Sadly, unlike Goldilocks’ fictional porridge, selecting workshop attendees is rather complex, and sometimes may be a little experimental!

In order to find the right people, it’s important to carry out a thorough stakeholder identification and analysis exercise. Techniques for analyzing stakeholders are beyond the scope of this paper, however some useful references can be found in the further reading section. Once the relevant stakeholders have been identified, there can be significant value in holding informal one-to-one workshop pre-meetings.

Holding informal 'water cooler' style meetings before a workshop allows us to focus on individual conversations (rather than just formal meetings) and get a quick 'temperature check' from each delegate. It helps us to ensure that:

- a) They are on-board with the workshop objectives (and if they are not, to gain an initial understanding of why)
- b) They agree they are the right person to attend
- c) They feel anyone else should be attending

A quick, 15-30 minute conversation over coffee can really help set the scene. It also means that you go into the workshop prepared, knowing a bit about each attendee and their views and perspectives. It may also help us to pre-empt and plan for any potential disagreement and conflict.

How?

Having considered why the workshop is necessary, as well as who to invite, it is now necessary to consider how the workshop will run. This starts with the rather routine (but incredibly important) logistical matters like when, where and for how long, as well as considering any equipment (e.g. projectors, flip charts) that may be required. It is useful to address these points early, as finding common time in stakeholders' diaries can be a challenge. And of course, even if you can find a common slot in diaries; for many organizations, finding a suitable meeting room can be an even bigger challenge!

As well as the logistical matters, it is important to consider and define the detailed agenda, who will fulfil the core workshop roles such as facilitator, scribe and timekeeper (this may be the facilitator or someone else). It is also important to consider the specific techniques that will be used during the workshop – relevant techniques should be chosen carefully to suit the mixture of delegates that you are inviting and the subject matter that is being discussed.

Agenda

It is useful to define an agenda and circulate this to attendees in advance. This should clearly state the workshop objectives, who the facilitator and scribe are, and also list (at a summary level) the kinds of activities that will be undertaken in the workshop. It is also important to state any items that the attendees will need to read in advance or bring with them. An example is shown in figure 3, below:

Sales Order Process Improvement workshop

1st December, Room 3.5, 10:00 – 12:30

Facilitator: Jayne Smith / **Scribe:** John Brown

Attendees: David Green, Penny Porter, Dan Bounds, Wendy Redman, Matt Johnston, Kelly Breem

Pre-Reading

Please examine the draft 'as is' process that has been distributed

Workshop Objective

By the end of the workshop we will have:

- Reviewed the first draft of the "as is" Sales Order process and be confident that it is accurate
- Identified and documented the main problems with the process
- Identified a range of potential solutions/ideas for improvement
- Planned our next steps

Agenda

1. Introductions/Workshop Objectives
2. Facilitated discussion & feedback on draft 'as is' process (please come prepared with your feedback)
3. Brainstorm: Main problems with the existing process
4. Facilitated discussion: Which problems should we focus on? What are the root causes?
5. Brainstorm: Improvement opportunities
6. Facilitated discussion: Which improvement opportunities should we investigate further? What should the next steps be?
7. Agree actions and next steps

Figure 3: Example agenda

Running the workshop itself

There are a huge number of techniques that can be used within a workshop to elicit information from delegates and to spark debate, and far more than we can consider in a single white paper. However, when the objective of the workshop is to map or discuss an 'as is' process it can be very useful to utilize a combination of brainstorming, group-work and facilitated conversation. Some related tips and techniques are listed below:

1. **Start the workshop with “why” and the agenda:** Whatever the workshop, it is worth starting by reinforcing and reminding delegates of the workshop objectives and the agenda. Having the objectives displayed somewhere prominent in the room can be extremely useful, this can also help ensure that the group stays on track and on scope. You may also want to lay down a set of 'ground rules' for the workshop – this can be a useful way of encouraging interaction and engagement by stating at the outset that 'creative thinking' is expected!
2. **Rather than starting from a blank sheet, display a “straw man” (very rough draft):** Often, when a process exists, we'll have a fairly good idea of how it works and where the potential problems are. We may have picked up a whole range of useful pieces of information in our pre-workshop discussions and interviews. In these cases, it can be useful to create, in advance, a starting point for our discussion. The purpose of this artefact is to create debate and discussion – it does not have to be correct! In fact, when introducing it, it is worth explicitly explaining this.

As soon as a draft is displayed, it is likely that delegates will start to spot missing activities, tasks and so forth. This is extremely positive, and shows that the activity is working. We could either encourage delegates to highlight their observations/suggestions by shouting out, or we could perhaps split them into syndicate groups for discussions and brainstorming.

