

Mapping the Present to Improve the Future

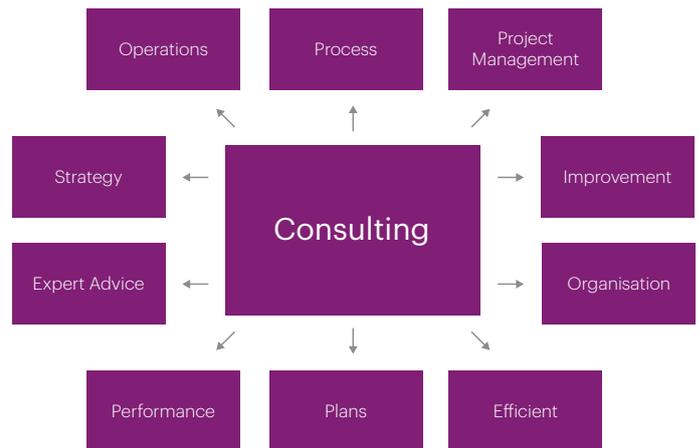
On paper process mapping can sometimes seem cumbersome and even counter intuitive as an improvement technique.

If we need to improve the output in future, how will spending a lot of time documenting what we're doing now help? It is especially tempting to think this way when there are already documented procedures and training manuals to tell us what should be happening.

It's important to remember though that when you get a team together to map a process you don't document what should be happening, but what actually is happening. The difference between the two can be quite a revelation, both for people working within the process who are very focused on what they do but unaware of how it impacts others, and for those managers responsible for the process who understand the inputs and outputs but are a little hazy on what happens in between.

In a recent example, a lightweight composites manufacturer chose process mapping to help solve the issue of solvent exposure amongst their employees. The company's entire operation depends on its ability to mix a solvent on site and then apply it quickly due to its very limited shelf life, but if employee exposure levels reported to the local authority rise above strict legal limits the whole operation could be stopped. With a consistently upward trend over the previous year taking them to 80% of the allowed limit, it was clear the issue needed to be addressed. Process mapping also offered the opportunity to look at reducing waste – there was a high cost associated with scrapping solvent which had become too thick to apply.

The whole movement of the solvent through the business was mapped step by step, from Procurement, through Goods In, Stores, Mixing, and Production to the disposal of waste. The event involved input from each shift and each department, and it became clear immediately that the solvent was being mixed and distributed in different ways on different shifts.



This made no difference to the quality of the product, but when the team was asked to identify the areas of solvent exposure on the completed map it was a major contributor to the higher readings. The mapping also exposed a disconnect between the amount of waste the facilities team measured and what was recorded by Health & Safety, meaning that they were paying more than necessary for third party disposal.

Conclusion

The event ended with a time bound action plan to reduce both the solvent exposure and the cost. Many of the actions wouldn't have been identified were it not for the cross functional nature of process mapping, getting people from different areas of the business to look at an end to end process when they usually only focus on their own responsibilities. The company identified several simple, short term actions to ensure they stayed within the legal exposure limits, and also some longer term investment which could further reduce the employee risk, the cost of which could be partly offset by the reduced waste.

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.