What Do You Put First – Process or Technology?

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Do you consider yourself structured or unstructured? Do you appreciate processes and systems or do you prefer flexibility and the freedom to do what you want when you want? There are clear advantages to both preferences, but the perspective I hope you'll have for the next few minutes is that processes and systems are valuable to your success because that is this article's topic. To be clear, like most people, I enjoy the opportunity to draw outside the lines and be unencumbered by systems, processes, and accountability metrics, but it is only through systems, processes, and metrics that organizations become efficient at what they do and remain competitive in their marketplace.

Having spent many years in the software industry, I have tremendous respect for application software and the end-user productivity it can enable. Yet I also know from many years in consulting how poorly technology can be implemented. Whether you use IT systems for sales, marketing, engineering, customer service, accounting, or talent management, you've probably had a bad end-user experience at some point too. Systems are often implemented in ways that are at odds with how operations actually work or should work. Customer relationship management systems don't align well with sales best practices. Project management systems don't align well with project management processes. Financial and HR systems don't capture the information or provide the reports that are truly needed to improve the organization.

A primary reason for the misalignment between technology and the processes they are intended to support is that technology receives the most financial investment, hence the attention. Processes then become an afterthought. However, IT systems don't create best practices, coordinate activities, and improve productivity on their own. Without integration and alignment with best-practices, systems become more of an obstacle than an enabler. People begrudgingly record data that isn't needed, isn't accurate, or doesn't reflect the realities of their daily activity. People generate reports that aren't accurate. Data then becomes the source of debates in meetings rather than the driver of important decisions.

Early in my consulting career, I led a team of IBM's top sales managers to develop a streamlined sales process to increase IBM's sales efficiency and effectiveness. As we wrapped up our process reengineering, we assessed the available software systems as an enabler to our newly defined process. Unfortunately, as we made our final presentation to senior management, the executives became so enamored with the software that the software became the focus of the ensuing implementation. The software was implemented globally with the focus being on the software rather than the process it was intended to enable. It took years and a lot of money before we were able to finally modify the software and fully enable the process that was intended to be implemented in the first place.

Having seen this scenario in many organizations since, I'm an advocate for designing processes and best practices first, letting systems follow second. Systems are for enabling processes, not superseding them.

If you are in management or another position that influences operational efficiency, focus your attention first on defining the best practices and processes that your organization needs to embrace. Think about how information and materials can most optimally move through the organization. Give attention to how value-adding activity can best be accomplished. With your streamlined processes and best practices defined, then evaluate, buy, create, or update the systems required to enable them.

If you are a user of systems that don't align well to the actual work you need to do, speak up. Let people know, constructively of course, that the systems you are saddled with aren't enabling your efficiency or effectiveness. Make recommendations to those responsible for the systems as to how the systems could be improved to best enable your productivity. It is to no one's benefit, especially yours, to use systems that don't support your needs, perpetuate inaccurate data, or waste time as people apply work-arounds to keep the organization running.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of Activating *Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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