Routine vs. Emergent Processes

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"Process: It's what we used to call work before you consultants got involved."

One size does not fit all

Many organisations will have created a Business Process Model as a key element of their approach to Process Management. This provides a framework and context diagram for all the processes in the organisation. It's one part of what we describe as the "infrastructure" of Process Management. It's an essential element to provide the basis for all process improvement and day-to-day process management activities.

Typically it will be divided into three types of process:

- Management processes (e.g. Business Planning)

- Customer-facing (Value Chain) processes (e.g. Deliver Services)

- Support (Enabling) processes (e.g. Manage Finance)

Each of these can be defined and built into a hierarchical model of the entire organisation and each should have its own Process Owner, with responsibility for the design, operation and continuous improvement of that process.

At the highest level, an organisation may only have 8-12 processes split into these three types. You might also describe the Customer-facing processes as "key" since they are the ones that enable the organisation to fulfil its stated Mission (what we do and who we serve).

Having defined the high-level processes, often Process Managers will be appointed (or sub-Process Owners) and given responsibility for defining (mapping), measuring and improving the lower-level processes.

It is at this point, they need to understand whether they are managing a "Routine" or an "Emergent" process. Routine processes can be defined, standardised and documented to quite low levels of detail (if necessary). They are often very transaction-focussed, such as "Pay Suppliers", "Process Customer Order" or "Prepare Monthly Accounts".

Emergent processes, by contrast, are much more dependent on the knowledge and skills of the people operating them to decide exactly which activities need to take place and in what order. Usually, they can only (sensibly) be defined at a relatively high level. Examples might include: "Develop Business Strategy", "Manage External Communications" and "Manage Projects".

Impact on Process Management

The majority of information and training published on process management assumes the existence of "Routine" processes. Their inputs and outputs can be clearly identified, as well as who does what in the process chain. It's therefore easy to map, define operating standards, measure performance, take corrective action and benchmark this type of process. Classic BPI approaches such as DMAIC Projects, Lean and Six Sigma tools are highly applicable to these processes and it's easy to see their relevance.

However, "Emergent" processes do not (usually) benefit from mapping and defining to low levels of detail, since how they actually work is very context and situation-dependent. Often, the specific outputs and outcomes of an Emergent process may not be obvious when the process is triggered, although the input will be obvious.

For example, the Develop Business Strategy process can be mapped at high level, but there are many different ways in which these steps could be carried out and different people can be involved, depending on many factors.

| Develop Mission and Vision | → | Conduct Horizon Scanning | → | Carry out SWOT Analysis | → | Develop Strategic Objectives | → | Develop Resource Assumptions |

At the start of the process, all we know is that the outputs will include a new set of Strategic Objectives and a set of Resource Assumptions, both of which will be used to set lower-level objectives and plans. We don't know what the Objectives will be, nor what the Resources will be. So, there is no point in mapping such a process to the nth degree.

Another example of an Emergent process is "Manage Projects". While there may be a high-level life-cycle model for this (such as Initiate, Define, Implement and Close), the specific sub-processes required will be very dependent on the nature of the project. A major capital project will require a different set of processes from a minor building refurbishment project.

Other business areas where processes may be Emergent rather than Routine include:

- Research and Development (R&D)

- New Product Development

- Legal

- PR/External Communications

- Recruitment of Senior Staff

- Staff Development

From a process management perspective, this means that Process Owners and operators of Emergent processes need considerably more knowledge and "intelligence" than those involved in Routine processes. The actual route/flow through an Emergent process will often be a matter for decision-making on a case-by-case basis, with much more discretion allowed within the overall process boundaries. The choice of measurements may also be much more difficult to define for Emergent processes and establishing what "improvement" means can also be difficult.

Process maps for Emergent processes sometimes end up looking like a series of parallel activities, any, or all of which might happen. Alternatively, they may end up as a set of "process modules"; any of which might need to be used to deal with a particular case and there may be significant iterations between the start and the end of the process.

Clearly, there is a strong link between Process Management and Knowledge Management, but it's particularly important in the case of Emergent processes since important knowledge about the process inevitably lies in the heads of those who own and manage it. Trying to document it and turn it from tacit to explicit knowledge can be a futile exercise. Emergent processes benefit far more from a people-oriented approach to knowledge management (e.g. appointing Subject Matter Experts, running Networking Events etc.).
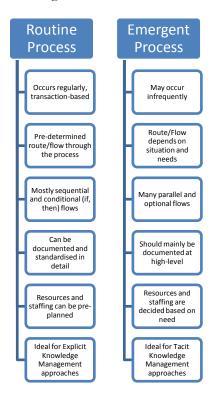
Intelligent Process Owners

What we need for both types of process is intelligent Process Owners who can understand the nature of their process and adopt an appropriate strategy to design, manage and improve it.

As always(!) none of this is absolutely "black and white" and there will no doubt be aspects of Emergent processes where "Routine" principles need to be applied. For example, at some point in the Develop Business Plans process there will be a need to Prepare a Risk Register. This process is fairly low-level and can be readily standardised. It needs to be standardised so that risks from across the organisation

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can be compared and analysed systematically. Allowing different departments to use different risk rating scales or different templates would not be helpful.

Intelligent Processes Owners should decide which parts of their processes would benefit from being treated as Routine and which are Emergent. It is important to remember that making the wrong decision could lead to a lot of frustration!

Routine Process	Emergent Process
Occurs regularly, transaction-based	May occur infrequently
Pre-determined route/flow through the process	Route/Flow depends on situation and needs
Mostly sequential and conditional (if, then) flows	Many parallel and optional flows
Can be documented and standardised in detail	Should mainly be documented at high-level
Resources and staffing can be pre-planned	Resources and staffing are decided based on need
Ideal for Explicit Knowledge Management approaches	Ideal for Tacit Knowledge Management approaches

Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to manage and improve their processes for nearly two decades. We have supported European Quality Award winners in their approach to process management.

We are not wedded to a particular methodology. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to manage and improve your processes.

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