



HIGH-YIELD METHODS

Designing process for service & front/back office environments

Viewing Office Process Through a Strategic Lens

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Companies achieve customer-alignment by first aligning strategies with customers, then aligning process with strategy, then aligning technology with process. The concept is clear and readily understandable, including how strategy drives process.

But try asking a colleague whether process is tactical or strategic. Almost guaranteed the answer will come back, “tactical.” That’s because business views process as “nuts and bolts” or “mechanics” or “measurability”—not as work enabling strategy. Now ask another colleague which drives process—strategy or technology. This time you’ll get a quick, “technology”—not recognizing that technology driving process means process won’t support strategies. Both responses are knee-jerk answers. But could they possibly be the correct answers?

If you manage manufacturing, the answer is, indeed, “Yes,” some noble efforts to customer-align manufacturing notwithstanding. But if you’re managing front office or back office functions, both answers are wrong—emphatically wrong for the front office. Nonetheless, virtually all office managers treat office process as a tactical companion to technology without a strategic role. They know not what they do—and the cost of what they do.

What’s happening here is business confusing “process” overall with thoroughly tactical “manufacturing process.” Not surprising, because manufacturing process has been around forever. While office process—well, let’s just say that what’s passed for “office process” has been the outcome of applying manufacturing process methods to get office



workers under control, the “herding cats” syndrome; or applying skin-deep, process 101 approaches, some of them erroneously labeled “Six Sigma,” to try reining in sales.

Why no attention or respect paid to the unique process needs of the office environment—and the strategic connection between office process and strategy?

Two basic reasons. First, management, supported by IT and production functions, customarily views office functions as a necessary evil, or overhead, or what stands between making a good product and making a good profit. So why bother creating a process approach that links process to strategy—and respects the uniqueness of office workplaces? “Hell, wouldn’t turn out to be anything more than dumbed-down manufacturing process that’s permissive enough to ‘let cats be cats.’” “Yeah, let’s apply an adult dose of manufacturing process discipline out there in the office to get things under control.” Swell.

Ingrained beliefs will overcome business intelligence almost every time.

The second reason I’ve already mentioned. We just don’t have process tools designed to link office process to strategy, or more accurately—we’re unaware of those out there. And putting the process-strategy link aside, even people who realize manufacturing workers now count for less than 10% of the U.S. workforce—and realize we’re focusing 90% plus of our process attention on less than 10% of workers—they have no place to turn for office process design methods, other than misapplying manufacturing process tools. And setting aside the process-strategy link, if you don’t accept the fundamental premise that office and manufacturing work environments are radically different, please review this chart.



Office Environments	Manufacturing Environments
Low repetition	High repetition
Decision-based business process	Fixed business process
Adaptability critical	Consistency critical
Hundreds of key workflows	Dozens of key workflows
80 - 90% of defects up at workflow level	Majority of defects down at work process level
Majority of work activities interdependent	Many work activities independent
Invisible defects	Visible defects
Empowered staff	Compliant staff
Resist "external" input	Accept "external" input
Business process <u>is</u> the work	Business process guides the work
Fully joined workflow & information flow	Partially detached workflow & information flow
High-dependence on application software	Partial dependence on application software

No resemblance between the two. But all the chart comparisons aside, the biggest differences between office and manufacturing process are how office process relates to business strategy, first and foremost, but also how it relates to technology.

Once you've looked at office process through a strategic lens, you'll never confuse office and manufacturing process again. And you'll never condone use of manufacturing process methods in the office—unless, of course, you don't appreciate Maslow's adage, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, then all the world looks like a nail."

So let's put your eyeball up to that strategic lens and take a look.



How about starting with implementing a new, customer-centric strategy—say, integrating marketing and sales to present one face to the customer. Very worthwhile initiative in a B2B company, but how are you going to pull it off?

How about the CEO issuing a memo saying, “Starting Monday, Marketing and Sales are going to blah, blah, blah, blah. Can’t you hear the laughter in response?”

Or how about firing the VP Sales and having both functions report to the VP Marketing? How many four-letter words do you know? And can you spell, “s-u-b-v-e-r-s-i-o-n? Or better yet, think “backstabbing.”

Or how about hiring a Chief Customer Officer over both VPs? He or she can knock their heads together until they get it right? Fat chance. Know what? I’m running out of options. Other than wiping out Marketing and Sales completely and starting over—and winding up with new folks wearing the same old headsets.

None of this stuff will help meld sales and marketing. Why? *Because if you don’t change the underlying process, you’ll get the same old outcome.* Strategies are thoughts. Process implements thoughts. And there’s no other place to take this. In the office, strategy and process are intertwined. You can’t treat them independently.

Further, please notice that in our sales-marketing example, the office process required to carry out strategy will dictate the type of technology support provided. No technology driving process.

I could give an endless number of similar examples. But they won’t mean as much as looking at your company’s process through your own strategic lens. Please try it.

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