3. **Syndicate brainstorms:** It can be useful to split the workshop attendees into groups and ask them to brainstorm around a particular topic, process or problem area. There are many ways that this feedback can be used, including:
 - Brainstorming/eliciting the tasks within an existing process
 - Defining the actors (systems/departments etc.) that are involved with a process
 - Creating potential improvement opportunities

In order for a brainstorm to yield the best results, it's useful to set a clear focus statement. This should ideally be a short, succinct and precise summary articulating the particular area that you want the group to focus in on. For example "List all the activities and hand-offs that your team are aware of or involved with in the Sales Order process". Asking delegates to use sticky notes to write one idea on each note works well.

4. **Brown wrapping paper & sticky notes:** A staple technique of process modelers everywhere, this exercise encourages delegates to discuss and define an end-to-end process. Once the various 'lanes' within the process have been defined, a large roll of wide (typically brown) wrapping paper is placed on a wall, with the lanes drawn on. Delegates write the various activities within the process on sticky notes, and place them on the model. These can be moved around until an agreed version is arrived at. When documenting an as-is process, this can later be validated with observation and other techniques. If creating a brand new process (or improved process), this can be drawn up and discussed in more detail after the meeting.
5. **Facilitated discussions:** In addition to the techniques listed above, it can be useful to have facilitated discussions. Led by a facilitator, this technique encourages the group to discuss a particular topic or focus area. The facilitator keeps the conversation on track and on-topic, and ensures that everyone has their say – and also ensures that only one person speaks at any one time.

This list reflects a small fraction of the techniques available to us, and there are many useful books and other resources that list a range of other techniques. Some links are provided in the further reading section.

Conflict

Any workshop of any substance is likely to uncover at least some difference of opinion. If the topic being discussed is controversial, the workshop might end up being a hot-bed for conflict! It is important that we are prepared for this—any pre-meetings that we have held may help to uncover likely conflict areas, and this insight is very valuable.

Rather counter-intuitively, it can be extremely useful to let conflict bubble to the surface. It may be tempting to move conversations on quickly, avoiding disagreement. Yet when this happens, though we might appear to have 'tacit' agreement in the meeting, if a satisfactory conclusion hasn't been reached, it is likely that the conflict will re-surface somewhere else. It'll often re-surface later in the project, after key decisions have been made.

As a facilitator, it is important to enable a robust, but appropriate, debate to happen. It's important to keep the conversation civil, ensure that the topics are relevant (and offer to 'park' them for later discussion if not), and that everyone has an opportunity to speak. Often, a workshop provides an opportunity for people to feel heard and for agreement to be reached. In exceptional circumstances, where agreement can't be reached, it may be necessary to consider escalating the issue further up the chain. This is a course of last resort.

Closing a workshop and issuing the proceedings

Finally, having facilitated a workshop, having (hopefully) resolved conflict successfully, it'll be time to close. This is the perfect opportunity to refer back to the workshop objectives and ensure that everyone agrees that they have been met. If they haven't, it may be necessary to agree to meet again – or perhaps follow up with interviews or meetings of other types.

In any case, it is important to issue the workshop proceedings or output. The nature of the output will vary depending on the context, project and stakeholders. In some cases a very formal output may be needed. In others, a quick summary and photo of a white-board may suffice. Whatever format is used, it is useful to include:

- A summary of the main output: perhaps an initial sketch of a process model, or even a photo of a whiteboard sketch
- A list of actions, including who will undertake them, and when by
- Agreement over whether the group needs to meet again, and if so, when
- A summary of any 'parked' items that weren't discussed in the meeting, with a clear plan of when they will be discussed
- A summary of any key decisions

It is very beneficial to send the output as soon as possible, that way if any attendees have any further thoughts, they can get back to you quickly and these can be incorporated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, workshops can be extremely productive environments for eliciting and discussing details of existing processes. We can bring stakeholders together, gain consensus and work to resolve any issues or conflict. Successful workshops are built upon a foundation of careful preparation and tactful facilitation. By thinking about the why, who and how of workshops, we can ensure our workshops are designed for success.

Further reading

Readers interested in the topics raised in this paper may find the following resources useful:

Cadle, J, Turner, P & Paul, D et al (2010) Business Analysis Techniques: 72 Essential Tools for Success, BCS, Swindon

IIBA (2009) A guide to the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge® (BABOK® Guide) Version 2.0, IIBA, Toronto

Paul, D, Yeates, D & Cadle, J et al (2010) Business Analysis (second edition), BCS, Swindon

Pullan, P, Archer, J et al (2013) Business Analysis & Leadership: Influencing Change, Kogan Page, London

Reed, A “Adrian Reed’s Blog” [Online] www.adrianreed.co.uk

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