XPLANE®

Visual Process Innovation

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A healthy process is the **lifeblood of any organization**.

It impacts everything from efficiency and quality to customer satisfaction and employee happiness. Yet despite its importance, nearly all organizations struggle to create and maintain healthy and effective processes.

XPLANE is a design consultancy headquartered in Portland, Oregon. We help large organizations clarify their strategies and align their workforce for maximum impact. Unlike traditional consulting firms, we leverage visual thinking, people-centered design, and co-creation to make complex information clear, so companies can achieve better, faster results.

Our approach is unique in that it has grown out of more than 20 years of visualizing thousands of complex processes for clients in industries including technology, retail, finance, entertainment, military, manufacturing, food, energy, and pharmaceuticals. As such, our approach is industry- and topic-agnostic, but we specialize in people-oriented processes and articulating the nuances of the human interactions that are critical to the effectiveness of any process.

We call our approach Visual Process Innovation, and it uses a framework and toolbox approach rather than a strict playbook, enabling us to be adaptive to any context.

Five Core Principles of Visual Process Innovation

Visual Thinking

Pages of detailed documents with boxes and arrows are usually confusing. If you want people to understand a new process, show it to them. Make it visual so they know what to do.

Co-Creation

Imposing a new process top-down rarely produces the desired results. People who execute the process know it best, and they will support what they help build.

Add + Eliminate

Improving a process is not just about cutting costs. To improve results, you need to add steps that contribute to success as well as eliminate the steps that are broken or redundant.

Methodology Agnostic

One process improvement method does not fit all. Just as your company is unique, you are more likely to design the right process if you can use several tools rather than follow a prescribed path.

Holistic

Process doesn't exist in a vacuum. Changing one process has ripple effects across your organization. Don't just look at a single process, look at the ecosystem of processes around it.

Our Process

Our process follows five phases as listed below.

1 ## Current State
Visual mapping of the current state of an existing process

2 ## Future State
Ideation, prototyping, and visual mapping of the planned future state

3 ## Validate
Socializing and stress testing a process prior to activation for improvement

4 ## Activate
Deploying the process into the organization or system

5 ## Embed
Ensuring the process takes hold and improving it

Process Improvement **Landscape**

There is no shortage of process improvement practices. Six Sigma and Lean are powerful tools for their purposes, but what these tools don't always solve is the people side of process. Visual Process Innovation is process improvement for teams. It can help to break down silos to make teams more collaborative, agile, and innovative. People-centered design and co-creation assure that processes are designed for people by people, not by statistical models, while visual thinking brings clarity and understanding, so people know exactly what to do.

Total Quality Management	Define Vision Measure Analyze			Solution	Action Plan	Improve	Control
SixSigma	Identify Define		Measure, Set Objectives	Analyze, Identify Improve	Implement	Confirm Results	Control + Document
Re-Engineering	Vision, Objectives	Identify Processes	Identify Change Levers		Implement	Operational	Evaluate
JIT	Design			Implement Total Control	Demand Pull	Stabilize + Level Schedule	Control
Lean	Identify Value	Map Value Stream		Create Flow	Establish Pull	Kaizen	Seek Perfection
ISO 9000	Mgmt Commitment, Implementation Team	Awareness Training, Status Survey	Implementation Plan	Quality Mgmt System	Implement	Mgmt Review, Quality Audit Certification	Continue to Improve
Theory of Constraints	Identify Constraint			Exploit, Quick Improvement	Review, Align on Other Steps	Elevate	Repeat
Visual Process Innovation	Current State	Future State		Validate		Activate	Embed

1

Current State

Treatment without diagnosis is malpractice. This is especially true of process.

Mapping the current state of a process can be the start and end of a project. Sometimes simply articulating how a process works today is all that is needed. However, more frequently mapping the current state serves as a foundation for creating a new or improved process.

Current State mapping is just what it sounds like–mapping out how a process works today.

We do this by bringing together stakeholders and subject matter experts to visualize the current process, working together on the walls in a co-creative, workshop environment. The idea is to bring the people who know the process together in one room to have one conversation at the same time.

