White Paper
Process Documentation
Practical Tips to Get it Right

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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.

Anyone who works in the corporate world knows that documentation is part and parcel in the way we do business. From operations manuals, to procedures, to process maps and models, organizations are resplendent with a smorgasbord of pieces of paper and information systems. But, in today's age of fast moving technology, is process documentation redundant or does it still remain "a necessary evil"?

This white paper attempts to identify whether process documentation still has relevance in today and if so, how to get the best out of it. In particular, Business Process and Procedural Analysts, Business Analysts and Technical Writers can use this white paper to identify what is necessary to document and how to do so effectively.

In summary, this white paper explains:

- Why documentation is perceived so negatively
- Recent changes to the way we document process
- Common mistakes in documenting processes
- How to get process documentation right

A Necessary Evil?

Let's face the facts – people don't typically enjoy documenting processes. Few deny that they are important but documenting what organizations do can be time consuming, detailed work that those without the requisite English language skills may struggle to complete.

I once worked with a client to document the processes and procedures relating to a new IT data centre. Completing 40 or so process and procedural documents took 5 months and involved approximately 30 different staff members. The organization had tried to get their staff to complete the documents themselves but quickly realized that the staff had neither the skills nor the inclination to do so. Furthermore each person had a different way that they documented the processes, leading to a confusing mixture of different styles of documentation.

Why Organizations Need Documentation

Process documentation may not be very exciting, but it certainly isn't evil - it can prove extremely useful if carried out professionally. The best way to understand its importance is to imagine what our organizations would be like without it:

- Processes would be inconsistent or non-existent!
- There would be no training materials
- Auditors or accreditation organizations could not check that quality is being achieved
- Regulators would not be able to see evidence of meeting their requirements

The Death of Paper

When we typically think of process documents we traditionally think of printed pieces of paper – and let's face facts many of our organizations are still swamped by pieces of paper that we refer to. But was that operations manual that sits on your desk in a folder really necessary to print, or is there a better way?

Many organizations are reducing their paper consumption and achieving both considerable cost savings and more efficient ways of working. There are many ways of more efficiently documenting processes (by electronic means) – a classic example being Orbus's iServer – but there is also a significant cultural change required to break the paper habit.

The Rise of the Machines

We now have a plethora of tools to tame documentation – from process modeling tools that can create integrated process and procedural documentation at the touch of a button AND publish it for consumption, to process automation tools that reduce the amount of instruction required by guiding the user through the workflow. We also have a range of new and old technology coming to the fore: it has never been easier to create instructional videos or podcasts and there are more technology solutions for managing content than ever before.

Common Mistakes and Simple Solutions

Whether process documentation is written by hand or by using a technology solution there are often common mistakes that staff make when documenting processes and procedures:

Forgetting Enterprise Architecture

Few people ever question why a process exists – and this is a common mistake. All processes within an organization exist to serve a customer outcome, even if at face value they do not appear to do so. When we document processes and procedures they must always be placed within the context of the organization's enterprise architecture – in other words they should be linked to not only the desired customer outcome, but to the business service they support and the technology that supports the (cross-functional) process. Often business process and procedural documentation is written without this context in mind.

