Change Management Associates
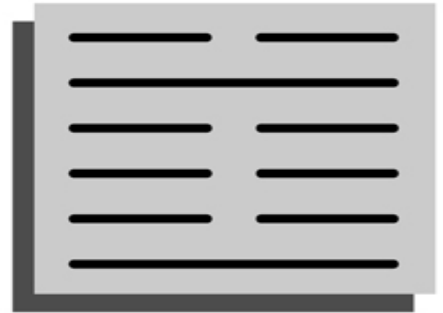
Featured Topic

Debunking a Myth About 'Lean Office'

Dear Drew,

During a recent delivery of our Lean Office Overview workshop a particular individual insisted that the simulation was unrealistic. In it four different information flows exist, thereby simulating multi-tasking that is found in most office environments. The information flows between multiple departments, often in batches, with several interruptions occurring during the simulated business "day". When asked to clarify he said, "We would be using computers instead of paper. Everything would be automated." I asked, "And what difference would that make?" He responded, "People wouldn't have to leave their desk to move the work to the next desk." In other words, the transportation of the information would be automated, which would reduce the motion waste in the simulation. I asked, "How much time was spent on the movement of information?" Other participants estimated less than one minute of the twenty-minute simulation or less than 5%. After all, the simulated office takes place in a 30'x20' area unlike the 'real world' where the information can flow between floors, buildings, even countries.

The participant insisted that by automating the process, performance of the office would vastly improve. I pointed out that the imbalance of capacities when compared to demand between people and departments would still remain, as would the persistent interruptions of simulated telephone calls and meetings. Batching, which often exists in computer systems, would still remain, as would the information quality related issues and excessive hand-offs. All of the participants agreed that only a minor improvement would be realized through "automation".

Upcoming Events

CMA and our network affiliates have the following events scheduled:

AME Events:

Customer Focused Events: Lean Office & Service
Pittston, PA
March 22, 2012
Hosted by Benco Dental. The morning tour will highlight several non-production applications of lean in this distribution operation. The afternoon session will review the application of key lean concepts to office and service environments. Click here for more information.

Developing Leaders for Tomorrow - Today!
US Military Academy
West Point, NY
March 21-23, 2012
The US Military inarguably develops the best leaders in the world. This special AME event provides a great opportunity to see how it is done. Click here for more information.

Visual Management
Logan Township, NJ
April 12, 2012

There is a common belief that "Lean Office" equates to "automation", and that most of the problems people are struggling with can be addressed by some technological 'solution'. This belief is frequently encountered during discussion of the future state as part of a value stream mapping event. It often brings to a halt any consideration of simpler, easier to implement improvements. Therefore benefits that could be realized in the short term are ignored in the hope of some long term 'solution' that will be the result of the significant effort of others, usually the IT department. The 'project' goes on a list of other IT efforts that had been previously identified, is prioritized with the others, and awaits the necessary resources to work on it. Then many months of 'business as usual' go by as well intended IT professionals work hard to develop a 'solution' for their 'customer'. The moment arrives to test the revised system. Commonly the test yields unexpected results and a lot of frustration on everyone's part. More months are required to work out the 'bugs'.

All during the effort valuable time has been lost when simple changes could have been made to provide people with real benefits in terms of reduced effort, improved quality, increased customer satisfaction and less frustration. Checklists, standard work, modest changes to roles and responsibilities in order to better balance the work and improve flow, training and other techniques can all be implemented within 30 -90 day periods, thereby giving people 'relief' in the short term. But these techniques require the people currently performing the work to change, and therein lies a challenge. It seems to be easier to ask the IT department to make 'big' improvements for us than to engage people in quicker, targeted improvement cycles.

But that is what lean is ultimately about - continuous, incremental improvement - with the involvement of all associates. Yes, we will have the occasional 'breakthrough' improvement, but what about the often significant time in between these? Further, it has often been said, and for good reason, trying to automate an inherently bad 'manual' process will not typically work, or at least not easily or quickly. It is always the prudent approach to simplify and stabilize all existing processes before looking to automate.

So, if you see your 'Lean Office & Service' effort taking the 'automation will solve everything' approach, or if it is all about long term solutions or projects, perhaps you should reconsider. Ask yourself this question, "What can we do next week or over the next several weeks?" You might be surprised by the responses.

Best Regards

Drew Locher

Managing Director, Change Management Associates

"Lean Office & Service Simplified" is a 2012 Shingo Prize Recipient!

"Lean Office & Service Simplified: The Definitive How-to Guide" has received a 2012 Shingo Prize for Research. The book published in February 2011 provides detailed step-by-step methodologies to apply all of the key lean concepts to office and service environments.

Entire chapters are provided on the subjects of Standard Work, Visual Management Systems, Value Stream Management, Flow, and Level Pull - all in the context of office and service. The book finishes with a chapter on leadership - the key to sustainment and the transformation to a culture of continuous improvement.

Drawing on over 25 years of practical experience, each concept is broken into its fundamental elements to help the reader better understand its true intent thereby building confidence to experiment. The book is available from Productivity Press.

Click on "News" to find articles and past newsletters.   Recent newsletters are:

"What's Your Problem? The Basics of Problem Solving"

"Can We Talk?" Encouraging Meaningful Conversations in Business.

"Because I Said So" Managing by Objective (MBO) versus Striving for Target Condition

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