Streamlining the Process

Introduction
Up to this point in our text, we have been preparing for the primary goal: the actual improvement of a business process. This chapter will present the remainder of the 10 fundamental business process improvement (BPI) tools, which are grouped under an umbrella called streamlining. This term best describes the fundamental concept of improving the business process. It identifies the methods that create positive change in effectiveness, efficiency, and adaptability.

The Principles of Streamlining
Streamlining suggests the trimming of waste and excess, attention to every minute detail that might lead to improved performance and quality. It suggests contouring to provide the smoothest flow, the least resistance to progress and performance with the minimum amount of effort. With streamlining, the process will operate with the least disturbance to its surroundings.

There are 12 cornerstone tools to streamlining, and they are applied in the following order:
1. Bureaucracy elimination: Removing unnecessary administrative tasks, approvals, and paperwork.
2. Duplication elimination: Removing identical activities that are performed at different parts of the process.
3. Value-added assessment: Evaluating every activity in the business process to determine its contribution to meeting customer requirements. Real-value-added activities are the ones that the customers would pay you to do. For example, a customer is willing to pay for the meat served on an airline (real-value-added) but does not care whether you keep records on employees who are on vacation or who come in late.
4. Simplification: Reducing the complexity of the process.
5. Process cycle-time reduction: Determining ways to compress cycle time to meet or exceed customer expectations and minimize storage costs.
6. Error Proofing: Making it difficult to do the activity incorrectly.
7. Upgrading: Making effective use of capital equipment and the working environment to improve overall performance.
8. Simple language: Reducing the complexity of the way we write and talk; making our documents easy to comprehend by all who use them.
9. Standardization: Selecting a single way of doing an activity and having all employees do the activity that way all the time.
10. Supplier Partnerships: The output of the process is highly dependent on the quality of the inputs the process receives. The overall performance of any process improves when its suppliers' input improves.
11. Big picture improvement: This technique is used when the first 10 streamlining tools have not provided the desired results. It is designed to help the Process Improvement Team (PIT) look for creative ways to drastically change the process.
12. Automation and/or mechanization: Applying tools, equipment, and computers to boring, routine activities to free up employees to do more creative activities.

These tools are proven techniques. In fact, some have been so successful in business and industry during the past three decades that they have evolved into entire disciplines. In BPI, they are not viewed as separate methods but are used in concert with each other. You will find that the scope of these tools has been enlarged when applied to the business processes.

Many people in business and industry - especially workers and first-line managers - try to improve their work processes. Their efforts are not insignificant, nor do the people themselves lack motivation. However, many seem to rely on intuition and consequently labor haphazardly, independently, and ineffectively. What progress is made is often too little and too slow compared to the need for continuous improvement. This chapter presents specific, proven methods of improving the process in a planned and organized way. When you use these methods consistently, your improvement potential and actual accomplishments are multiplied several times over.