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## Who Before What

by Matthew J. Ferguson: September 19, 2011

In many organizations, process comes before people, and function over feasibility. No wonder people resist. And all the change management in the world won't help if the stakeholder community lacks the skills to execute a new process. Here is guidance on putting people at the forefront of your process design efforts.

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Designing a new process invigorates an organization with the promise of something new, something that will fix a vexing problem and some new 'way of doing things' that will make the employees gush with gratitude. Unfortunately, the process becomes the jewel in the crown as the people get left behind.

Process design can fall flat on its face when sponsors forget two very important principles:

- > First, the 'want' has to be clearly distinguished from the 'need.'
- > Second, one needs to evaluate what employee/stakeholder capabilities are required and what employee-centric benefits can be derived. In other words, what about the people?

### Buyer's remorse in action

Let's take the example of my friend Rob who spends four hours a day commuting. To help make his drive more pleasurable, Rob bought his first luxury vehicle with all the bells and whistles: heating/cooling seats, touch-screen navigation, voice-activated climate control, satellite radio, wireless connectivity, heads-up display, self-parking, run-flat tires and even an environmentally friendly, DVD-based owner's manual. Despite all this, Rob hated it.

Prior to this purchase, Rob drove a practical vehicle that got him to and from work with an AM/

FM radio. When he bought the luxury car, he was convinced he needed the added functionality. However, once he departed the dealer 'safe-zone,' he was completely lost. Rob was overwhelmed and frustrated with all the new technology. The hype ended and reality set in.

Eventually, Rob became accustomed to all of the "benefits" of the new technology. Yet he still only uses 50 percent of the functionality and, at times, still misses the days when he drove a car, which was simpler and easier to use. In short, what started out as an investment with defined returns became a headache with buyer's remorse.

Fundamentally, this same dynamic is at work when you fail to put people as the centerpiece of your process design efforts.

### **Evaluate feasibility and ability**

Let's look at some ways to avoid the 'process-before-people' design approach. In my observation, most organizations approach process design in much the same way Rob went about selecting a car. Usually a small committee, not involved in the day-to-day implementation, develops a list of wants and needs, performs a gap analysis to current state, and sets out to design a flow that is all encompassing.

This could be viewed as analogous to our car example in which Rob makes a list of all of his wants (gap analysis), takes the list to the dealership (engaging a third-party advisor) and designs a car (process) based on his desires. There are three critical flaws with this approach.

> First, without categorizing the results of the gap analysis into wants versus needs, organizations often fail to identify the right balance between increased function and overwhelming complexity.

> Second, without using a technique such as customer value analysis, organizations stand to create something that delivers a plethora of benefits to the wrong stakeholder community.

> Finally, without understanding the barriers to process utilization (potentially through force field analysis), the organization runs the risk of having a host of new capabilities without the requisite abilities to make use of them. By changing the focus of design efforts from function to feasibility, organizations can better assess the true value of their efforts and the reasonable expectation of return.

### **Appeal to human nature**

If the aforementioned scenario sounds familiar, think about the root cause of the issue. While

creating the right balance between wants and needs is important, the most critical aspect of process design is evaluating the likelihood of adoption. Any discussion of process adoption must consider motivation. While behavioral psychology is a topic for another time, in its most basic form, behavioral change comes down to two factors: ability and desire.

I have noticed most organizations focus on influencing the latter half of the equation: desire. And, dependent on management philosophy and leadership bandwidth, influencing desire is usually achieved through one of two ways: “mandate and measure” or “monitor and reward.” These methods of positive or negative reinforcement may influence in the short-term, but do little to affect sustainable change.

The second but more effective means of influencing results is looking at employee ability. Ability is woefully undervalued when evaluating feasibility. Much like the earlier analogy, if your stakeholders do not have the requisite knowledge and skills to execute the process, all the change management in the world will not increase adoption.

Regardless of how you identify these concerns, there are some fundamental questions to consider:

1. Do my stakeholders believe there is a “better way” to do their job, and can I make the case that the new process helps them?
2. Will improvements be realized at the expense of “extra work?”
3. Do my stakeholders have the required knowledge to operate within the new construct?
4. Does the experience level of my stakeholders match the complexity of the process?

### **Consider ripple effect**

In my estimate, organizations fully reach only 65 percent of a process’s intended benefits, leaving 35 percent of expected value at risk to exceptions and failed measures. Similar to evaluating stakeholder abilities, organizations must also analyze the business architecture to which this new process will be applied. Considerations such as organizational design, communication channels, reporting rules and concurrent processes must be evaluated in order to define feasibility.

While there are several modeling techniques available to assist in this analysis, there are again key questions that should serve as the backdrop:

1. Are there organizational dynamics at play that could negatively affect adoption?
2. Am I structured in a way that allows me to measure the effectiveness of the process?
3. Does the leadership level have the knowledge to coach and measure effectiveness?
4. Does the process require governance mechanisms that are not currently aligned to reporting structures?

While many process design efforts are conducted with a small group of sponsors and stakeholders, the implementation of these efforts will have a ripple effect throughout the organization. Identifying these impacts in advance will not only make your change management efforts more effective, but will also help determine what tangential changes to structure may be required to have any success at all.

### Focus on the driver first

Success in the design effort has less to do with the process and more to do with the community who must interact with it and adopt it. Let's revisit Rob and his luxury car again. The fundamental problem with the car was not what it did but rather *who* was driving it. Had Rob understood how the enhancements would impact his commute, perhaps he would have chosen a less complex vehicle.

Process development is no different. Failed processes are rarely a product of elegance or functionality. It usually comes down to people being people: hesitant to learn, resistant to change and always looking for the shortest path from A to B. By admitting this and shifting your focus to evaluate feasibility based on your people, you stand a much better chance of realizing success. Otherwise, like Rob, your employees will want to trade in the new luxury car (your new process) for an older but comfortable clunker (the old process).

*Matthew J. Ferguson is Practice Manager, Consulting Services for ESI International.*

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