This is far more effective than the commonly used business analyst approach, which then requires the analyst to piece together their own understanding of the process followed by socializing, validating, and refining it before they even start on improvement. It's much better to have that group of people work together to map it and then walk out of the room saying, "That is the process as we all understand it today."

Taking the time to map the current state of a process is important for several reasons:

First, it enables a thorough examination and documentation of the process, as it exists today. This always reveals exceptions and variations in the process where people are compensating for gaps with workarounds that meet their needs. These are the first possible improvement opportunities.

Second, doing the current state legwork acts as a primer for the stakeholders and subject matter experts– they become engaged in the overall effort creating a sense of ownership and support that will help sustain the effort and embed the results once complete.

And finally, having a visual map–a physical artifact–provides a common building point for the team, enabling them to maintain alignment as they work across time and space for the remainder of the effort.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Scope & Altitude
Mapping a process with a group first requires getting alignment on the scope and altitude, so they are all focused on the same things. Scope is simply the start and end points, and altitude is the level of detail to which we need to describe the process. This provides essential parameters for process planning and keeps the team aligned throughout development.

Process Blocking
With the scope and altitude clear, we break down a process into phases and possibly sub-phases and steps in an exercise called Process Blocking. This creates a simpler framework for the group to complete a clear picture of the current process.

Walk the Process
Using the current state map, the stakeholders "walk" the actual process to validate the map, updating it with workarounds, extra steps, or short cuts that take place in most mature processes. This makes sure the current state reflects what's actually happening rather than what the handbook says.

2

Future State

Designing a better process requires everyone to see roles, activities, outputs, and hand-offs with 20-20 vision. The best way to do that is to visualize your process, to actually see it rather than read about it.

The Future State phase visually maps the new process from beginning to end. That sounds simple enough, but getting that map right is both critical and difficult.

One of the reasons Lean is so successful is that it intensively maps the value stream from end-to-end. We've developed a similar mapping approach to clearly visualize the human interactions that are critical to making any process effective.

We bring all of the key stakeholders into a room in a discovery session to literally map each step on a wall. It's crucial to make sure the right people are in the room. The people who actually know the process best will know where the bottlenecks might be and where there are opportunities for easy improvements. A multi-disciplinary group of stakeholders allows organizations to get a holistic look at the process and not just focus on a few areas that are obviously broken.

We look to design the process from beginning to end, including all of the handoffs and interactions that need to take place along the way. It is these vital human relationships that are important to making the Future State a success in the workplace, and Visual Process Innovation brings those to life.
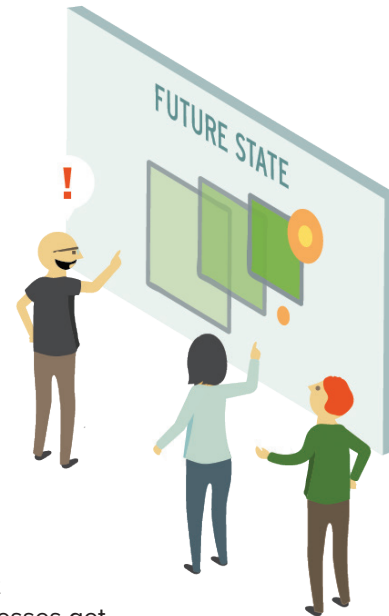
Most processes get hung up on the human side of process. The handoffs, collaboration points, or routine changes that are required to make a process improvement initiative successful need to be understood by the people involved. Visually mapping these fundamental convergence points is one of the keys to success.

When leaders and employees can both clearly see what they are supposed to do, why they should change, and how they fit into the picture, they can begin to change. That's when organizations see and feel the benefit of process change.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Future State Mapping
In a workshop with the key stakeholders, map the future state by asking key questions: What is the action? Who takes action and how is this accomplished? What is the output and what is the handoff to the next step? By the end of the discovery session, the map will help people clearly understand what they need to do.

Paper Prototyping
To see the process in action, paper prototyping using hand-sketched drawings allows teams to test a new process with different stakeholder groups. It's a quick and effective way to examine a process improvement plan from different perspectives and refine the process before making big investments.

Best Practices and Benchmarking
It can be important to research industry best practices to understand where organizations might find gaps and opportunities to improve, what objectives should be priorities, and gauge customer expectations. This helps set benchmarks and objectives so organizations adopt the best thinking.

