Workflow Analysis: Make Your Work 'Flawless'

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Workflow analysis is a management tool generally associated with large organisations with repetitive tasks for having a clear definition of various roles and interactions. However, a simple workflow management technique or some basic principles of it can be introduced in any company to improve planning and productivity. The long-term objectives of Work Flow Analysis is reducing transactional costs and managing performance.

Workflow can be defined as the process, progress, or "flow" of work within a system. It is a mode of defining where a particular work / task starts, 'who' does 'what' to it and where the output moves further till the final output or the output reaches outside the boundaries of the organisation.

To understand workflow analysis, first you must understand the idea of a system in a work place. A system in a work place is anything that consists of interacting, interrelating and interdependent parts. Workflow analysis refers to observing and analysing how effectively the process takes place in a system. It involves evaluating the process and further improving it for effectiveness and better output by breaking its components down parts and mapping it.

Basic Elements of Workflow

1. Elements- An element of a workflow is part of the process executed by a particular person or at a particular point. An element in a system is depended on other elements.

2. Inputs- Whatever goes in, or is given to a person as his job in his input. This can be an information, a raw material, a function, a code, a call etc.

3. Outputs-Whatever a person hands over to the next person in a system is his output. Inputs and outputs continue the workflow till the final outsome or product is made. This could be a finished or semi-finished product, an ongoing call, a modified code etc.

4. Processing- Processing is the work done on the element by the person with whom it is at that moment. Processing induces outputs.

5. Conditions- Conditions are those elements which determine where the work moves next in the workflow sequence. In the simplest workflow of small companies, there are no conditions and work simply moves from person to person. However in many workflows there are conditions which determine where the output moves to next typically based on approval, behaviour or response. For example, "a file moving from one section to other, can be sent forward to the next person for approval, or send back for re-working".

6. Time- Time is the amount of time required to execute an element. Time can be in any unit like minutes, hours days etc depending the nature of work. Cycle time is the time required to complete an entire workflow. The actual execution time may be longer than scheduled one if any of the elements fails to get completed in its scheduled time take or if at any point, the workflow is reversed.

7. Choke points- A choke point is a point where work piles up because of unnoticed work loads or uncalculated delays.

A simple work flow is a linear representation with a series of arrows pointing to the right, each arrow representing an element. For example, a file moving from one department to another need to be processed by different people

Benefits of Workflow Analysis

Workflow analysis detects what an organisation do / how they do it and the costs associated

with each process.It brings to light obstacles if there is any in the proper implementation and allows the organisation to quantify the projected cost benefits.

How to Increase Productivity

Productivity can be increased by reducing the cycle time by acquiring a smooth workflow and by monitoring that the work is completed in the prescheduled time. Smoothening can be achieved by reducing the number of elements in a system or by identifying and removing choke points. If time spent on each element and the number of reworks (the number of times when the work flow is reversed to correct errors or to attain defined specifications) is reduced the processing time will be naturally reduced.

Tips for reduced cycle time

Avoid repetitions-In an unplanned work flow, some elements tend to be repeated with different people like too many QC stages.

Eliminate unnecessary elements / **processes**- In an unplanned work flow, elements tends to get added over time. It often happens when there are too many approvals or similar activities in between. Take a closer look at elements and eliminate all that can be eliminated.

Reduce time for individual elements- Individual elements like assigning more resources to elements that require them can be reduced.

Run elements in parallel- An unmanaged work flow will be sequential. That is, each element waits for all preceding elements to get completed. If at possible points more than one element runs in parallel it saves more time

Reduce choke points-Choke points easily develop in workflows where there is too much of loading on one individual or point. Another way in which choke points develop is when the work

keeps coming back to the same person for checking multiple times. Identify such choke points and eliminate them from the workflow.

4 / 4

Define roles and increased competency- A way of increasing competency is to create teams which would cross check each other's work on a given element rather than have everyone check everyone else's work.

And finally, aligning and optimising the workflow is not a one time effort. Changes in business environment also would require re-optimisation of the workflow. Many organisations design workflow in their early stages but don't remember to reevaluate them as the organisation evolves.