

Process Improvement: Subtracting Waste, Adding Value

by Clive Shearer

- In the future, calculators may weigh no more than one and a half tons ...
—*Popular Mechanics*, 1949
- There will never be a bigger plane built... —*Boeing President, about the 247, a 10-seat aircraft, 1933*

Do you remember when cellular phones were about the size of a brick? Fortunately, manufacturers disregard the old saying, “if it ain’t broken, don’t fix it.” Instead, they prefer to improve products that are already working. It is no different in the workplace. Just because staff in an office, lab, or hospital are busy and functional, it does not mean that tasks are exempt from improvement. If things are working well—could they be improved?

- Are people working diligently within a system that is not firing on all cylinders?
- Do people have to ‘go the extra mile’ just to get the work done?

Dropping the Ball During Handoff

Most people know how to do their jobs, but people do not work in isolation. Problems often occur through miscommunication.

- Are employees doing the wrong things because of miscommunication?
- When work is handed off from one person to another, does quality get left behind?

Waste is Often Unnoticed

We learn to ignore a car alarm that sounds every day. We learn to ignore inefficiency at work, because we get used to it. But waste is expensive:

Strive for Value Added Activities

The opposite of a wasteful activity is a “value-added” activity: it enhances the end result. Value-added activities include productive meetings, effective documentation, functional communication procedures, and practical systems.

- Would you like to establish ‘best practice’ standards to elevate your team’s productivity?
- Are you tracking and measuring your successes to boost morale?

To Survive and Succeed

The term “process improvement” may sound overwhelming or intimidating, but can actually be very straightforward. Typically process improvement consulting helps by:

- spotlighting and mapping current processes;
- facilitating meetings and activities that enable people within the organization to consider different ways of doing business; and guiding the organization toward improved processes.

Clive Shearer is a member of the University Consulting Alliance

Be Ready for Change

The university environment is constantly changing. Budgets are being curtailed, rules and regulations are changing, technology is advancing and work areas are being realigned. People are expected to be more productive. Process improvement can help your change to be positive—are you ready?

Contact the Alliance at 206-616-8461 OR alliance@u.washington.edu.