

Best Business Practices (12/5/17)
Web Article

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Business Process Best Practices: Achieving Growth by Pursuing Quality

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To unlock growth for your company, adopt these best practices in business process improvement

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1. Introduction: Delivering Quality

Yes, in a competitive business environment, it's always helpful to find an edge. The search for that edge is driving business owners to pursue everything from branding to social media to digital marketing strategies. But amid all those 21st-century bells and whistles, companies continue to gain market advantage by delivering that old-fashioned thing known as quality.

No matter what else changes in the business world, there will always be value in

doing exceptional work in your core business, which is why ISO and other industry standards have gained popularity. Can these certifications propel your company's growth? Not in and of themselves. But by targeting the process best practices that position your business to qualify for certification, you can optimize your company's performance and establish a culture of achievement that promotes sustained growth.

2. Identify Growth Opportunities

As a small business owner, you've already got too much on your plate, and you may think of business process improvement as a huge undertaking--one you may not have the bandwidth to do productively. What kind of diagnostics can you do up front to determine which areas of the business present the best opportunities not just for improved processes, but improved profitability?

"A small business owner has always got to be looking for opportunities for growth and increased profitability," says Andrew Miller, president of ACM Consulting and author of *Redefining Operational Excellence: New Strategies for Maximizing Performance and Profits Across the Organization* (AMACOM 2014). "I don't look at this as something to add to their already busy schedule. I look at this as the way to run a successful business."

To begin, look for the areas of the business in which process improvement could have the most impact. Try to think in terms of the outcomes you want to achieve rather than the challenges you're trying to address, Miller advises. That's not just a matter of semantics or spin: "When we talk problem, then the solution becomes problem resolution. When we talk outcome, the solution becomes growth and innovation."

3. Stay True to Your Core Focus

Once you've completed the impact assessment, consider how well the area you've targeted aligns with what you want the company to be. An opportunity is worth pursuing only if it makes sense in the context of your company's identity, culture, and path to growth.

"You have to know what you want to achieve. You have to know who your target customers are and what's valuable to them," Miller says. "From a growth and innovation perspective, you've always got to keep in mind your ultimate objective,

and make sure you align whatever tactics you employ with that objective. You've got to build the process around what you're trying to achieve, not try to achieve what comes out of the process.

"Process improvement is anything you do that improves the performance of the company," says Paul Harmon, co-founder and executive editor of Business Process Trends and author of Business Process Change, Third Edition: A Business Process Management Guide for Managers and Process Professionals (Morgan Kaufmann 2014). "The goal is to perform better as a company, but the question is what that means for you."

In considering the answer to that question, it's important to look beyond your own goals for the business. You also have to consider the impact that the process improvement would have on the company's stakeholders--the employees, customers, and vendors whose relationship with the business will be affected by the proposed process improvement. To achieve optimal results, you need to understand their investment in the process, and know how to measure their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the change. This will help you to establish meaningful metrics for assessing the process improvement's performance and its ability to contribute to sustainable profitability and growth.

4. Outcomes and Impact

To get a sense of how this works in practice, consider a process improvement that focuses on the success of your sales and marketing meetings. To ensure that those meetings make the best use of your time, consider whether you're doing a good job of meeting with the right types of prospects. Could you improve the processes you use to qualify prospects? Could you enhance your understanding of their needs and, by extension, your ability to pitch the right products or services to them? A shift in your perspective on these meetings--for example, from landing the highest volume of new accounts to launching long-term client relationships--can support your growth and profitability objectives.

By improving the percentage of sales meetings you have with the right potential customers, you can maximize the time you have available to provide those prospects with the information and attention they need. This can shorten the sales cycle and customer acquisition process, accelerate the rate at which you bring new customers on, increase your sales employees' sense of engagement and achievement, and free

more time to devote to qualifying more prospects and delivering service to existing clients. The process improvement will strengthen your conversion rate, enhance your productivity, and as a consequence, contribute to your bottom-line performance.

Of course, to achieve these results, you need to consider whether your organization is capable of implementing the process changes that you envision. The sales and marketing process improvement outlined above will produce results only if you consider their impact on the rest of your organization, from order fulfillment to customer support. When you're developing a process improvement strategy, it's essential to build scalability into your plans so that the entire organization is equipped to handle the growth generated by the initiative.

Similarly, your approach to process improvement has to be fluid enough to allow for continual adjustment and refinement as required to keep you on track to achieve your objectives. "Sometimes, it'll be small changes. There are small enhancements you can make right away that will already get you one step closer to where you want to be," Miller says. "As that outcome or objective changes, you need to go back and look at things. 'Does what we're doing now still apply?'"

5. From Improvement to Innovation

To find the best answers to those questions, it's essential to involve employees in planning and implementation. Their participation affords you the advantage of access to first-hand experiences and insights that you may not have as the business owner. In addition, it lets employees know that you value their input and want them to feel empowered in, and not just responsible to, the business. By engaging everyone in the organization, you create a company mindset and culture that encourage every member of your team to think constantly about opportunities to improve business processes--and, beyond that, to achieve new and profitable levels of innovation.

For the same reasons, you'll want to solicit vendor and customer feedback on what you can do to make it easier to do business with your company. In that respect, you can think of business process improvement as essentially customer experience improvement. This, again, will keep you focused on outcomes that support your performance goals.

Once all these components come together, you'll have a blueprint not only for

process improvement, but for a strategic approach to effective, innovative operations that align with customer demands, employee aspirations, and your own expectations for the business. By building a company that delivers in each of these areas, you'll establish a strong foundation for driving sustainable success and continued growth.

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