

Effective business processes

Tim Page CFP^{CM} of PageRussell shares his views on strategies for improving practice efficiency through a more effective use of business processes



Each month we ask an industry expert to raise an issue of importance for the whole financial services sector

Here's a scary thought: Your clients do not care that you spend two or more hours behind the scenes for every hour you spend with them. Actually, it's worse than that. If you told them the truth, they would think you were making excuses to bill more fees, or

worry they've hired an inefficient Financial Planner.

Clients care about the time you spend with them. To increase that precious contact time you can reduce complexity, delegate tasks to colleagues and outsource – all require effective business processes to work.

At PageRussell we have five employees, all of whom have to complete a wide range of detailed tasks each day. We need a simple and consistent way of doing those tasks so it is easy to remember, or find out, how to do each task. Also, because we work as a team, other team members are reliant on us to complete tasks in a consistent way. You cannot do this without defining, mapping out and documenting those tasks.

Even if you are a one-man-band with no plans to expand your business, effective processes help enormously. Processes save you having to reinvent how to do all of the boring day-to-day tasks and give you more time for your clients.

Many consultants make the mistake of holding up McDonalds as an example of effective business processes. But I don't want my clients to have a bland, "junk food" Financial Planning experience. I want my clients to have a consistent experience equivalent to fine dining at Claridge's. When you know Claridge's has a Gordon Ramsay restaurant - possibly the most efficient and systemised fine dining business there is - you realise how consistently great service also depends on effective processes.

I am not a business process or process

mapping expert. I made all kinds of mistakes while learning how to put business processes in place. Fortunately, PageRussell won the inaugural David Norton Award in October 2008. In 2009 we had 10 days of consultancy time from Brett Davidson and his team at FP Advance. Two of these days were outsourced to Michelle Hoskins of Adviser Partnership. Brett and Michelle helped us master the skills necessary to define and then improve our processes.

You can start with simple check-lists. Check-lists are easy to understand; great for ensuring every step in a task is completed and they require no special software. A lot of CRM software is set up to track cases using check-lists. The problem with check lists is the flow of actions is not immediately visible, especially if there are different routes to follow.

Before long most people end up drawing a diagram – typically a flow chart. If you're not careful you can spend a fortune on process mapping consultants and software. If you already have Visio then great, but we only use PowerPoint (which is normally bundled with MS Office at no extra cost) and is easy to learn.

Don't get hooked into all the false technicalities (like I did at first). There



Tim Page : effective process is key

is no “right” way to map a process. Just concentrate on creating your own conventions and stick to them.

I tried to get everything onto PowerPoint and use each slide like a web page, but managing all the hyperlinks was impossible. Visio is better at this, but can get out of hand. What, to the creator, is a work of art, can look like a confusing mess to a new employee. Also, if a task is computer-based you don't want the process instructions taking up most of the screen.

We've gone back to paper-based manuals, stored centrally. The process flow charts are used at the start of each

Biography

Tim Page CFPSM

Tim Page is a CFP professional and chartered Financial Planner at Page Russell in Bury St Edmunds. He is a qualified Financial Planner with a firm commitment to holistic planning. Tim is chairman of the East Anglian branch of the Institute of Financial Planning. He joined PageRussell in 1999 and has been a director since 2000. As part of the latest generation of a family firm, Tim has over 40 years of 'inherited' experience to draw on. He is married to Annie and has recently become the proud father of their daughter Rosie.

process manual to give an overview only. Detailed step-by-step instructions are in checklist format in a separate section for less confident staff members to refer to. (Most of your staff will know how to scan a document, but a trainee may not).

As you map out a process all the waste and inconsistencies will jump out from the page. It is tempting to change the map then present the “improved” process map as the finished article. However, your team may be happy with the current system and do not know why you are making life difficult by changing things.

First define and map the process. Then meet with the team who perform the task to check the map shows what happens now, rather than what should happen. That meeting will automatically turn into a discussion about how the process can be improved. When you've agreed the improvements, go back and write up the manual for the improved process. Don't forget to check with the team before implementing the changes.

When do you start? Now! Continual improvement is better than delayed perfection. Start with new employees and simple tasks (scanning post, meeting and greeting clients). By the time they've finished writing the manual for a process they'll know it inside out. 📄