Process and Workflow Analysis

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Assessment of Objectives and Project Scope

Before any effective forms design effort is made, the prudent forms professional studies and analyzes the workflow supported by the form(s) to be introduced to or enhanced for the related business systems. This analysis considers all the likely interfaces and impacts, both routine and exceptional, that can be anticipated to occur through the use of the form(s) involved.

Fact Finding

Since assumptions are naturally prone to error, a thorough search and evaluation of actual situations and existing envrionments helps to assure that subsequent decisions are intelligently based. General rule of thumb: Direct questions to the person who actually performs the work to describe what is done and how it is accomplished. Managers often possess only a cursory overview of the functions supported by the forms. Those who use the form (or will use a new form) are best equipped to explain/describe reality.

Various methods should be employed by the analyst. Examples include:

- observation of the work process by those who fill-in the form; examination of any written procedures;
- focus group discussion of the "ideal" function(s) of the form;
- solicitation of comments from those who *receive* the filled-in form; etc.

Identification and examination of the reach of the form(s) and the repercussions of its use across the various affected business systems. (*Reference*: "The Business Forms Handbook" – current edition - DMIA)

Data Organization

Data is defined as discrete facts and metrics that serve as the raw materials for the development of information. The proper and appropriate organization of that data results in useful information. Often, the easiest way for everyone concerned to understand clearly the steps within a process and how they are performed, including all the systems and players involved, is to view a linear chart of the whole process. Such a chart includes not only who does what, when and where, but also maps where delays and repetitive steps may occur. Such a chart also reveals critical chances for error and identifies streamlining opportunities.

Examination of the data elements that occur most often, the errors that are most apt to happen, and the most often encountered delays and reworks provides the basis for process clarification and work simplification. "*The Pareto Principle states that only a 'vital few' factors are responsible for producing most of the problems (cause and effect). This principle can be applied to quality improvements to the extent that a great majority of problems (80%) are produced by a few key causes (20%). If we correct these few key causes, we will have a greater probability of success."* (Essociates Group, Inc. -2003)

Special attention should be given to the usability of the form by the person who reads (receives) the completed form; not just to the person who writes (fills in) the form.

Analysis

After defining the scope of the project, gathering facts, and organizing the data, it's time to do an analysis the *meaning* of the results of those efforts. Beyond the obvious questions (who? when? where? and how?), the most important question to be answered here is "why?" This exercise is necessary to justifiy the existence of the form. A good test is asking what the result/impact would be if the form did NOT exist. (Confirms need.) Methodology and step sequences may differ among analysts, but the ultimate purpose of the analysis process is to understand the task(s) to be performed by the form tool(s).

Solution Development

Finding the optimal outcome among all possibile business solutions is the goal of the analysis. The pros and cons of each potential solution should be weighed objectively. Only then, may the best solution be selected, developed and implemented. Care must be given to honor all organizational policy and legal requirements, including those related to Section 508 (user accessibility).

Recommendations

It is not unusual for a forms analyst to be required to present the results of an analysis project, along with their considered recommendations, to the directly affected user community and/or to functional management prior to beginning implementation of a form system design project. Preparation of the proposal should include all pertinent information accumulated during the analysis process. Much of it may be held in reserve to provide detail *only upon request*, but all should be considered when developing the final proposal.

Plan the presentation carefully, being mindful of the dynamics of the expected audience. Keep the presentation simple, clear and uncluttered. Provide detail when requested. Don't oversell (shut up and sit down when you've said what needs to be said)! Include a target completion date, whenever appropriate. Offer criteria for measuring project success.

Implementation

Once the analysis is done and the decision made as to which alternative solution is to be implemented, it's time to make it happen. Whether the end product is intended to be a paper form, an electronic form, an Internet form or some combination of the formats, pre-and post-handling issues must be addressed.

Implementation will not be an automatic occurrence. It must be planned. When will the form(s) be made available? Where and how may they be obtained by the users? In what format(s) will the user find them? If electronic, what server will house the form? The database(s) that may be accessed must be identified and made accessible. System interfaces must be planned, installed and tested. Implementation timing must be determined and published.

Approved forms must be made available to the using community. If they are paper, users must be informed about how to obtain stock. Stock levels and reorder points must be established. If they are electronic, users must be told the server addresses or URLs where they may find the forms. Testing must confirm access.

Documentation should address three (3) areas.

1. Development documentation describing the thought processes of the analyst/designer in constructing the form
2. Clear instructions for the user on how to complete the form, where to go with questions, and how to request form changes
3. Policy & procedural information on how the form fits into the business system(s) it addresses

Needless to say, the ideal form is self-instructing. In the event, however, that detailed training is appropriate, it should be offered in the way(s) most applicable to the situation, taking into account the complexity of the form(s) and the level of expertise already in existence among the current and prospective users.

Follow-up and Evaluation

At a predetermined interval following full implementation of the form(s), a check should be made to validate the usability and effectiveness of the form among all users (writers and readers). Any modifications that are identified should be implemented either immediately (if critical) or at a scheduled interval (if routine). If new instructions are needed, they must be provided to all users when any changes are introduced. Documentation and interfaces should also be updated at this time, when appropriate.

Note: This information may be useful to a forms professional preparing for the Certified Form Systems Professional examination offered by Business Forms Management Association. http://www.bfma.org/certification/CFSP.htm