

## Are we lost? Has anyone seen the map? – The benefits of Process Mapping

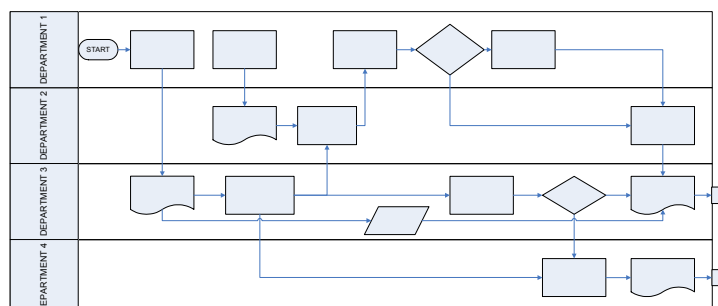
The operating processes in today's distribution centres are sometimes mind-bogglingly complex, as you will know if you have ever had to write the requirements specification for new warehouse management software.

By the time we have considered what we want to achieve currently, then added future potential process improvements, then thought about the customer profile and possible changes in service demands, it becomes difficult to recognise how all of these elements inter-relate. When working on changes to one specific area of the operation and testing different 'what-if' scenarios, we need a tool to help us to see the bigger picture and the potential impact upon other areas as a result of any changes we wish to make.

This is where 'Process Maps' (sometimes called 'Process Flow Diagrams' or 'Flow Charts') can help. They are easy-to-understand illustrations of how the individual steps in a process fit together. It makes them useful tools for identifying how processes interface and for documenting how a particular job is currently done, or should be done in the future. Furthermore, the act of mapping a process in this format helps us to understand the component parts of the process, any problem areas or constraints, and to think about where it can be improved.

So, they can be used not only for software specifications, but for process improvement initiatives, introduction of new materials handling equipment, layout changes or for staff training, to name but a few. Dare I say it? It can also help to make sure that you know what you are doing now, to identify those 'work-arounds' that have been introduced over the years and were never formally approved.

### A few guidelines when creating a process map



1. Determine the boundaries of the process.
2. Collect information regarding the individual steps in the process
  - 'Brainstorm' the process tasks, and sort them into the order they occur.
  - Use existing process descriptions and interviews with management positions to identify the 'official' process.
  - Interview or hold workshops with the people currently operating the process to identify the 'actual' current process.
  - Use your personal experience.
3. At each step, consider:-
  - What really does happen next in the process?
  - Is a decision needed before the next step?
  - Is there any information input or output at this point?
4. Use the simplest possible symbols, which all readers understand.
5. If more than one department is involved in a process, use a multi-stream format to identify where responsibilities or information pass from one department to another.
6. If many comments or an explanatory text is required, use numbering within the process boxes, and list the numbered comments on a separate line or page.
7. Finally, review the mapped process with the personnel involved to confirm your interpretation.