Why Do IT Process Improvement Initiatives Struggle?

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Often, IT process improvement initiatives struggle and fail to deliver the value that was initially envisaged. This article covers some of the main reasons why this is the case and presents some possible solutions.

Reasons Why IT Process Improvement Initiatives Often Struggle

Some of the top reasons that IT process initiatives often struggle to deliver the intended value or have been deemed as failures include:

- **The people factor**—The biggest constraint to an IT process improvement is people. Resistance to change is a powerful human behavioral element that helps survival, but it can derail any process improvement project. Often, management has “other” priorities or work related to IT processes or COBIT is not seen as part of everyday work.

- **Treatment as a project and not a process**—IT process improvement is often treated as a project, and the focus ends at the end of the project, e.g., reaching maturity level 3. As a result, processes slip back to their previous state or worse and the entire process starts again (figure 1).

- **A big-bang approach**—Organizations often make the mistake of bringing in a team to deliver IT process improvement or COBIT implementation in a short period of time. The result is usually a bunch of paperwork that ends up in a drawer.

- **The overcomplication of processes**—Processes are often overcomplicated and do not suit the environment. To avoid this, the design of the IT processes should be simple and efficient. People will quickly figure out when a process step is not necessary and skip the step or the process altogether.

- **Unrealistic deadlines (trying to do too much)**—IT process improvement is a long-term process and requires behavioral change. This requires strong mentoring and coaching for the process owner to get up to speed. Improving a process takes a lot of time; often, companies try to tackle too many processes at one time. It is recommended to prioritize, possibly six processes a year.

- **Lack of ownership**—Process owners often show a lack of ownership for various reasons, including not being involved in the documentation, not seeing the work as important and not receiving rewards or penalties for performance on the
• **Implementation of COBIT, not improvement of processes**—The COBIT framework provides a process reference model; it is not an off-the-shelf cure. Rather, it needs to be customized according to the environment.

While COBIT can be used as a reference guide in designing the processes, the processes should be based on COBIT and not designed verbatim. Naming and measurements, for example, need to be customized and, in some instances, are not sufficiently specific for the needs of the environment.

• **Poor documentation practices**—Although some process documentation may pass an audit, they are sometimes of poor quality and/or add little value. Process documentation is sometimes not standardized. Work is often done for the sake of doing it and not to improve the working environment. Minimum standards need to be set for process documentation.

• **Poor design and standardization of processes**—Often, process owners lack the necessary knowledge or skills to design a process, which means that processes have different formats and varying levels of content. Processes need to be standardized for ease of understanding and assessment.

• **Processes that become outdated and irrelevant**—Processes often get outdated and become irrelevant because they are not continually improved and reviewed for relevancy.

• **The inability to implement processes**—Perhaps the biggest challenge is to implement the process in an environment. Even when the design and documentation have been done well, organizations struggle to embed the processes into their operations.

### The Solution

What is the solution to the aforementioned issues? First, an IT process management framework must be developed that will provide guidance and standards for the design, approval, implementation and management of IT processes within the organization. The benefit of having such a framework is that all IT processes will be designed and managed in a consistent manner, which will allow for the measurement and, ultimately, improvement of the IT processes and their expected results.

For each IT process, a process guidebook that contains certain IT process attributes and will guide the process owners in the design, implementation and maintenance of the IT processes must be developed. Frameworks such as COBIT and ITIL should be used to design the processes so that they are fit for purpose, but the frameworks must be customized to the environment. As should be outlined in the guidebook, the typical attributes required for each IT process are depicted in **figure 2**.

All processes should go through the three phases (**figure 3**):

1. **Design**—The IT process guidebook and the outputs are documented.
2. **Implementation**—Processes are institutionalized by defining roles and responsibilities, key performance indicators, updating job descriptions, training, etc.
3. **Maintenance**—Processes are measured, assessed and audited, and improvement plans are produced to improve the process. These improvements then enter the design phase of the process and go through the entire process again; thus, a process of continuous improvement is adopted.

Imagine a process as a conveyor belt that requires equipment, people and tools to operate it; the output of the process will be a product, e.g., a box of cereal. It is important to note that while the conveyor belt must be put in place for the process owner, it is up to the process owner to deliver the product. Therefore, the process owners are primarily responsible for the process outputs; however, they
can obtain assistance.

A Suggested Approach

Although not prescriptive, the following systemic approach is recommended for IT process improvement:
1. Conduct awareness research, and assess the current state of the IT processes. IT processes must also be prioritized, and only the priorities that have a business benefit justification should be included in the improvement program. Feedback must then be given to management to obtain approval to proceed with the program.
2. Design the IT processes, and document the key outputs of the process.
3. Implement the design phase’s deliverables, including applying organizational change management; motivating, mentoring and coaching all process stakeholders (including the process owner); institutionalizing the IT processes (including integrating them with existing business processes); and reviewing and providing feedback on IT process performance and progress made.
4. Conduct a reassessment of the prioritized IT processes, and incorporate improvements into the design of the processes.

Process performance measures(metrics and performance criteria should be addressed in progressing this approach, and tools should be considered for use to support process improvement activities as appropriate.

Conclusion

IT process improvement, as one of the streams of an IT governance program, can add value to an organization. Unfortunately, more often than not, this is not the case. Unless a holistic, well-thought-out approach to IT process improvement is adopted, the value will not be realized and the program will become a meaningless paper chase with frustrated participants. People need to be aware of the issues before embarking on such an initiative and need to have clear plans to address these issues or they could be headed for failure.

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has more than 10 years of experience in the IT industry, with a key focus on project management and IT governance, including COBIT, IT strategy, IT architecture and process design. He is considered a subject matter expert on COBIT and is often called on to assist with COBIT implementations. Sylvester is a part of the COBIT development team and recently contributed to the development of COBIT 5 materials. He was one of the pioneers in implementing COBIT within South Africa at De Beers from 2000 to 2003 and played a key role in the South African Revenue Services’ governance of IT program, hosting a disaster management course that prepared delegates to handle disasters within their organization.

Editor’s Note
The new ISACA COBIT Assessment Programme provides an approach to process capability assessment that includes the rigorous definition of process capability, evidence of achievement of process outcomes/outputs (as capability indicators), demonstration of assessor competence, and reliability and repeatability of COBIT-based process assessment results needed to improve the rigor, reliability and, thus, comparability of the results obtained. The approach is based on ISO/IEC 15504 Information technology—Process assessment and recognizes the need to support development process improvement plans.

Endnote

1 This three-stage approach (design, implementation and maintenance) is based on the author’s practical experience and on basic concepts from Software Engineering Institute, Capability Maturity Model Integration, Carnegie Mellon University, USA, 2000.

2 This is based on the experiences of the author.