

## IT – The Inside Track to Better Business Processes

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Many IT professionals are in a unique position in that they deal with people and processes throughout their organization. This gives them a business perspective that most employees don't have; a chance to see much of the work of the organization at a macro level while understanding many of the mechanics in detail. Some have taken advantage of their ubiquitous position in their organization to delve into the realm of business process analysis.

Business processes (including IT processes) are often fraught with inefficiencies; unnecessary work, redundancy, delays and work-arounds that have been incorporated into high-tech "solutions", solutions that were intended to get the job done better. The solution is rarely as good as it could have been had the requestor and solution provider a better understanding of the process and requirements. By assuming the role of process expert, the IT professional elevates himself to a position that is becoming ever more indispensable given the critical nature of the work we do.

With the help of proper tools and methods, IT groups are improving the services they provide and discovering new opportunities. A good process focus helps IT folks understand how their work fits into a bigger picture. When process analysis tools are applied to client processes, the developer/analyst gains a better understanding of the processes he is supporting while he and the customer get a chance to understand and challenge the changes before they are implemented -- ultimately resulting in a better installed product.

While there is a lot of talk about process focus, simply talking about processes isn't understanding them. Looking at them from 10,000 feet doesn't cut it either -- Reading through procedures and talking to managers and supervisors about processes provides an understanding that is at least many steps from reality. To understand our processes, we need two things...detailed information and a good tool for capturing and displaying this process detail.

The detailed information is in the heads of the PEOPLE WHO DO THE WORK - the people who, day in and day out, are living the process that you want to document. It is the accumulated experience specific to the process that you want to understand. These people know WHAT HAPPENS in their part of the process better than anyone else because it is what they do. They know what appears to make sense in the process and what appears to be nonsense in the process. They know how to make their piece of the process work and how to get around it when it doesn't work.

A good tool provides clarity without being overly simplistic. It provides detail without clutter. It is easy to use and easy to understand. There are a lot of flowcharting tools that provide symbol sets. But if the symbols are not wrapped in a methodology, then the charter has to invent one. The result is usually superficial and inconsistent, an awkward one-time effort with little or no lasting value.

By contrast, the work simplification charting method, developed specifically for documenting business processes, uses a small, well-thought-out symbol set supported by an elegantly structured methodology. The fact that the work simplification symbol set was adopted as the ANSI and ASME standards for Process Charting over fifty years ago is testimony to its fundamental simplicity. It has flowed through a half century of new technologies and constantly changing processes with the grace of an alphabet... because it is fundamental. It is basic. It gets to the root of our processes. It speaks the language of process.

A person who uses this technique to chart a process gets to see how that process works; every record (document, email, form, system, etc.), work step by work step. If they chart enough processes, they get to know how the organization works.

The popularity of this method has been overshadowed by less detailed techniques that do not display either the records or the work steps. These newer techniques were developed with a principal focus on designing electronic systems and not on the processes themselves and they do not follow the flow of the records or show the steps the people take to process them. As a result, a generation of would-be process improvers has been led to believe that a flowchart consists of a few boxes (containing superficial work descriptions) connected by arrows. But the detail does not go away simply because it is ignored.

Meanwhile, people using detail process charts are getting far better results in much less time. They have built powerful libraries of charts that provide genuine transparency of those processes. The process library is a great help for training new employees and employees who have been promoted or transferred, it speeds the process for auditors, meets requirements for certification (Sarbanes/Oxley, ISO, etc.) and provides the information needed to institutionalize continuous improvement.

**Ben B. Graham** is President of The Ben Graham Corporation. The Ben Graham Corporation pioneered the study of business processes and has provided education and consulting services in business process improvement methods since 1953. His organization publishes Graham Process Charting Software, designed specifically and solely for preparing detail process charts. Ben is the author of the book "Detail Process Charting: Speaking the Language of Process", published in 2004 by John Wiley Publishers.