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6 strategies for getting started with process management

Efficient Processes Instead of Costly Software

Productive work processes in companies are time-saving and satisfy customers, which many are aware of. Yet, companies have difficulty improving their workflow. More precisely, they struggle with taking the very first steps towards improvement and evaluating their current internal work processes. We propose 6 practically relevant strategies to deal with process optimisation.

After customers had complained about long delivery periods, a medium-sized company quickly identified the reason for the delays in delivery: shipment. The two managing directors of the company contemplated about investing in shipping automation and software. They spent no time considering the alternative of thoroughly checking their current work processes. Compared to acquiring a new software, analysing their own processes seemed too challenging. Only later did they change their mind. They realised software would have (slightly) improved the shipment; however, what lay at the heart of the problem was the interaction between the departments accounting, shipment and order acceptance.

Many companies try to cope with difficulties by implementing automation and software solutions. But these are, according to process management experts, not always the right choices. Technological solutions only rarely promote a cross-departmental cooperation or reduce losses, errors, double workloads, or inconveniences. Most often, the only visible effect is the faster transmission of data. Why is it that companies prefer automation and software to efficient processes? Because the first steps into process management are difficult, according to experts. What is the first step toward getting an overview of work processes within the company and potential problem areas? We suggest six answers to this question below.

News-Service

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Michael Popp, process management expert at next level consulting (Vienna), reports that “employees shun disclosing their work processes, because they fear personal repercussions.” Some companies, therefore, are already groping in the dark at this very first step. Michael Popp recommends intensely involving employees into executing this step, i.e. convincing them to cooperate by applying cooperative methods. Here are his six proposed strategies for a successful start into process management.

1. Openly inform employees

When work processes have to be changed, an overview of the status quo needs to be drawn. This requires an evaluation of the situation and the processes as they are enacted in practice. But it is this evaluation that employees are suspicious of. Therefore, process management professionals find ways to approach employees to explain to them the concrete plan. Employees are thus informed about the reasons why the management needs information on current work processes and what their objectives as well as underlying strategies are. Michael Popp recommends companies “explain to their employees that the first step solely serves gaining a general overview of work processes, not assessing employees’ work.”

2. Let employees participate

Many companies fail to integrate their employees while evaluating the current situation and work processes. Instead, they hire external professionals to assess the current situation based on internal records. Experts recommend companies ask their employees about their work processes. This is the only way to ensure a realistic description of the processes and to recognise necessary changes. Thus, companies should listen to their employees and their information on who does what, when, where and for whom.

News-Service

- Ideas & Content for Editors -

3. Advertise for process management

It is widely wrongly assumed that process management only serves the company's interests. According to Michael Popp, this view is inaccurate, because employees benefit from the establishment of smooth work processes as well. Stress at the work place and personal work overload are most often not caused by too much work but by poorly organised work processes. Michael Popp suggests companies "explain the advantages to their employees. Better work processes might, for instance, decrease the amount of multitasking and required agreements." Additionally, the establishment of processes leads to employees saving more time. This positive outcome causes companies not to fire employees and should be used to establish better customer service instead. This positively results in employees' readiness to take the first steps toward implementing work processes together with the company.

4. Use the right methods for an evaluation of the situation

It is crucial to realistically present the current situation. "Do not asses or criticise, and do not think about what is right or wrong. There surely are reasons for why processes have not been changed for 20 years", says Michael Popp. Experienced process managers literally draw an image of work process. They bring along sheets of paper and sketch out a design of current work processes by using symbols and various icons. This visualisation helps employees to talk about abstract processes and to gain an overview of these processes.

5. Be on the lookout for potential losses and conflicts

As opposed to software, people can think. Employees might get annoyed about mistakes, discuss issues with their colleagues and try to minimise sources for mistakes. These actions might be accompanied by losses, arguments and disagreements. These centres of conflict waste a lot of time and energy. It is worth taking these sensitive aspects within work processes into consideration during the initial evaluation of the situation. Another relevant point

News-Service

- Ideas & Content for Editors -

to bear in mind is to choose the right amount of work processes one wants to examine. On the one hand, long and extensive processes, like entire service or manufacturing processes, are hardly assessable at once. On the other hand, examining too short processes might lead to missing important correlations. Experts suggest companies put their customers at the heart of the evaluation and adapt their processes according to the customers' needs. This means, if a customer quickly needs a confirmation of order for spare parts, you would preferably check which tasks and work processes are necessary to guarantee a fast confirmation of order. What has to be accepted and understood is that such process management procedures need not succeed at the first attempt.

6. Offer incentives for better collaborations

Many companies tend to define company-related objectives with individual employees instead of teams, who are in fact often responsible for entire processes. This results in employees blindly carrying out their assigned tasks without keeping in mind the big picture. Michael Popp states "when customer orders are quickly dealt with, it makes more sense to reward the entire team, not just individual employees." This might result in employees reconsidering their work process and understanding the supportive role of process management. On top of that, companies are convinced that teams, which fulfil customer expectations due to good collaborations and efficient processes, deserve to be rewarded.

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