

HARD facts on SOFTWARE - A fresh look at process mapping

Contributed by Immo Böhm
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Process maps! Why bother? This is for big corporates with 200 staff doing the same boring function over and over again you might think. Think again.

Process mapping entails the collection and documentation of all your business processes in the form of a process map consisting of specific symbols and connected with arrows to indicate how the process flows. Typically process maps are used to indicate either software or engineering processes, and specific symbols are used to indicate specific steps. For example, a decision point is indicated with a diamond shape. Any decision can typically lead to an answer of "Yes" or "No". According to the answer the process will flow in different directions, perhaps different actions are necessary.

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We are actually in the middle of looking at features of Point of Sales software, having covered the online sales point last week. However, this week I want to discuss something entirely different, although related to software.

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Typically also the process map should indicate the responsible person or job function that should execute the action indicated by the symbol. Sometimes some functions are processed on the business system, and this needs to be indicated on the process maps as well.

Sophisticated software can be used to build complex process maps, also called flow charts. Some smaller programs which are also made for process mapping include Visio and SmartDraw, but you can just as well use Excel or Word, or OpenOffice to draw your process maps.

Process Maps in itself are not good enough. They might give you an overview of your business processes, but will they be good enough to get your end users to understand what they have to do? Typically Process Maps lack the necessary detail. It is therefore necessary to document procedures for all the processes your business requires, well at least for the common processes. In HansaWorld we use our internal shared folder, which we call "Conferences"; to document these procedures. We typically have a conference for "Sales Procedures", "Purchasing Procedures", "Admin Procedures"; etc, and in each of these folders we put the actual procedures.

Procedures are written in collaboration with the management team and line managers and/or supervisors and users that use the procedure. More often than not the end users will know more about a procedure than management and they should have an insight into the procedure. Once it has been agreed on how a certain process will function, and thus the wording of the procedure has been agreed upon, it is approved by management.

All staff working with the procedure is now required to sign a printed copy of it, which is filed and close at hand for reference. Procedures are then updated from time to time as required.

There are many advantages to documenting procedures like this. Firstly management gets a better understanding on what is actually involved to perform a certain task. Secondly staff can be held accountable should they not follow a certain procedure. They cannot come back and say: "But I did not know how to do this…”.

On the other hand, staff cannot be held responsible for mistakes made when they follow the procedure. Then they have acted in good faith and the procedure was wrong or ambiguous. Of course a situation like that is a trigger to refine the procedure. Another advantage is that new employees find their way around much quicker and make fewer mistakes in their new job. Staff is also more relaxed since they know exactly what is required of them.

Although mapping processes and documenting procedures might seem a tedious exercise, it is nonetheless a great tool to help users make the most of their work, and especially use their business management software correctly and effectively.

Until next week, and remember……keep it (A)FRESH!

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Immo Böhm is the founder and managing director of Afresh Consult. He has been involved with business management systems for over 5 years. He is an experienced implementation and process design consultant and has done in excess of 40 projects in this regard. Immo has a B.Sc degree, a diploma in IT and a MBA (UK).