Plus/Delta Opportunity Mapping
Building from the current state, stakeholders map what's working and where those tactics and activities could reap benefits in the process. Then, they map opportunities to improve drawing on their own experience with how the process works day-to-day to create an improved Future State.

3

Validate

Process validation can be a silver bullet in successful process innovation. It helps you learn what's working and what's not before the expensive (in every way) steps of activation and embedding.

To make sure you've got the new process right, it's important to socialize and stress test it. This allows you space to refine and adjust the process before you launch it. You can test the process from multiple angles and establish metrics and milestones to assess and measure success.

VALIDATE

HOW DO YOU VALIDATE A NEW PROCESS?

Validate it by putting it on its feet in as real an environment as possible. Whether that's done in a safe "sandbox" environment or a riskier live environment depends on many different variables. Here are a few critical considerations when designing validation tests:

WHO
Who is involved in the process, and how readily can they be included? Workers on an oil platform in the North Atlantic won't easily be able to join a validation workshop in Texas.

WHAT
What is involved in the process, and can it be used for testing? Validating a cruise ship's cleaning / restocking process requires a ship that needs that; those aren't just lying around.

WHERE
Where does the process take place? Is it in one location or spread out? How distributed are the locations? Is it in different areas of one building or different parts of the world?

WHEN
When does the process take place? Meaning, what is the timeframe? One hour, four days, three months, or even an undefined amount of time?

WHY
Why are we testing the process? What do we want to learn? Is it early stage testing, looking for bigger gaps, or is later stage testing for detailed refinement?

HOW
How are we going to test the process? What's viable given the above input and more?

In solving for these challenges, beware of unintended blind spots that come from short-changing reality in testing scenarios. For example, by not running a shipping process in a real time or real space environment, you might miss that cargo is now left sitting in the sun for hours because that in-between step was not included in the testing workstreams.

Activating a new process before it's ready is the surest path to failure before it ever had a chance to succeed.

Socializing and validating a planned future state lets you

1. Introduce the new process to stakeholders who haven't yet worked on it.

2. Collect their feedback for material improvements.

3. Gain their support for it by making them collaborators.
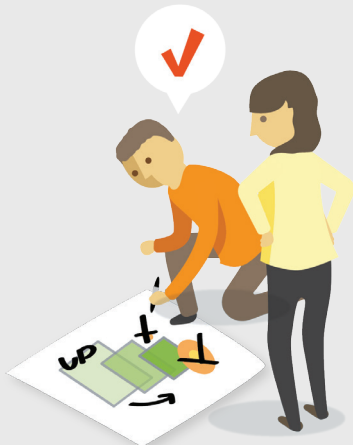
TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

User Acceptance Testing
Again, you can kill three birds with one stone: introduction, feedback, and support. Using the current and future state maps, you can introduce the process to its users; get their feedback for improvement; and through this socialization, begin to build support for it.

Test Cases & Stress Testing
Used for years across many different engineering disciplines, test cases and stress testing helps you plan for what the process is designed to solve and how it might be stretched with the unexpected.

Scenario Walk-Throughs
When performers from rockstars to actors to politicians prepare for a performance, they do many walk-through rehearsals to work out the kinks, so they know they're ready for the real show when it's time.

Quantitative & Qualitative Measurements
Whenever possible, it is important to test a new process using the quantitative and qualitative measurements used in the actual live environment.

4

Activate

Most new processes fail because people aren't convinced they have to change. For a new process to be adopted, people need to believe in it, know what they need to do, and actually change how they work.

Implementing a new process is the toughest step, and it's often where organizations undercut their plan by not focusing time and resources on how to engage, teach, and motivate people to change. Processes don't change by themselves; people need to change.

Co-creating and visualizing the future state jump-starts any process change.

Since the multi-disciplinary teams that create the new process become advocates for it, those same people help to develop an engagement and activation plan to scope out what the organization needs to do over weeks and months to make sure change occurs and to make sure those changes stick.

We do this in a discovery session designed to understand employees and how to engage them. We focus on every touch point in your process. Employees need to know why they need to change, how it is changing, and what they need to do differently.

