

Process Improvement

Processes are always capable of improvement. Observing the actual implementation of a process or an overall methodology¹ will identify actions and outcomes within the following matrix. The actions are either authorised within the process or methodology or unauthorised (ie, either not defined or specifically excluded). The results of the action are either productive and enhance the objectives of the organisation or unproductive and either consume resources for no real benefit or actively work against the organisations objectives². *Unauthorised unproductive* activities need to be stopped and *authorised productive* processes supported and enhanced.

Authorised	Modify the Processes	Support the Processes
	Stop the Action Immediately	Opportunities for Improvements
Unauthorised	Unproductive	Productive

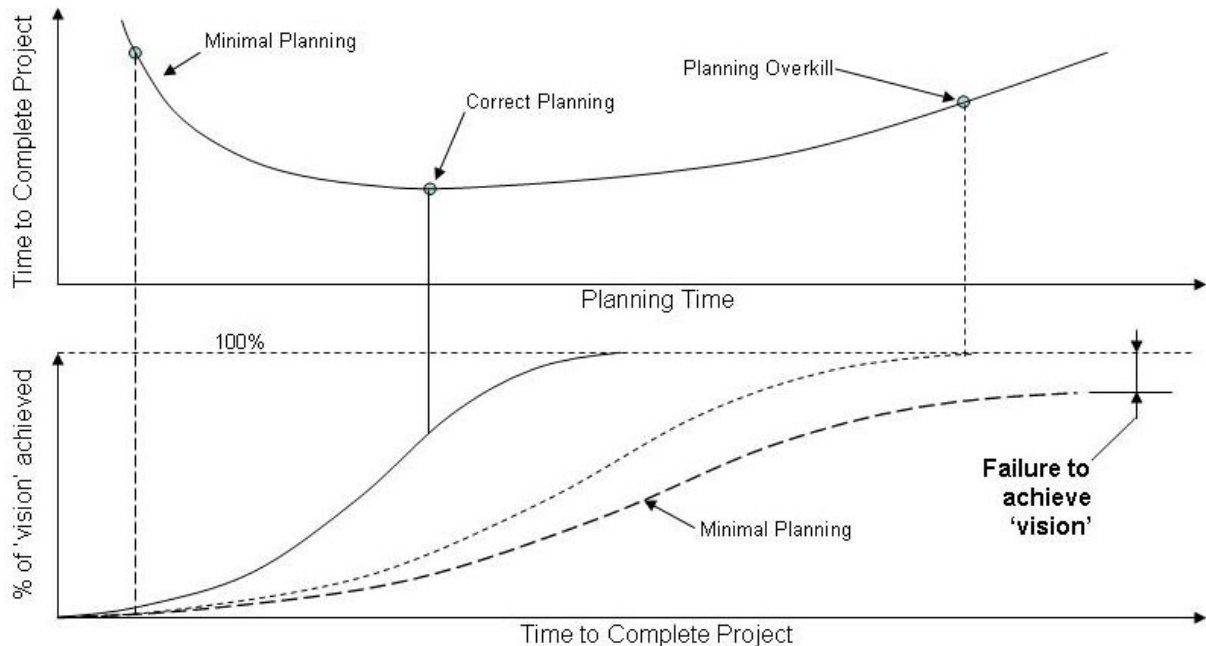
The two zones offering opportunities for significant process improvement are refining or removing elements of the methodology that do not add value to the overall management of the project and incorporating unauthorised processes that are not in the methodology but that are being used add value.

The easiest and most important area for action is rectifying the unproductive processes already in the methodology. Care need to be taken to ensure the definition of 'unproductive' is understood. Most planning processes don't produce anything directly and consume effort; superficially they can be classified as 'unproductive'. In reality, effective planning contributes significantly to the efficient delivery of the overall 'vision' for the project and the value derived from planning is in assisting the efficient execution of the work based on an effective plan. However, excessively detailed planning can quickly become counterproductive (see: Firdman below).

Value judgements are needed to assess the point at which adding more detail or rigour to the planning process becomes 'planning overkill' reducing the overall value of the process and conversely, how much detail can be safely removed from a planning processes to improve overall productivity before insufficient planning starts to cause problems.

¹ For more on selecting and implementing a methodology see WP1045:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1045_Methodologies.pdf

² Processes that do not contribute to the strategic objectives of the organisation are bad for business and are therefore also 'bad governance'. For more on governance see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1033_Governance.pdf



Adapted from Firdman, H. E. (1991). Strategic information systems: Forging the business and technology alliance. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Once the existing methodology is optimised and firmly in the ‘authorised and productive’ segment, the next area to examine is the unauthorised actions and processes that aid productivity and progressively incorporate these into your methodology. The ‘unauthorised and productive’ quadrant is where you find genuine innovation and opportunities for organisational gain.

Continuous Improvement

The first rounds of improvement are based on developing the maturity of the methodology or individual process based on the action matrix above. The second phase of improvement is to continually question the value of each step and process to minimise the amount of effort directed to running the methodology or whilst maximising its effectiveness. Mature PMOs are a useful vehicle for undertaking this work³.

Process Improvement Under Pressure

Frequently the catalyst for process improvement is process failure. This presents a compounded problem, you don’t have the resources or systems to make the current processes work satisfactorily and need to divert resources to developing and implementing the improved processes.

The first thing to recognise is there is no quick fix! Most successful solutions to long-term issues are achieved through incremental changes and successes, not through one big fix. Look for some small improvements that you can make now and then establish a trend by applying some of the following ideas:

Pick one small thing as a demonstration, and make it successful. For example, if we’re having trouble planning and estimating, then identify one very small project for careful planning and estimation. Focus on completing just. This becomes our proof for improvement: having done a better job once on something small, we can do it again.

³ For more on PMOs see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1034_PMOs.pdf

Ruthlessly prioritize. Make sure that the next set of small improvements are truly the most important. For everything else, *nice to have* translates to *not this year*.

Do your planning. If you have two years of backlogs to work through, and you double your development speed, then it may take a year to catch up. Avoid magical thinking.

Be transparent. Explain your *do one small thing right* strategy to all internal stakeholders. You can even call it 'Agile'.

Don't confuse small with big. As soon as a few small things start to work, internal stakeholders will be lobbying for massive overhauls. It won't happen!

Share all improvements with customers. They are likely to be hungry for any good news, and eager for you to succeed. Gather some applause for your team. Customers don't really expect you to fix everything at once, but need some sense of progress.

Celebrate the positive. Regardless of the starting point, your teams need a sense of progress and optimism. Be an effective leader: highlight small triumphs, applaud people who are doing the right things, divert attention from yourself⁴.

Summary

OPM3 has demonstrated standardised processes that incorporate best practices can provide significant benefits to an organisation⁵. The challenge is balancing systemised processes with the need for adequate flexibility to deal with the circumstances of each unique project, to best meet the needs of your organisation.

⁴ For more on Leadership see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1014_Leadership.pdf

⁵ See more on OPM3 at: <http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/OPM3.html>