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Looking for ways to do more with less became even more important during the economic downturn. And the concepts of Lean Six Sigma that started in manufacturing are now making their way into professional services firms, including accounting.

Jim Boomer • Oct. 07, 2013



Process improvement has been a stated goal in most firms for some time now. Looking for ways to do more with less became even more important during the

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Too often, however, we want immediate satisfaction, so we quite naturally focus on short-term tweaks in our processes or technology, quick fixes that will have immediate impact. We often consistently avoid doing deep process analyses and improvements because they don't provide instant gratification. Doing so would create a cost today that does not have a corresponding payoff until an undefined time down the road. However, process improvement will help create the infrastructure necessary for the firm's long-term success. And that's what really counts.

Do Clients Care About Processes?

Clients don't directly care about our everyday processes. So why invest the time and effort to analyze, improve, and document? The bottom line is that standardizing, documenting, and communicating processes helps eliminate inconsistency and redundancy throughout the firm. Standardizing, documenting, and communicating, then, lead directly to results and that's what clients really care about! The fact of the matter is that clients, results, and processes cannot and should not be separated.

Tunnel Vision

We each have "our" work that we perform on a consistent basis, work that has become so routine to each individual that we assume that everyone else in the organization knows what everyone else does and how. Further, we assume that others know how to do one another's work correctly and consistently. The role of the firm managers and partners is to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, studying entire processes to ensure completeness and efficiency. To get an accurate view, such processes must be documented.

Steps to Process Improvement

The first step in documenting a process is identifying the organized group of related

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Potential Results of Process Improvement

There are a number of potential results from process improvement. Some of the more prevalent are listed below:

- Wasted time and money are ferreted out.
- Hidden dollars show themselves.
- Morale and job satisfaction improve.
- Work gets down with more consistency and effectiveness.
- Ramp up time for new hires and/or existing employees transitioning to new roles is reduced.

Where To Start?

Obviously, with hundreds of processes in the firm, no one has the time to document all of them at the same time. However, you can slowly chip away, using a phased approach. The key is to start by focusing on the most critical processes, those that will also provide the biggest payoffs. The three processes that will have the largest impact in most firms are:

1. Tax Preparation
2. Financial Statement Preparation
3. Billing & Collection

My advice is to pick one major process and set your focus keenly on that workflow. Select an internal resource to attain Lean Six Sigma training/certification or bring in another outside expert to help guide you initially. Once one process analysis is successfully completed, you'll have the confidence and energy to take on more areas of your firm.

Today's question, then, is this: How do we focus on process improvement when the

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