Quick Wins

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As times get tough, BPM practitioners will be challenged as they are called on to find ways to reduce costs. Quick Wins refers to changes that can be made without too much analysis or effort. Here are some heuristics you can use to help save money fast.

This is the first of a series of Advisors that we plan to write on how process practitioners can help companies during tough times. When everyone is looking for ways to cut unnecessary costs, finding simple, easy to implement ways to save money can be a very valuable skill.

Different folks probably use the phrase "quick wins" in different ways. The BPTrends Associates Methodology has an activity called Quick Wins that occurs near the end of the Redesign Phase. In essence, it assumes that in the course of a major redesign project a BPM team might come up with ways to change a process that are quick and easy to implement. In these cases, rather than waiting for the entire redesign process to be completed and rolled out as a new To-Be process, we recommend that companies immediately implement any Quick Wins. By definition, quick wins should not require a lot of effort or preparation and should be obvious and broadly supported.

In the best case, they can be implemented by simply calling together the team of people currently performing the process and saying something like: "You are currently sending two reports - one to Delivery and one to Inventory Control. We've checked with everyone involved and they all agree that the report for Inventory Control serves no useful purpose – it's left over from some earlier requirement that no one can even remember. So, starting tomorrow, we will no longer send a report to Inventory Control."

Where Do You Find Quick Wins?

Stepping back for a moment, consider the BPTrends pyramid pictured in Figure 1. This is one way we traditionally look at the kinds of activities that companies undertake when they are trying to improve their processes. Let's consider the levels, one at a time.

The **Enterprise Level** focuses on creating and maintaining a process architecture and establishing a BPM group to coordinate and prioritize BPM efforts. Assuming you are a CMM Level 2-3 organization and do not currently have a well-defined business process architecture, the next 6 months may not be the best time to work on one. Creating a process architecture and a performance measurement system requires significant effort and delivers little value until it is completed and implemented across the enterprise.
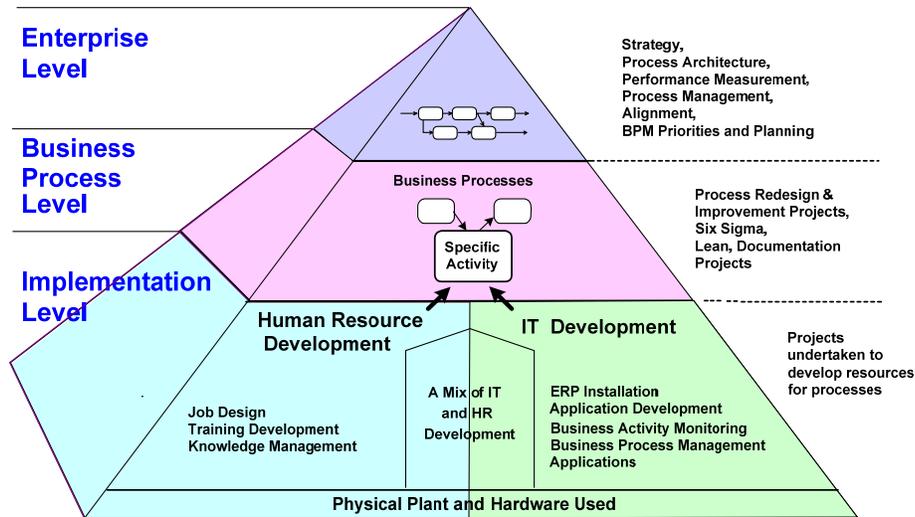
Figure 1. The BPTrends pyramid with its three levels of concern.

In a similar way, **Implementation Level** changes usually take time to complete. Whether it's HR developing a new training course or IT purchasing a new software application or installing ERP or BPMS, in the short term it's an expenditure.

That leaves the Process Level where day-to-day managers and employees live and work. That's where it's usually easiest to get quick wins. Most companies know this however, they tend to respond by cutting back or delaying projects to save cash. They cut travel and reduce training and conference budgets, and they look for ways to cut staff. At a minimum they put a hold on hiring in an effort to make everyone do more with less. Every process person can give examples of how harmful this approach can be if implemented without a clear understanding of the unintended consequences.

If we approach the problem a bit more rationally, we are essentially looking for ways to make existing processes more efficient without reducing quality.

Let's consider a few possibilities.

Eliminate Customers. This may sound like a bad idea during tough times, but, in fact, Heskett and others (*The Value Profit Chain*) have shown that we often spend more resources on customers that don't make us much money than on those that do.   Difficult customers require more employee time. Meeting with employees to determine if there are customers that take excessive time -- and figuring out why -- is an inexpensive way to look for some quick wins. If it turns out that a particular set of customers generate little or no profit, and they are more costly to deal with - then dropping those customers can generate a quick benefit.

