Don't Automate, Obliterate!

By Uwe H Kaufmann and Amy BC Tan

Our business simulation is intended to show the business impact of improving and even redesigning a rather simple business process using basic yet powerful tools. Process KPIs as well as customer satisfaction and customer KPIs are measured to gauge the degree of improvement. Since we have been running this simulation many times with teams from different industries and for employees at various organisational levels, we have observed the following very interesting behaviours:

1. After experiencing the initial round of the simulation with intentionally sub-optimal process design, teams very frequently raise two requests: more staff, IT support.
2. When given the chance to re-design the process, 90% of all teams tend to move their team members around to cover up process weaknesses instead of analysing and closing gaps.
3. More often than not, teams focus on internal matters rather than customer requirements.

Our simulated process has a few intended flaws built in. The most time-consuming process step, for example, can be easily improved with one very simple change that costs nothing whatsoever. This would lead to a much better flow and a reduction or even a complete removal of the backlog that usually builds up in front of this process step. However, only less than 10% of all participating teams find this "trick" without help by the facilitator. More than 50% of all teams try to add manpower to this task and opt for automating this step instead of looking closer and removing the obstacle.

There has been a significant increase in IT solutions during the business simulation since its introduction more than ten years ago. Whilst it is correct, that some tasks can be automated just by using a hand phone, it does not make sense to automate a task that no one needs – after understanding how the process really works.

The sobering fact is, that teams tend to automate before understanding the process.

If our business simulation findings would give any indication about real business process re-engineering (BPR) work, we would have to conclude that many IT solutions have been bought prematurely, many broken processes are still broken, just faster and many opportunities in business processes are still uncovered.

Why is this like that? It seems that IT support, an Android or iPhone App is used as a silver bullet for many problems. Nowadays, Cloud-computing is the up-to-date method and can't be wrong. Opposing against these approaches is like fighting against the time. Good old process mapping and process improvement seem like outdated approaches that belong to previous generations. Michael Hammer, the godfather of business process re-engineering, once said

Automating a mess yields an automated mess.

Our teams usually end their business simulation successfully. After being taught some eye-opening truth about the process, they are able to cut the lead time drastically, increase customer satisfaction to the highest level and have even fun doing so.

Only a small percentage of this improvement is due to IT support. Most of it is a result of understanding the process and optimising the flow using good old BPR tools.

About the Authors

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