

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? It was only a few years ago. 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?*

STREAMLINING THE HANDOFF

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

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

CUT WASTE THAT'S "UNDER THE RADAR"

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: “putting out fires,” enduring unproductive meetings, revising documents, searching for files and working with the wrong information.

- *Are team members frustrated when they have to deal with other people’s errors?*
- *Are mistakes being caught far downstream, instead of at the source?*

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 PI 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.

BE READY FOR CHANGE

The university environment is changing: budgets shrink and shift, rules and regulations are revised, technology continues to advance and work areas are realigned. Yet through all these changes, people are expected to be more productive. Process improvement can help your changes be positive—are you ready?



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