

Process Problems? Why They May Be Worse Than You Think

The Dependency Dilemma

By Joe Whitefield

Hurry up and wait. That's life, when you are involved in something that has several steps to reach completion. We have all experienced the frustrations that accompany any process that drags out indefinitely or breaks down at various stages – for example, driver's license processing at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Facilities management is an industry that also relies on numerous processes.

THE DEPENDENCY DILEMMA

For simplicities' sake, a process is a series of steps dependent on each other, and leading to a final result. Projects have design and construction processes. Maintenance and operations have work control and accounting processes. There are processes involving compliance for practically everything. In fact, most of our work products are part of a process at some level whether we realize it or not. These processes typically involve some form of planning, execution, and reporting. We should ask ourselves, "How well do our systems and processes serve our organization and our customers?" Are they arduous and frustrating, or easy and useful, leading to advertised deliverables? This article will explore the nature of processes and the critical role dependency plays in their success or failure, known as the dependency dilemma.

The common denominator for different processes is that they are embedded with multiple levels of dependent steps. Step 2 cannot be completed until step 1

is completed. Step 3 cannot be completed until steps 1 and 2 are completed, and so on. Ultimately, the success or failure of the process will be determined by the final product or service that is delivered, and the final product is dependent on each step. Two things we know about process flow are (1) each step/event has an individual expected level of performance to be successful, and (2) every step/event downstream in a process is affected by the performance of the steps/events upstream. Another thing that is typically known, but often grossly underestimated, is the degree to which the downstream steps/events (and ultimately the final product) are affected.

BREAK IT DOWN

Every step in a process is subject to the normal variations and risk factors that impact its performance relative to the expectation. Something as simple as having an approval signature on a document is subject to the availability of the responsible party. Weather events, utility outages, individual vacation and work schedules, system errors, individual mistakes, and Murphy's Law are a small sample of things that can negatively impact any activity, thereby endangering its successful completion.

Financial ramifications often follow inefficiencies and breakdowns in individual process steps. However, the negative impacts are most often felt initially in time delays. Something that should take two days takes four days. That adds pressure on all of the downstream events—not only

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to be effectively executed, but also make up the lost time (two days) if an adequate margin has not been built into the schedule of events.

The essence of the dependency dilemma is the problem of compounding. Problems in step 1 are passed along to step 2. Step 2 may add some of its own problems, and a compound set of problems is then passed on to step 3. Additional steps in a process lead to an even larger snowball of problems at the end of the line, thus affecting the final product. Even if you are aware of the process problems, they are probably worse than you think. Problems such as delays and quality issues reflect poorly on the responsible organization, and establish a platform for customer frustration and criticism.

The more bureaucratic and organization is, the more susceptible it is to process problems. By nature bureaucracies have more regulations and requirements to meet. These add additional steps to many processes. Additional steps increase risk and opportunities for poor

performance and problems affecting the final product. Results and output matter. Customers expect a successful delivery of the final product/service. They rarely concern themselves with the internal workings of the process itself. Success is shared when a process leads to a successful final product/service. Failure to deliver a successful product reflects poorly on everyone involved in the process whether they were specifically at fault or not.

IMPROVE THE PROCESSES

First, decrease the dependency problems by simply eliminating unnecessary or low-value steps in a process. One less signature can help, two less can really help. Since most steps (and participants) in a process are intended to add some value, there may be some risk (or perceived risk) to eliminating them. Be an optimizer. The question to ask is not “does it add some value?” but rather “is it worth it?”

Second, check for specific steps that consistently bog down and choke the process. Often improving one small step will increase the flow throughout the entire process. Learn from history. It is better to address thwe specific problem area than to compound the problem further by subjecting all of the personnel and steps in the process to additional requirements.

Third, seek to minimize the variations that often affect critical steps. This is where aggressive scheduling and a deep bench can help. Plan activities when people are more likely to be available – say Wednesdays instead of Fridays. Advertise deadlines well in advance. Have a knowledgeable substitute and/or qualified signatory. Incentivize people to finish their work early. There are many ways to improve in this area if you are open to some changes. Chances are it may require a little more trust and delegation and a little less control.

Finally, where possible, add some margin (time in the schedule, or contingency in the budget) at key places within the process to allow for recovery should problems arise. Contingency planning is a key to effective risk management.

Facilities managers are inundated with processes. Some are streamlined and effective, some are not. If you find frustrations and poor results throughout a process, you are probably suffering from severe dependency dilemma. If your processes are managing you rather than the other way around, develop a plan to address the dependency dilemma that is undoubtedly present. A little relief can go a long way for you and your customers. 💰

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