Improve Customer Service.   This sounds expensive, but it need not be if done with intelligence. In previous Advisors we've talked about modeling the process by which the customer interacts with your company.   Ignore, for the moment, your organization's customer service process and create a model of the steps your customer goes through to get service and support from your company. Conduct some informal interviews and rely on your gut instincts as a customer. Figure out where a customer's real pain points might be consider how you might change them and focus on the ones you can improve with a minimum cost to your organization.

Combine Jobs and Empower Employees.   In some cases this might be an expensive and time consuming option – but in other cases it can be done rather easily. In fact, this often occurs when management decides

to let attrition reduce the number of employees.   Every customer hates to get bounced from one employee to another. If you find this occurs, ask why and what would be involved in empowering the first employee to solve the problem. Sometimes combining two jobs yields superior results.

Examine the Core Activities for Value.   This is the essence of Lean, at least as it's practiced at lots of companies. Step through your core value chain, one activity at a time, and ask how the product or service you are producing is improved by each specific activity.   If an activity isn't adding value, why are you doing it? Sometimes, just sitting down with the team of people responsible for implementing a process and asking them what activities are not adding value will yield a list of activities that could be eliminated.

Consider Outsourcing on a Modest Scale. Everyone knows that big outsourcing projects take time to set up.   Perhaps this isn't the time to outsource the HR department. But, it might be a good time to outsource your local copying operation. There are lots of companies that do copying. Today, you can link to a copying company via the Internet and transmit documents via email. If you don't do much copying, it might make good sense. More broadly, consider all your operations and ask yourself if there are companies that specialize in doing something that your company does as an internal support activity. If the answer is yes, chances are they have figured out how to perform that activity cheaper and better than you can.

Use Websites to Communicate.   Lots of problems occur because information isn't shared. Today, it is trivial to set up a website or buy an online project management software package. If you have people complaining of a lack of information, consider setting up a quick and dirty website or wiki so that people can share information. (In fact, you can have a dozen people sign on to LinkedIn and set up their own private discussion group where they can share files and carry on a continuous discussion.) For some companies there will be security problems, but for others, trying something like this, today, as an experiment, for little cost, might provide data that will be useful in redesigning processes in the future.

Read Books and Attend Webinars.   Travel, training and conference budgets have been cut at lots of companies. There's certainly an advantage to face-to-face meetings for some purposes, but if you have to engage in self-study you couldn't begin at a better time.   Lots of companies are putting on webinars.   And lots of people are publishing books on business process change – just to focus on a field we know well. Organizing an internal session around reading a chapter in one of these books, or attending a webinar can keep people thinking about new possibilities at a fraction of the cost it takes to send someone to a conference.

This is hardly a comprehensive or even a well-organized list. We will try to drill down in these and other areas in 2009. For the moment, we simply want to get everyone's juices flowing. Tough times represent difficulties, but they also present opportunities.   If you, as a process professional, stick too doggedly to a costly project you are currently focused on, you may find yourself out of a job – part of management's effort to save money in the short term.   On the other hand, if you present yourself as a professional who can help identify ways to save money and define intelligent ways to reduce costs, you should be well-positioned to survive whatever comes in the next few months.

The key is to not to focus on large projects or complicated, costly efforts but, instead, to focus on how to obtain quick wins that save money while making the company's processes more efficient. Think in terms of a light weight SWOT team that can deliver results quickly and inexpensively. The opportunities differ from company to company but the existence of waste, bad sequences, and redundant activities are everywhere. Good hunting.

Till next time,

Paul Harmon

ABOUT PAUL HARMON

Paul is a Co-Founder, Executive Editor and Market Analyst at BPTrends, (Business Process Trends), the most trusted source of information and analysis on trends, directions and best practices in business process management, (www.bptrends.com). He is also a Co-Founder, Chief Methodologist and Principal Consultant of BPTrends Associates, a professional services company providing executive education, training and consulting services for organizations interested in understanding and implementing business process management. He has worked on major process improvement programs at Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Prudential and Citibank, to name a few.

Paul is the Co-Author and Editor of the *BPTrends Product Reports*, the most widely read reports available on BPM software products and the author of the best selling book, *Business Process Change*: *A Manager's Guide to Improving, Redesigning and Automating Processes.* He is an acknowledged BPM thought leader and noted consultant, educator, author and market analyst concerned with applying new technologies and methodologies to real-world business problems. He is a widely respected keynote speaker and has developed and delivered executive seminars, workshops, briefings and keynote addresses on all aspects of BPM to conferences and major organizations throughout the world. BPTrends Associates is partnered with Boston University to develop and deliver the BUCEC BPM Curriculum and Certification Program.