

Applying Lean in an Office environment

Lean principles applied in the office are not about ‘taking away all the interesting bits’ and turning staff into robots, but fundamentally about removing waste in order that staff can spend more time on creative or considerative steps that add more value to the customer.

A model of Lean implementation often deployed to great effect in an office environment is the Rapid Improvement Event, sometimes also referred to as a Kaizen Blitz Event.

The Rapid Improvement Event (RIE) is an improvement methodology where an intense improvement activity occurs over a short period, typically 1 week. Overall activity duration, including scoping, planning, training, etc. occurs over a period of between 4-8 weeks, dependent upon the complexity of the issue being addressed. This approach brings about significant improvements in performance that encompasses a small number of different work teams or processes without a high degree of complexity. It relies on the fact that the participants, who do the job every day, are the people best placed to identify process improvements.

Quick wins

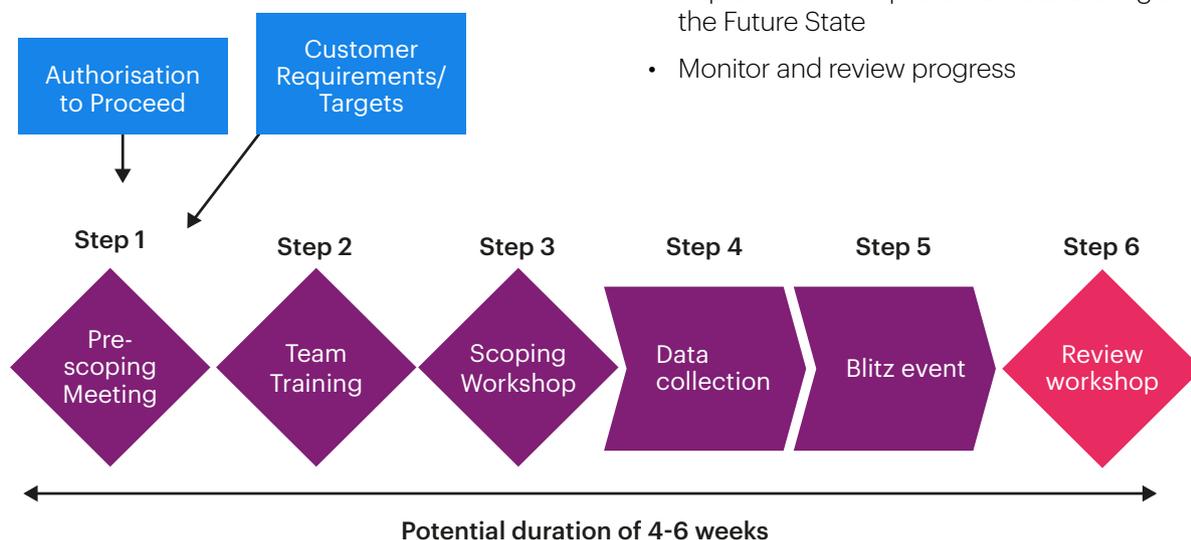
This approach is usually preferred by line managers because it provides a faster return on effort, is more visible and does not challenge existing management control styles to the same extent as full implementation.

Staff also like it as they feel engaged in a process that quickly achieves improvement. The disadvantage is that the ‘quick wins’ may be difficult to sustain when they are not easily integrated into the overall strategy of the organisation.

The typical methodology and timing for a RIE is shown below.

This methodology identifies the change required, gives solutions and allows participants to plan the actions required for implementation. The approach utilises Lean tools and techniques to:

- Define, understand and measure the existing process or Current State
- Identify waste and process failings
- Identify the root cause of this process waste
- Develop a revised and significantly improved new process or Future State
- Document the new process in a format that a review team would find the most user friendly
- Implement the improvements and bring into realisation the Future State
- Monitor and review progress



The overall RIE approach generally consists of a number of discrete stages. The table below gives some additional detail to the approach:

Stage	Participants	Duration	Summary of activities	Outputs
Step 1 Pre-scoping	Sponsor(s) Consultant	1 day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the requirement • Outline scope and boundaries • Identify Stakeholders • Agree timing • On-site familiarisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalised scope of work, costs and timing. • Quad of Aims
Step 2 Key process familiarisation	Stakeholders Consultant	1 day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarisation visit to key site at which Rapid Improvement Event will be held. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding of processes prior to Scoping Workshop
Step 3 Key process familiarisation	Sponsor Stakeholders Consultant	1 day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic awareness and understanding of Lean • Introduction of basic tools and concepts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common understanding and foundation for undertaking RIE
Step 4 Scoping Workshop	Sponsor Stakeholders Consultant	1 day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve a common understanding of the RIE goals (agree Quad of Aims) • Understand the business process sufficiently to identify initial data requirements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common understanding within improvement team of the RIE task • Plan to source key data ahead of RIE
Step 5 Data Collection	Stakeholders	2-3 weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of data sources • Collection of base data • Data analysis and interpretation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graphical analysis of key data • Performance baselines
Step 6 Rapid improvement event. (Workshop to Proposed Review Team)	Sponsor Stakeholders Consultant	5 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify current state business process and waste/inefficiencies (Value Stream Mapping) • Gather process measures and identify root cause of wastes/inefficiencies. • Develop future state business process • Process metrics/controls • Develop implementation plan • Identify source and scale of improvement benefits. • Implement improvements where possible within the RIE timescale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current state Value Stream Map • Wastes identified and measured • Future state Value Stream Map • Benefits sized and targeted • Implementation plan • 'Quick hit' improvements implemented • New procedures and training requirements • New documentation agreed

Fundamentally, the RIE approach is simply focused on answering 3 basic questions:

- **Where are we today?** – Current State
- **Where do we want to be?** – Future State
- **How do we get there?**

We need to consider carefully how waste manifests itself in offices. In the office environment waste exists but usually doesn't manifest itself in a physical form. In fact waste is sometimes actively managed; staff find 'work arounds' with off-line spreadsheets or numerous meetings. Worse than that, we reward management of waste through recognition of constantly fire-fighting the same fires.

Waste in the office environment, once pointed out, tends to be easy to spot and is termed as 'Surface Wastes'. Here are some examples of the eight wastes associated with Lean Thinking in the office environment.

Typical surface wastes:

- **Transportation** – retrieving or storing files, carrying or posting paperwork
- **Inventory** – open projects, unread or no actionable emails, old database records, batching orders
- **Motion** – searching for files, hand offs and waiting for approvals moving from one system (or screen) to another
- **Idle Time** – waiting for systems to come online, waiting for customer response, waiting for approval and sign-off
- **Over Processing** – repeated manual entry of data, detailed report when a phone call would do, more information than the customer needs, over regulation and layers of approvals, duplication and additional checking
- **Defects, Rejects, Rework** – data entry errors, missing information, pricing errors

- **Over Production** – doing more or ahead of customer need, doing reports no one actions, making extra copies
- **Skills Misuse** – using skilled workers for low skilled work, using the wrong equipment

Conclusion

Lean Rapid Improvement Events are a great tool that drives performance improvement and can get team members and managers excited. However, always remember that to achieve the full, sustainable Continuous Improvement culture that Lean advocates, just doing RIEs will not be sufficient.

Bourton Group has supported many businesses from a wide range of industries to implement Lean improvement techniques via tailored engagement programs.

We work collaboratively to deliver on efficiency objectives and targets, with returns on investment of over 20:1 being reported, along with wider benefits of reducing waste, decreasing time to complete activities and improvements to quality – all of which have been directly attributed to Lean.