

## **RECOGNISE A PROCESS**

There is an unfortunate yet very common tendency to use an external standard such as ISO 9000 as the starting point for defining a management system.

"Procedures" are built around the sections of the standard in an artificial structure which does not fit naturally or logically with the way in which an organisation operates.

So you may have a contract review 'procedure' and a purchasing 'procedure'. But confirming that you can do the job is only one step within the process of tendering for work, and your purchasing process is not logically complete until the goods or services have been received and checked.

It can be difficult for those who are steeped in narrative procedures suddenly to change their thinking sufficiently radically to allow them to "see" their processes. Often they think of what their department does as a series of disjointed tasks, rather than identifying what initiates an action and how it is followed through to completion.

You should always start at as high a level as possible, and look for the "input" or event which kicks off the process.

For example, what do you think are the 5 or 6 key processes involved in running your department - or your business?

One way of differentiating between a "process" and a "procedure" is that procedures can exist at a low level and permeate upwards, and processes can exist at a high level and work their way downwards - processes can go all the way down to the work instruction level, but procedures can never make it to the very top. A bit like a glass ceiling for procedures.

You will also have to make some decisions at an individual process level if:

(a) one stage in a process involves a separate group of job functions from the rest of the process, or

(b) a process is currently defined as a set of (not obviously related) procedures and staff do not recognise the process as an entity.

Often, if a transaction moves out of a department it is regarded as "finished", despite the fact that further processing is carried out elsewhere.

In case (a), it is sensible to split into separate processes or to define a sub-process. In (b), it is usually better to set the existing procedures aside and draft the flow of the process without feeling obliged to retain the current descriptions.

As an example, one NHS Trust's response to a Major Civil Accident requires Action Cards to be distributed to key staff in their Accident & Emergency department. Each consists of a few lines of instruction, and there is no mention of what anyone else has to do. All these cards were consolidated onto a 1-page flowchart, which clearly shows all staff's involvement. Each individual can now see the complete process, with his or her specific role highlighted.

## **GO WITH THE FLOW**

We will see later that there is more to a process than just the tasks and decisions which define the flow of information or material. But even to describe this process flow clearly and in a format which staff can understand and use easily can be a challenge. The best way to show (or "map") a process flow is now widely accepted to be as a flowchart.

There are many types and formats of flowchart. Some are little more than a diagram with indeterminate "objects" linked by lines which suggest connections back and forward, up and down and occasionally round in a circle. To me, the attempt in the Year 2000 revision of ISO9001 to illustrate the process-based approach which the standard is promoting is a prime example of this.

I have a problem with loops. It seems illogical to me to imply that a feedback loop can ever take you back to the start of a process - time will have moved on, and your next "journey" through the process is a different version ("instance" of the process, for which the available resources and the influences and constraints may all have changed.

Two of the more useful formats of flowchart are:

(a) a process flowchart, which shows "what has to be done", and

(b) a deployment flowchart, which also shows the departments and job functions involved - "who should do it".

The deployment flowchart is a matrix, best presented (in my opinion) with job functions along the x-axis and tasks or activities down the y-axis. The columns representing the job functions are sometimes referred to as "swimlanes".

Both types of flowchart can run from left to right across a page (or screen) or can flow downwards. There is an obvious problem with the cross-page presentation when the right hand margin is reached, and the resultant need to draw a link down, across and back on a page does not help the intuitive flow of the logic.

My own preference is for the cross-page presentation for top level processes (which tend to be an overview which often lends itself to display as an A3 poster on an office wall), and the vertical format for detailed processes.

Several software packages offer some of this mapping capability, a few of which use meaningful symbols to indicate the type of action involved at each stage. Other than for top-level processes, I much prefer those which use symbols which do not require the description of the task to be entered as text "inside the box". I find that it is far easier to follow the steps in a process when the text is clearly set out in a single column, and where you do not have to chase the flow of symbols across the page or screen to follow the logic of the process. The "text in the box" option is also limited by the fact that you can fit in fewer swimlanes for the job functions involved.

And there is always the (long-winded, rambling and confusing) narrative option which allows you to describe conflicting or contradictory activities on different pages, each of which sounds plausible when read in isolation.

## **DRAW THE LINE SOMEWHERE – BUT THERE MAY BE A PARALLEL**

You may infer from the deployment flowchart format that a process is a sequence of linear steps. This is not always the case. For example, when patients present themselves at a hospital's Accident and Emergency department, they will go through triage so that their condition can be assessed, and they must also have their personal details registered.

Depending on what is happening in the department when a patient presents, registration may take place before triage or vice versa.

Another example would be the preparation of a tender document, when the Technical department prepares its cost estimate, Personnel investigate the availability of staff with the right skills and the Commercial department consider the legal aspects of the contract.

In the first example, the tasks are sequential but the order is not preset, and in the second case the tasks may actually take place in parallel (although they need not do so). This will cause a problem when you try to show the flow through the process. This would normally be done by drawing a connecting line from one task to the next - typically (in the case of a deployment flowchart) between the symbols which represent the person who has responsibility for taking the action or making the decision. How do you handle the two situations above? I will leave you to think about this one –suggested answers can be found in another article!

And it is not only a process which may be more than a linear sequence of actions. Processes themselves often occur in parallel. For example, resources are managed continuously whilst production processes are running.