

■ Lance B. Eliot, Feature Editor, Elliot & Associates

Spring Cleaning: Time to Fix I.S. Processes

Lance B. Eliot, Feature Editor

Good I.S. people trapped in bad I.S. processes. That's the lament that I often hear from Information Systems (I.S.) professionals when I review the status of their service offerings as an I.S. function.

Many I.S. staffers are frustrated that they cannot deliver the kind of high quality service that they believe they can provide or should provide—often due to internal processes within the I.S. function that thwart and distort their own individual efforts.

It's like a team of qualified or even exceptional individual players that cannot get much done due to poor team coordination. Such a team has not yet properly tuned their collective efforts to work effectively. Imagine a basketball team where the ball is continually tossed to the wrong player (perhaps by design!) or the players are randomly spread around the court as opposed to focusing their efforts on a concentrated competitive play.

Users of the I.S. function are equally disgusted at the lack of proper processes within I.S. (though, often users will not realize that the processes, rather than the individual people, are the true culprits in poor service). Users get delayed service, improper service, or fall between the cracks and never get service at all.

Here are some typical examples of I.S. internal processes gone berserk:

- Users order desktop workstations and need to wait over a month to get delivery of their much needed PC's. Meanwhile, they see ads for PC's by outside vendors that promise a fully loaded PC on your desk by the next day after your order. The users get angry, and in some cases decide to start avoiding I.S. altogether and order their PC's elsewhere.
- Users put in requests for maintenance to existing applications and

get turned down with the reply that I.S. is just too busy to get around to dealing with their request. Nobody seriously considered the requests, instead the I.S. function spit it back at the users in an automatic, knee jerk fashion. Some users take matters into their own hands and hire some local programmer contractors to come in and get the job done.

- Support problems are brought to the I.S. Help Desk by users, and the problems get logged but never solved. Meanwhile, various second and third level support staff in I.S. are working on the problem without realizing that the users have now found other alternatives and no longer require assistance.

The preceding examples are not only illustrative of bad processes, but also highlight the unfortunate consequences of bad processes, namely that users become distracted from their actual work to become mini-I.S. developers, the I.S. function is branded as incompetent and avoided at all costs, and the organization suffers double and triple "taxation" as a result of redundant efforts and other extra costs.

In spite of the bad processes, close examination might reveal that the Help Desk staff are actually quite professional, the I.S. procurement workers are loyal and committed to doing their jobs, the developers are top notch programmers, and the rest of the I.S. staffers are generally a good lot. The easy answer to I.S. snafu's (like the few mentioned above) is usually that the people are "bad" and need to be re-trained or replaced. Though the personnel aspect of the equation must certainly be evaluated, in many cases the workers are not the sole blame or even the predominant source of the problems. It's likely that good people are stuck inside bad processes.



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C.C.P., C.S.P., C.D.E., and C.I.S.A. certifications. He is the author of over 150 articles and columns, and the author or co-author of two books. He has served on the editorial boards of publications produced by the IEEE, ACM, DPMA, and similar organizations. Dr. Eliot has over ten years of experience in industry as a Chief Information Officer (CIO), Data Processing Manager, Systems Analyst, and Software Engineer.

A Good Model for I.S. Processes

The first step toward a cure for bad I.S. processes is to recognize that bad processes exist.

A mapping of I.S. processes needs to be undertaken. The maps will provide a trace from the start to the end of the major I.S. processes and allow a careful review of the time, cost, and service delivered as a result of the processes. Each I.S. process needs to be assessed based on user needs, user expectations, industry benchmarks, and associated criteria.

The next step involves understanding how the people within the processes are performing, and how tools are aiding or inhibiting their efforts. Do I.S. staffers not understand how and why their task exists within a given process? Can the process be rehabilitated by training or by the adoption of a tool to aid the process?

Now, it is time to begin reengineering the I.S. processes. Can an entire process be eliminated? Can a process be outsourced (if improvements are then possible)? Can multiple processes be collapsed into one? Can one convoluted process be broken into more manageable sub-processes? And so on.

The reengineering of the processes should not be done in a vacuum. Users and I.S. staff and management must collaboratively redesign the processes.

When I mention the idea that users should be involved, many I.S. managers object and say that users do not have the time nor interest in performing such duties. In my experience, if the processes are

bad enough, there will be plenty of users willing to help find ways to improve the processes. This is akin to a loyal customer of a company that voluntarily helps the firm redesign its products as a result of a hopeful belief that the company can be great once again.

In order to make the entire set of I.S. processes have a sensibility to them, I often group them into major categories. You can then have selected users work on a category of relevance or particular interest to them, and you have an easier time communicating the nature of the processes and how they work.

Keep in mind that you should not allow a splintering of the new I.S. processes to occur. Some I.S. groups create processes that are islands onto themselves. Each I.S. process will inevitably have some impact on another I.S. process. For example, cleaning up a support related process will ultimately impact the processes involving development as a result of the need for development staff to be eventually involved in support matters.

The major I.S. processes that all I.S. organizations need to consider include:

- Planning of the I.S. Function
- Management of the I.S. Function
- Customer Service of the I.S. Function
- Promotion and Marketing of the I.S. Function
- Alignment of I.S. and the Business
- Development, Deployment, Maintenance of the I.T. Infrastructure

- Development, Deployment, Maintenance of I.S. Services

There are various recommended I.S. process models that exist in the literature. Researchers and research related organizations have generated a sizable literature on the topic. Indeed, the Society for Information Management (SIM) recently had a working group that studied the issue and released an I.S. process architecture draft model.

Conclusion

Is your I.S. function struggling to get their work done? If so, it might be worth taking a close look at the I.S. processes underlying how the I.S. function performs its work. And, given the difficulty retaining top I.S. talent these days, if you frustrate users and I.S. staffers by not crafting good I.S. processes, you may find your I.S. staff leaving and your users finding other alternatives as well. Clean up those bad processes and keep the good people.

Remember that your input is welcomed. If you have projects addressing the information technology area, and you would like to share this with the readers of "Information Technology," please contact me.

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NAMES IN THE NEWS

CAROL LATTA, Feature Editor, Home Office, Georgia State University

Jeff Harper, Athens State College, recently completed his Ph.D. in Management Information Systems at Auburn University. His dissertation, "Analysis and Classification of the Problem Definition Concept in Technology Transfer," examined requests of NASA by business and industry for technology transfer assistance and was directed by R. Kelly Rainer, Jr. The project developed a classification structure for problem statements associated with the requests by using an original research method based upon latent content analysis procedures. The study was endorsed by the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center and is the first in a series of research efforts that will culminate in an intelligent information system designed to provide automated

responses to many technology transfer requests. Dr. Harper will be leaving Athens State this fall to join the faculty of Indiana State University.

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