

It's All in The Process: How to Save Time, Increase Productivity, and Free Up Creativity

By Deborah Hoard

“We need to think outside the box!” How many times have you heard that in a meeting? Creativity and original thinking are worthy objectives, but who has the time to be innovative when you're bogged down by a never-ending stream of administrative tasks, and you can't see the forest for the trees?

Don't despair . . . there's a way to break this cycle. Simply turn your tedious tasks into highly effective streamlined processes. “Processes?!” you ask. Won't they hinder my creativity with a more restrictive regimen? No, not one bit. In fact, effective processes do just the opposite.

What Are Processes ... And Why Do I Need Them?

Processes are a series of tools that automate and streamline administrative and other repetitive tasks. Well-developed processes save time and energy and create a framework that allows your team the freedom to be more creative and productive. This freedom encourages “out-of-the-box” thinking that, in turn, leads to more competitive results and, ultimately, increased revenues.

During an average workday, marketers can spend a significant portion of their time on administrative duties, thus preventing them from focusing their time and energy on their actual work – creative design, copywriting, market research, media buying, etc. This distraction from their core responsibilities reduces their productivity and has negative consequences on the bottom line.

In a marketing environment, it is critical to implement effective processes. Time spent on support tasks, such as obtaining purchase orders, processing data sheet fulfillment orders, finding UPC codes for product packaging, tracking campaign milestones, and updating ad rates can inhibit creative flow and stop projects in their tracks. However,

without well-defined processes to automate these functions, you are likely to experience inefficiency on an increasingly large scale, resulting in endless project delays and the loss of your most valuable asset – your competitive edge. These operational processes should be just as commonplace as the ones that help you run, track, analyze, and measure the marketing programs that contribute directly to your bottom-line business.

Removing the Roadblocks to Your Success

Developing effective processes that you can use on a daily basis is the key to saving time and increasing productivity. However, a word to the wise: Any old process won't do. A poorly conceived one can actually increase the workload rather than relieve the burden.

To be effective, processes must achieve the following six objectives:

- Save time
- Automate repetitive tasks
- Be easy to implement
- Take into account every important procedural step
- Establish rules of engagement between employees, executives, and other departments
- Be viewed as valuable by the people who will use them

Developing Successful Processes ... One Step at a Time

How do you develop successful processes? First, you need employee buy-in. The worst thing you can do is implement a process for the sake of the process and not for the sake of your employee. If your processes don't address the needs of those who use them, they will never be adopted or fully embraced. To obtain buy-in, try viewing the process as a "product" and your employees as the "target audience" who will use that product. The following Process Development Steps provide a useful guideline for nurturing this process along:

- *Conduct focus groups:* Determine what is preventing your employees from becoming more productive and creative.
- *Create the product:* Develop the processes based on the information gathered from your research, taking into account organizational operation and corporate culture.
- *Conduct Beta testing:* Allow key employees to test and critique the processes before they are implemented.
- *Market the product:* Develop a training program to make the transition to your processes a smooth one.
- *Upgrade the product:* Make sure your processes evolve as needs change and better tools become available.

The Proof is in the Process

According to a recent study conducted on behalf of a leading enterprise software company, we discovered that the corporate communications department employees were spending over 40 percent of their time on administrative tasks. They were swept up in an endless cycle of low productivity. Tasks, such as paying vendors, entering them correctly into the A/P system, and resubmitting purchase order requisitions that were rejected for lack of information, became distractions from getting their work done. To make matters worse, new employees were taking up to six weeks to get up to speed because they were left to their own devices to figure things out without the benefit of a viable process in place.

By following the Process Development Steps listed above, the department identified the required tools and processes that reduced wasted administrative time and needless frustration. Better yet, since the department's employees were actively involved in the development of these new processes, they were motivated to use them.

Within three weeks, the team's administrative time was reduced to 15 percent of its daily workload. The team members found more time to concentrate on the work they were hired to perform, resulting in a significantly higher production rate and improved

project quality. In addition, new hires were up to speed within three weeks, allowing them to be more productive sooner.

Two key effective processes this company enacted were:

- Developing attractive forms, charts, and databases that encourage and motivate creative minds to use them
- Moving the A/P process online, with internal contact and departmental data automatically completed

Effective Processes Are for Everyone

Lack of time and energy can deplete the personal and organizational resources you need to be creative, productive, and competitive. To help your team achieve its objectives, rise above the daily grind, and think “outside the box,” provide a framework for automating repetitive functions that distract from important revenue-generating responsibilities. Create a foundation for streamlining support activities and reducing “red tape.” And, finally, develop effective processes that free up individual creativity, encourage productivity, and lead to increased revenues for your company.

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Deborah Hoard, Founder and President of Net Results, has over 16 years experience of successfully turning around critical marketing communications projects that are in danger of not making their deadlines for such top companies as Apple Computer Inc., Cisco Systems Inc., Informatica, Inc., Maxtor Corporation, and Oracle Corporation. To find out more, visit her Web site at www.get-net-results.com.