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Using Lean Working ideas and techniques to improve customer service, eliminate waste and cut costs

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What is Lean Working

Lean Working (sometimes known as Lean Thinking or Lean Manufacturing) is a proven long term strategy for simultaneously enhancing consumer value, eliminating all forms of waste, reducing costs and improving quality.

Originally developed by the Toyota Motor Company and known as the Toyota Production System, Lean principles and practices can be applied to any organisation in any industry. Lean ideas have been successfully applied, for example, by organisations in the aerospace, banking, construction, retailing, energy and healthcare sectors.

Rising consumer expectations combined with on-going Government pressure for 'efficiency savings' are encouraging many public service organisations to try new approaches to both improving services and reducing costs. Lean Working can be applied in any situation where a process can be defined at the operational level and can even be applied in highly specialised fields such as Legal Case Working.

Most importantly, Lean Working actively involves frontline employees in team based processes for eliminating unneeded activities, reducing unnecessary costs and providing consumers with improved public services. Lean works by using systematic and disciplined approaches to problem definition, solution design, process implementation and performance review.

Making work Lean

Lean Working is based on the understanding that all processes have the same basic features and that careful analysis will simultaneously highlight opportunities to improve quality, eliminate waste and reduce costs. It provides a structured, cyclical framework for both clarifying consumer requirements and for identifying and eradicating waste activities and their associated costs.

In essence, the Lean Working approach is really very simple: you define value from the perspective of the consumer, you map how that value is created and how it flows to the consumer and then you ensure that the required service is delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Importantly, Lean Working seeks out and values the contribution of 'frontline' employees in the improvement process. They are often the people best placed to quantify what consumers really require and to identify where time, effort and other resources are wasted or poorly utilised. It involves the active and on-going participation of both managers and staff in identifying opportunities to improve service design and to eradicate non value adding activities or other unnecessary costs.

Implementing Lean Working

At its heart, Lean Working is about understanding and meeting the needs of consumers more effectively. The starting point for this is developing a clear understanding of the 'problem' that the consumer is trying to solve - be it accessing a vital service or simply paying a bill - and working out how this can most effectively be accomplished by the organisation.

The delivery of any product or service should be triggered by consumer demand, starting with a request that 'pulls' the delivery of the product or service from the organisation. The smoother the flow through the organisation, the less effort is wasted and the more efficient the service will be. Complication should be avoided because complexity usually feeds on itself and often adds unnecessary costs.

In practice, this means that public service organisations need to develop much better understandings of 'consumer purpose' and then rethink the end to end processes by which they create, measure and deliver value to their service users. Fortunately, most Lean Working techniques are both 'low tech' and easy to learn. With practice they can be used by anyone, although it is important to recognise that the tools themselves are much less important than the quality of the thinking behind them.

Despite the potential benefits and the ease with which Lean Working tools can be adopted, introducing Lean Working practices can be difficult. Many public service organisations still have cultures that inhibit change and suppress innovation and employees may be cynical about past quality improvement initiatives that have failed to deliver the expected benefits.

Experience has shown that a structured implementation programme involving people from across as well as up and down the organisation works best. The benefits of introducing Lean Working practices are often immediate as 'blockages' are removed and processes begin to flow more smoothly.

However, the real benefits of eliminating waste and the subsequent increases in capacity and capability that derive from this will not be fully realised until improvements in service design are coupled with smarter working practices as a whole. Effective ways of measuring and monitoring the delivery of the service in question will also need to be developed and time for this must be factored into the implementation plan.

Embedding Lean Working may require between 3 and 6 months of sustained effort to overhaul and streamline a single service line. Adopting Lean Working across a large organisation will require a concerted effort over a number of years and success will not be achieved without the full support and active involvement of top management.

The benefits of Lean Working

It is important to recognise that Lean Working is not just the latest management fad or consulting gimmick. In recent years the Lean approach has been adopted by organisation after organisation and in industry after industry.

In each case the goal has been to use Lean ideas and tools to make a difference in ways that both add value and reduce waste. In each case the application of Lean ideas has been tailored to work in the specific context of the sector in question.

The reason that Lean has been so successful in each and every case is the valuable benefits that successful implementation brings to the host organisation. This is equally true for public service organisations, where the benefits can be substantial:

- More resources to devote to the delivery of frontline services
- Improved service design leading to increased user satisfaction
- Less delays and fewer mistakes made during service delivery
- Increased morale as staff are empowered to do their jobs effectively
- Increased productivity as organisational capacity is better utilised

These benefits don't come overnight of course. They emerge from a collective effort to ensure that everyone is actively engaged in solving the myriad of problems that get in the way of consumers being provided with excellent services on every single occasion that they interact with the organisation.

Finally, as Lean Working is adopted more widely across public service organisations of every type, it will become less about developing 'leading edge' approaches to service delivery and more about keeping Lean Working practices embedded in day to day working arrangements and ensuring that improvement is on-going.

At this point, the critical success factors will become the way that Lean concepts and tools are applied in each specific context, how well public service organisations tap into the ideas and energy of every staff member and how successfully managers keep people focused on delivering services that really benefit consumers.

How Versa can help

Versa has built a successful track record working with people to investigate, define and analyse consumer problems; develop solutions that deliver maximum impact at minimum cost; implement and embed those solutions effectively and to review performance and make appropriate adjustments. If you would like to discuss how Lean Working ideas and techniques might be applied in your organisation please get in contact.