How Visual Process Mapping Helps Our Clients

By Steven Aragon

Hello, my name is Steven Aragon. I am the Client Service Manager for The Doug Williams Group.

Often, people ask me what we do at The Doug Williams Group. I tell them that, among other things, we streamline processes, which helps create efficiencies, reduce costs and improve profitability. Many people say we’re the best at what we do.

Process improvement is a key part of my work. After all, as the great author, engineer and management guru W. Edwards Deming famously said, “If you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you're doing.”

Then they might respond with, “Okay, what is a process?”

When they do, it reminds me that, although the word process is part of our daily vernacular, many people outside our industry probably either don't know or have only a vague idea of what a process is.

I will explain. In a nutshell, a process is a series of actions taken in order to achieve a desired result.

Although you might not realize it, processes are all around us, all day, every day. Getting out of bed in the morning and getting ready to face the day is a process. Planning and preparing dinner is a process. Also, much of what we do at work is a process.

Why processes matter

The concept of progress wasn’t always at the top of my mind. Before I joined The Doug Williams Group, I wouldn't have been able to tell you what a process is, much less describe what I do as a process. A year later, processes are all I see, and the benefits that result from process improvements are all I know!

While working with our clients over the course of the past year, I have participated in a number of what we call Process Improvement Team Working Sessions. These sessions have provided me with valuable insight into the challenges organizations encounter when implementing major change, and an understanding of how process modifications can make all the difference.

For example, with one client, it was surprisingly interesting to learn how a simple tool such as Visual Process Mapping was able to help the organization and its hard-working employees plan and implement the necessary improvement efforts needed to successfully execute a major change.

What is Visual Process Mapping?
In any large organization, even the simplest processes can become complicated over time. Employees might miss a step or there's a breakdown in communication. Important data gets dropped. By the end of the process everyone is well aware that something is wrong. But how do you correct it?

The answer: *Visual Process Mapping*.

A Visual Process Map is literally a diagram that shows—or maps—visually, the steps involved in defining and determining a particular process from start to finish. By translating the process into easy-to-understand steps, all stakeholders can see, at a glance, the process that needs to be implemented, along with key roles and responsibilities. This puts everyone on the same page regarding what needs to be done, when it needs to be done and by whom.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a Visual Process Map has the potential to be worth many dollars in cost savings. But that’s only the beginning.

Over the past year, I have observed our clients reaping myriad benefits as a result of Visual Process Mapping. I’ve watched as team collaboration and morale has increased. I've seen discrepancies, redundancies and unnecessary steps disappear. I’ve noted improvement in how new hires are trained. And I’ve experienced firsthand the creation of new best practices.

It’s really quite remarkable.

**Increasing Team Collaboration and Morale**

For one client, we began our Visual Process Mapping exercise by gathering a number of key players from the organization in a room to address a specific task. In this case, the diverse group was composed of employees at all levels, from C-suite executives to front-line administrators.

Each person in the room was empowered to be an agent of change for the organization. This helped create camaraderie and allowed for collaboration and open, candid discussion, which was necessary. It also eliminated the fear and uncertainty that might have existed if one employee had been facing the problem alone.

Working with a team to collaboratively create solutions in a face-to-face manner allowed for immediate feedback and response to comments, questions and concerns. The high level of commitment shown throughout the working sessions also let the participating employees know that their frustrations were being heard and addressed, which increased overall team morale.

**Eliminating Discrepancies, Redundancies, and Unnecessary Steps**

Visual Process Mapping gives the team the opportunity to explore and discuss how operational processes are currently taking place, rather than what should ideally be occurring.

During a recent Visual Process Mapping exercise with one organization, participants quickly discovered the discrepancies between the actual and the ideal, which made it easier to pinpoint where specific bottlenecks and problems existed.
Then, once the process was mapped out, all steps that didn’t add any value were examined, and determinations were made by the group about whether they were redundant or unnecessary.

With this new level of insight, the team was able to begin brainstorming about how to best eliminate the issues from the new map, therefore making the process more efficient and effective.

**Improving New Hire Training**

Visual Process Mapping doesn’t only benefit current employees; it also has the powerful potential to help new and future hires quickly learn about his or her new organization.

When you hire new employees, how long does it take them to understand the complexities of your organizational processes? A day or a week? Not likely. How about a year or more?

With a detailed Visual Process Map, new employees can be brought up to speed quickly and more effectively, and in a way that’s much easier for them to understand than by sitting in boring training sessions or leafing though a thick, wordy employee manual. A Visual Process Map offers the added bonus of providing a great opportunity for you and the new employee to have a meaningful, productive discussion about processes.

**Creating Best Practices**

Who doesn’t want to create and implement best practices? The good news is that Visual Process Mapping can help you do that.

In any organization—and especially in large ones—it’s virtually a given that workflows and standard operating practices will vary unit to unit. In this scenario, the best you can hope for is some slight variation in the process across units. At worst, you’re dealing with a convoluted mess.

A Visual Process Mapping session provides the perfect forum for addressing these issues. By creating a Visual Process Map, you’ll be able to identify and highlight all of the process variances that exist across practices, while giving team members the opportunity to eliminate what’s inefficient and emphasize what’s effective.

Also, just one great process improvement suggested by an employee (or department) can be turned into a best practice that can be adopted and applied across an entire organization.