

BUSINESS PROCESS MANAGEMENT

Methodologies - a reflection on appropriateness

There is a growth of methodology-driven business change, but **David Winders** ponders on whether the right tool is being used for the right reasons.



Business Process Management, Six Sigma and Capability models seem to be driving a boom in so called “scientific” change management activity in the corporate world at

the moment. All of this is facilitated by a desire to be “doing the right thing” and is incentivised and promoted by regulatory frameworks including Sarbanes-Oxley, FSA compliance, Data Protection and Basel II.

Methodologies are booming with millions being spent on introducing this and that initiative. The corporate world, in particular the stock market quoted sector, is riddled with what a recent senior change director I worked with recently referred to as “worthy stuff”.

It all seems to be driven by the principle “if one is being seen to be doing the right things then one cannot be blamed if things go wrong.”

Organisations have all the right approaches in place, having invested thousands in state-of-the-art business paradigms, and yet fail to answer the phone with a human being that understands its customer’s needs or has any empathy for what is required, let alone speak the customer’s language properly.

How many organisations have I.S. departments that have implemented ITIL, CMM and CMMI amongst the myriad of other “right ways of doing things” and then convince themselves

that they are centres of excellence, presenting immaculate performance dash boards, process models and procedures and yet fail to deliver a laptop to a member of staff within a sensible timescale?

Smaller Companies have more focus on their core business

There seems to be such a gulf of difference between the small entrepreneurial enterprise that has focus on its principle activity and that of the big corporate within which, in some extreme cases, many “head office” employees have little knowledge of their organisation’s products and services, treating the customers as an inconvenience. Is this down to the inappropriate application of methodology in larger corporate companies?

The corporate world’s love of “worthy” activity

Within the larger corporate environment there is a trend for the growth in large populations of knowledge workers, expert in managing and using all these methodology-based tools. I regularly sit in those offices on assignments whereby if you listen to some teams undertaking their daily activity you would rarely be able to work out what the company did because all the effort in the department is deployed in applying one “worthy” initiative or another.

Small companies do what they do with a high percentage of effort being applied to manufacturing and selling their product or delivering their service, generating revenue. The larger the organisation becomes the bigger the ratio becomes between activities that are core to the business and to those that are supportive tasks or cost creating. If the ratio of core activity versus supporting activity is plotted against numbers of employees on a graph the curve is of an exponential

growth of non core activity as the organisation becomes larger.

The big corporate world and its love of “worthy” activity is fuelled by middle-class professional employees who base their whole lives and the development of their careers on the application of methodologies and management paradigms.

As a consultant I am part of this world; but at least I have at long last had the inspiration to step back and see what is going on and learn to have the benefit of applying appropriateness. Once a salary man myself, working in the larger corporate environment, I also fuelled this corporate methodology adding to the overhead, producing slide packs, producing reports, project documentation, running methodology-based training programmes and managing method-driven programmes. But having now left this environment to become freelance and thus being exposed to many organisational cultures, so often very different in their make up, I have seen the light! I still work in business change management but what I have learned are some key principles which I apply to my clients and change-management assignments. This approach is essentially based on the application of appropriateness.

The Appropriate use of Methodologies

Methodologies are useful for providing structure to the inexperienced but the more experienced you get the more you can move away from a meticulous step-by-step approach to deliver value quickly in a pragmatic way, by choosing what is best to apply for a particular opportunity.

Methodologies are often excellent as guidelines but zealous over-use should be avoided and not be allowed

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to overtake sensible application and miss the point. Some individuals tie themselves to a particular approach on a wholesale basis developing their entire careers to applying a methodology in an almost religious zeal. In fact some excellent approaches - the Six Sigma method is a good example - have in some organisational deployments had their efficacy diluted by over selling and creating a priest-hood around their application and implementation. The pursuit of certification, accreditation and acquisition of so called "belt" status can become a self confidence, self reassurance, exercise based more on developing and enhancing personal ego than delivering real business value. Don't get me wrong; I think Six Sigma has some great features, but it is not the only way to do things.

Other methodologies have been known to issue little metal badges and ties to identify the individuals who have done the exams and proven their indoctrination via interview panels of the acolytes prior to entry into the inner circle - bizarre or what!

This can create an artificial differentiation of individuals above and beyond the "great unwashed" general business population - I don't think this is particularly helpful. Thus a balance is required when embedding a method into a corporate culture in making sure that you don't go too far by obliterating appropriateness and creating a methodology-based elite.

Consultancies and Methodologies

A lot of consultancy organisations feed off the rigorous application of a particular method or a series of methods and I'm afraid often this gives the profession a bad name. Some consultancies leap on a new "buzz" word or trendy approach and milk it for what it's worth, whilst good techniques within it can become lost in overall scepticism of management consultants by fulltime employees that receive and have to endure this stuff year-in, year-out

A good consultant, delivering real value, applies what is useful to the client; not a one-shape-fits-all approach supported by gimmicks and jargon.

Many large brand-based consultan-

cies just have to apply methodologies in an absolute way because they employ cohorts of inexperienced college leavers.

The idea is that if you push each organisation through the sausage machine of templates and data collection methods then you need lower paid "green" graduates and can still charge high day rates because the answers will come out at the end of the process. The answer maybe flawed but who cares it has the right brand name to impress the CEO; a little cynical I know but frequently so true. Having seen slide packs from leading consulting brands with the wrong customer name on slide 67 left behind from the previous piece of work I know this can be true.

Big brand impresses the executive board - "We used XYZ International Consulting to embed the "Whiz Bang Process Improvement Initiative" in our organisation"; but does this really represent good value for money? It might impress the bigger organisations but this is not what an SME needs. High costs, big name and an output that goes on a shelf and is probably no more than the management knew anyway, just extracted by interviews and workshops and put into some flashy slides; surely it's the quality of the output not the brand.

Appropriateness is the message of this article

Apply tools and techniques that are appropriate to the task or problem in hand. This will deliver solutions that are fit for purpose without installing levels of bureaucracy and methodology for methodology's sake and incurring the resulting high costs of following steps and producing artefacts just "because the manual tells you to". Appropriate application of methodology is the cost effective approach to business change.

Principles of Appropriate Use of Methodologies by Change Professionals:

- Use the right tools and techniques to solve the problem at hand.
- Don't force the client to do every step because the book says so.

- Listen to what the client sees as important and apply what is needed.
- Sell the benefit of the output not the method.
- To many people methodologies are boring; don't over-sell. What interests the consultant from a technical perspective can be deadly dull to others.
- Be prepared to listen and learn - stop and re-evaluate the approach to a problem rather than ploughing on following the book and templates.
- Employ and engage personnel who can be selective in the use of methodologies; the diehards are perhaps the most inexperienced candidates.

A good business transformation consultant applies appropriateness and saves you money by only applying what you need - giving focus on the value-add of the assignment not the size of the fee income. The consultant who delivers good value for money will enjoy both repeat business and a strong client relationship. This leads to greater profits in the longer term.

A one-off expensive piece of "shelf-ware" doesn't result in repeat business for the consultant and is not good for either party.

What should a client look for?

From the perspective of a client, look for people who apply the principles above and be wary of those who want to talk endlessly about their "this or that" methodology. Methodology can often be used to cloak a substantial lack of substance. Methodology plus brand, gloss and ego does not necessarily deliver value for money.

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