This provides insights to create an implementation plan that helps people understand and accept changes and moves them to activating and defending those changes.

We design learning experiences, so they can understand and practice new processes and behaviors. And, we work with organizations to develop reinforcement tools so change sticks.

Activation isn't a one-time launch announcement or a communications plan. Activation is a strategy for creating support and lasting change in the way people work.

Without an activation plan, organizations often see only parts of a new process successfully integrated and won't gain the full business impact of the improvement program.

People are creatures of habit, so change can take time, and activation needs to lead your team to the new process and then reinforce change.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Empathy Mapping

This is an excellent tool for understanding what any new process is up against. It maps the larger context for different stakeholder groups, so we can look for ways to engage them. The framework asks what each group is doing, thinking, hearing, saying, seeing, and feeling to get a clear picture of the audience and begin to look for ways to engage them.

Communication & Engagement Strategy

Focusing on key engagement principles such as transparency and two-way communication, we focus on questions: How do we reach employees? How do they learn? What tools are available? How can we create opportunities for social networks to support the new process? How can we answer questions? This helps us to work with clients to design a strategy for success.

Learning Experiences Activation

Once we know how to reach stakeholders, we work to develop the right tools; from learning games to training programs and playbooks, we work with organizations to design what will be most effective in helping people understand why and how the process needs to change.

Enablement & Reinforcement Tools

It's easy for people to slip back into old patterns; that's human nature. Simple engagement tools can test a new process, so you know what's working and where you might be running into roadblocks. Then, we can turn those into opportunities to reinforce and redefine the engagement strategy to set people up, so they can execute the new process.

5

Embed

To remain competitive, companies need to get people to embrace change and continually look for ways to improve what they do.

Process improvement is not a one-time event. To remain competitive, you need to look for ways to improve all the time by setting up mechanisms to assess, review, and enhance the way things get done, and to reward people for identifying or implementing improvements.

Once an organization goes through a process change, people want to believe "we're done." To keep up with competitors, companies need to set up the mechanisms for assessing, prototyping, and improving how things get done on an on-going basis.

This is the well-known business concept of continuous improvement. The goal is to make it easy for any employee to suggest ways to make a process more efficient and more effective and for the company to quickly adapt and change.

We do this by co-creating a framework, so people ask the right questions and learn to spot process roadblocks. That framework helps organizations develop a culture that encourages and rewards people for suggesting potential improvements. It also puts in place the reviews and checkpoints to give people a platform to speak up.

Importantly, we help to design a nimble structure to embrace improvements and can quickly implement changes. We do this with culture and organizational mapping, which makes their goals and values clear to everyone and helps them change faster.

No matter how groundbreaking the process design was when it was initiated, organizations will fall behind if process improvement doesn't become part of the corporate culture.

Technology, business, and the competition are shifting too quickly for any company to stand still. The companies that succeed over the years are those flexible enough to keep changing and improving.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Culture & Organizational Mapping
Mapping your organization and its current culture can be game changing. Having clarity on where your efforts will encounter passive or direct resistance—or where you could leverage positive influences—enables you to plan for or even harness these issues.

Cycle Measurement and Metrics
Once organizations put new processes in place, it is vital to develop the right metrics to know whether they are achieving their goals. We help companies design life cycle measurements and other metrics to make sure new processes are on target and help recalibrate processes when they aren't.

Visual Kaizen Event
Kaizen is a Japanese term that means small changes for the better. We help companies design a Visual Kaizen framework, so people using the process can easily demonstrate the benefits of their Kaizen idea, and teams can quickly move from "to do" to "done."

Champions & Feedback Loops
Building reviews and feedback into the culture and the calendar creates a regular review cycle that encourages participation. Appointing and empowering change champions help fuel those feedback loops from the outset and opens the way for some of the most important learning from the people who see the process up close.

Good luck on the journey to co-created, people-centered processes!

These principles and approaches are born from experience. Learn how XPLANE has followed these steps with Fortune 500 companies. Read our case studies here and here.

Interested in hiring XPLANE for process improvement work? Our team can partner with you on each phase of your journey, from facilitating an off-site session, to fully redesigning a process, to making sure the new process is successfully implemented.

Connect with us to learn more about scope and pricing.

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