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FEATURE ARTICLE

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For Immediate Publication

Finding Savings Through Process Improvement

By Steve Epner

Remember 5 part forms? Remember the note at the bottom to “press hard to go through 4 carbons?” Do you realize the kids entering the work force today do not know what a carbon is?

Everyone has stories of how we have cleared forests for printing paper. And yet, working with paper causes us to waste as much as 90% of the time we touch it or lose trying to find it. Most companies can become much more efficient if they could just get rid of paper.

Paper is the biggest time wasting “it” in the business world. Think about the time to: file it, retrieve (or find) it, stage it, move it, and wait for it. Plus there are costs to buy it, print it and store it. If you have ever thought about making your internal processes more efficient, start by looking for ways to eliminate paper.

For example, how many people in your organization get printed reports where you wonder what they really need it for? Why not give all of those people the ability to read the report online? You eliminate tons of paper, the distribution of that paper, the destruction of that paper and everyone still has the same capability to read whatever was on that paper.

By the way, if they do not read the new files, it doesn’t matter. It is just an electronic copy. Be glad to provide it and then leave everyone alone.

But paper is not the only log jam in our processing environments. Sometimes we create them by making our processes very complicated. Just because a process failed once 10 years ago, we have built in an extra review to make sure it never happens again.

I was at one company and we were streamlining their processes. I came across one of

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those complicated procedures. After having it described in detail, one of the newer, young employees in the room commented: "Why do we always make it hard to be wrong, instead of easy to be right?" What a statement. This young person summed up 20 years of management science in one sentence. Find everywhere we have made it difficult to be wrong and see if we can just make it easy to be right.

A third area of inefficiency is any time we are mailing information to others within or even external to the company. Why not just use email? It is no longer a question of whether or not you need to be online (you have to), it is just a question of how long you are going to wait.

It may be time to force your people (and your company – if you are still waiting) online so you can send them information electronically. We need our staff personnel to pick up reports and other documents electronically. We need to eliminate the cost of overnight shipping. All of the information anyone needs should be published on our intranet (internal internet). Do not worry about supporting the post office. They will take care of themselves.

What else can we do? A simple step is look for the bottlenecks. Find out where paper congregates. Ask who is reading paper reports? Track down all users of print outs of over six or ten pages. Then figure out what they are doing and if the paper is necessary. Many times, you will find it is not required. Take advantage of the situation and eliminate it right away.

You might turn the process around and survey the people who generate the report. What do they think is the purpose of the report and who gets it. Then talk to the people who get it. Ask what they do with it and is it useful? Sometimes, you find reports that are not used or do not serve any purpose. Eliminate as many copies of the report (or the entire report) wherever possible.

Consider attaching a travel log to any document that is passed around for action or approval. Each person records when they received it, the actual amount of time they spent working or reviewing it, and the date of when they passed it on to the next step. You find operations that take a week to devote 5 minutes of real work. Ask why it takes so long. These types of process must be redesigned to reduce the overall cycle time of any process without reducing internal controls.

Improve process by raising the level of integration of your computer systems. UPS and Fedex make it easy to integrate freight charges into your invoicing systems. Invoices are generated faster and more efficiently since there is no waiting on pieces of paper coming from the shipping dock. Gain greater savings by emailing invoices instead of mailing them.

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These are just a few ideas that you can use right away. For more ideas, use your free half hour of consulting and call Jeff Gusdorf (314-983-1208) or Steve Epner (314-983-1214). They will help you focus in on savings that are just waiting for you. Reduce your costs without pain. It is amazing how much money can be recovered by just looking at what we are doing today.

Steve Epner has been directing traffic on the information super highway since 1966. A highly regarded industry expert, Epner is widely published and has provided comment for national business publications including the *Wall Street Journal*. His experience in business, technology and strategic planning makes him a nationally renowned technical speaker. Epner can be reached at sepner@bswllc.com.

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