This problem can be alleviated by utilizing a tool such as Orbus iServer Enterprise Architect.
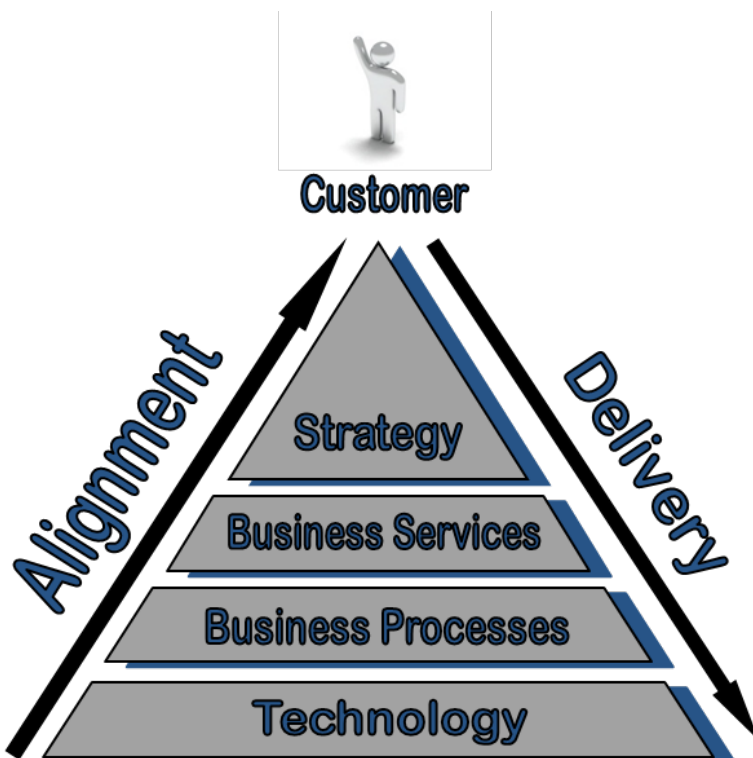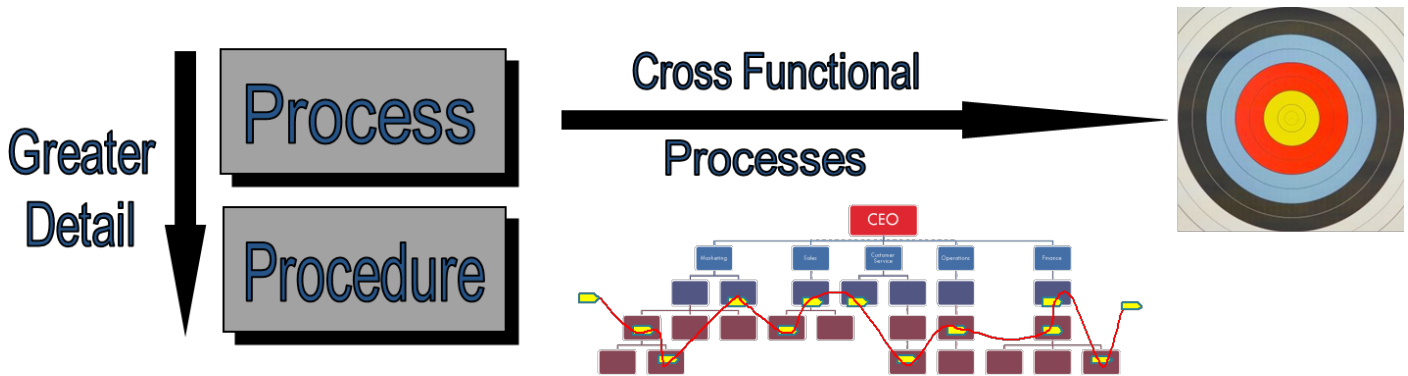
Silo Based Documentation

Worse than not having an enterprise architecture context is the dreaded "siloed" process document. This occurs when a single business function documents a part of the process without looking at the upstream or downstream parts of the process. In essence they do a number of activities within their own area and document only these activities.

This is a dangerous practice as it can lead to individual business functions making "improvements" to their part of the process which can actually have a negative impact on the overall process. This is commonly referred to as "local process optimization leading to global process de-optimization".

To solve this problem a cross functional process view must always be taken where the process is documented from a customer experience perspective.

Including procedures in processes not processes in procedures

It is a great idea to have process maps within procedural documents as they help the staff involved with the process to see the end-to-end process and the linkages to enterprise architecture. On the contrary it is a very bad idea to try to show procedural documentation on a process map or model. The function of a process map is to show very clearly and simply what work is done, not how the work is done – as such procedural level detail on process maps or models constitutes unnecessary "noise" that is to the detriment of comprehension.

Not Everyone Can Write a Document

Getting the level of detail within documents correct is a fine balancing line. Too much detail and users will give up using the documents – too little detail and they will turn to their peers or managers for help. Getting the balance of what is needed is a skill best left to professional process or procedural analysts.

Acknowledging Loops and Exceptions

Many processes and procedures are written as linear processes where the process follows a "happy path" where nothing goes wrong. Unfortunately most office based, service businesses don't work that way. Exceptions to the process and process loops (where the process has to go back to an earlier step in the process) are common occurrences. Most time is lost and work is created when an exception to the "happy path" process arises. Therefore it's critically important to embrace exceptions as part of the documentation so that staff know what to do in the event that they occur.

Documenting the Undocumentable

There is a tendency for some organizations to want to document every process – but there are still some processes that are so non-linear that to document them is a waste of precious time and effort. Whilst technology is advancing our ability to capture details of "unstructured" and collaborative processes, often these processes can be so random in nature that there is little value in trying to document them. With all process and procedural documentation a practical approach that balances time and value to the organization is key.

Conclusions

Whilst Business process documentation is still viewed as a mundane task by many it is still a necessary evil in many ways. This white paper has detailed why we still need process and procedural documentation as well as some practical tips for improving the documentation by:

- Taking an enterprise architecture view of the process to set the strategic context
- Adopting a cross functional, customer centric view to avoid global de-optimization of the process
- Including process maps in procedures, not procedures in process maps
- Hiring the rights skills to create process and procedural documentation
- Documenting all pathways and exceptions to the process – not just the "happy path"
- Avoiding documenting processes where the documentation will add little value

Following these simple tips will help produce documentation that will be useful, practical and viewed as an asset to the organization rather than a "necessary evil".

If you'd like to read more about business process improvement, please visit Craig's blog, The Process Ninja at www.theprocessninja.com

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