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The Lean Fighting Machine

Applying Lean Six Sigma to your records management strategy

By *Diane K. Carlisle*

Today, as never before, records and information are critical success factors for all types of corporations. Records have become assets that are as important for the corporation to manage as their fixed assets and financial resources. For this reason, the goals of records management are consistent with Lean Six Sigma principles of reducing waste and improving quality in business processes.

However, if you were to ask three people what Lean Six Sigma is, you are likely to get at least three different answers: "It's a certification process so you can become a black-belt leader in your company and really get ahead"; or "It's the way managers are making decisions about cost reductions and layoffs"; and even, "It's mostly for manufacturing companies and doesn't really apply to our services company." Is there a grain of truth in each of the previous perceptions? Perhaps. Do any of these perceptions really capture the value of Lean Six Sigma? Not at all.

IN THE SIMPLEST TERMS, Lean Six Sigma is a blend of two different approaches used to improve the quality of products and services. Both methods begin with identifying the "voice of the customer" so that business process improvement focuses on what the customer values. In the Lean method, the primary focus is on identifying and eliminating various types of waste in a business process. Various tools and analytical methods make up the Lean toolkit. The 5S approach is applied to workflow and workspace corporation problems in order to standardize and streamline processes. A Kaizen event may be conducted so that analysis is focused on a specific problem and proposed solutions are developed in a compressed timeframe.

The Six Sigma method also focuses on business process improvement; however, the primary emphasis here is on reducing defects and variations in products/services. It applies a more rigorous statistical analysis during the initial assessment and monitors metrics over time in order to sustain the improved processes. Six Sigma originated at Motorola and is most commonly used in manufacturing companies. However, in recent years, various service industries have adopted Lean and Six Sigma techniques to achieve more repeatable and reliable business processes and customer results.

Lean and Six Sigma methods are complementary: Both focus on what is important to the customer and identifying those steps that add value. Both identify critical-to-quality (CTQ) elements in the business process. Blending the two methods results in a balanced operation that drives waste from the process and reduces defects and variations in the end product.

LIKE ANY OTHER OPERATION, there are many reasons why a company would undertake a Lean Six Sigma review of its records management strategy. An examination of processes not evaluated since their design or those that have simply evolved over time or even the purchase of a new technology can all precipitate this review. Among the eight types of waste that Lean Six Sigma seeks to eliminate are overproduction, rework and waiting. By routinely following the company's retention and disposition schedule, the company can avoid costs caused by "over-retention" of

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and disposition schedule, the company can avoid costs caused by over-retention of records. As stated in a survey jointly sponsored by Cohasset Associates, ARMA and AIIM in 2007, "The costs for the storage and subsequent legal production of any unneeded records (online, near-line or offline) are completely unnecessary and, as such, are a 100% wasted expense."

Moreover, through the application of records management policies and procedures, records management seeks to standardize the processes involved with the management of a company's information resources. This standardization facilitates employees' ability to make the right records-handling decisions the first time. Furthermore, one of the tenets of Lean Six Sigma is that if there is no action in a business process, no value is being added to the customer. So if documents are waiting for approval, no value is being added. Records management facilitates access to and use of records and information, thereby avoiding the waste of waiting.

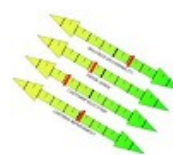
BORROWING FROM THE "Lean" toolkit, records handling may be the exclusive focus of a Kaizen event - a planned, structured process improvement effort in which a small group of people improve some aspect of their business in a quick, focused manner. For example, in October 2006, Virtua Health conducted a Kaizen event to shorten the time that staff had to spend looking for patient medical charts. The participants conducted preliminary work to gather data on the current process and understand the back-office operations. This work discovered that throughout a typical day, staff would spend a combined seven hours searching for charts that were not in the file room. During the 3.5-day event, the team used a variety of Lean Six Sigma techniques to design and trial revised workflow processes that would decrease the time spent looking for charts. They performed a 5S exercise to assess the organization of the file room and designed a new workflow process to ensure proper tracking of files that were not in the file room. The team then designed a communication and follow-up strategy to implement these changes throughout the practice.

THE DMAIC APPROACH originated in Six Sigma and applies a more structured methodology to the analysis. Each letter in the acronym refers to a specific stage in the overall analysis. The Define step calls for collection of data regarding the current situation and clearly states the problems caused, as well as defining the desired outcome. Since the analysis is focused on meeting customer expectations, the voice of the customer (VOC) is a central task. The "customer" may be internal customers, such as departments that use the same information or the corporation as a whole, in the case of ensuring regulatory compliance or preparing the corporation for litigation.

A key part of Six Sigma defines metrics, which will be used on a continuous basis to determine whether anticipated benefits are achieved and to ensure the processes remain effective over time. The Measure process begins with establishing baseline measurements such as time, volume, frequency and impact. Once the data is collected, the Analysis step focuses on pinpointing bottlenecks that contribute to defective or variable results. The team identifies opportunities to remove non-valued-added tasks and redesigns the processes for greater efficiency. The team may also develop a business case to determine the cost-effectiveness of potential solutions and/or may make recommendations regarding technology solutions.

The Improve step implements the approved recommendations by developing a project plan to test and execute the streamlined workflows. The final Control step goes to the heart of continuous improvement; it calls for auditing of the new processes and a controlled rollout of the new workflow.

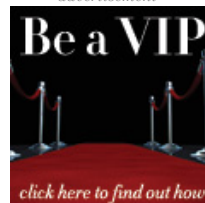
IT IS NOT UNCOMMON for management to view records management activities as a low-priority task, but the application of formal business process improvement methods helps to counteract such tendencies. One primary benefit of Lean Six Sigma is that it leverages data-based analysis throughout the process. The application of metrics leads to a more concrete understanding of the value records management adds to the company's operations. Using data and objective analysis neutralizes territorial claims, helps identify bottlenecks and wasted effort and keeps



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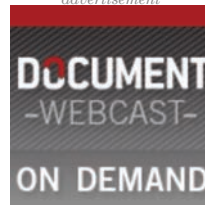
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focus on the end goal.

Lean Six Sigma is particularly well-suited for analyzing business processes that affect multiple business units, and records management issues are, by nature, enterprise-wide. A combination of perspectives is needed to adequately address the complexity of records management issues. Records in most corporations are multi-purpose. While their primary value is closely tied to the business unit's core functions, the legal/compliance department has a set of requirements for records. IT has a key role to play in the creation, use and storage of electronic records. If any one of these stakeholders is left to determine how records should be handled, key requirements are likely to be overlooked. Therefore, it takes the combined efforts of records management, legal/compliance, IT and the business unit to develop the best solutions. Furthermore, since the Lean Six Sigma approach is applied to the entire process, the analysis is comprehensive enough to consider all players in the supply chain: outside suppliers, consultants and other service providers, as well as internal stakeholders.

It is quite reasonable to expect a number of corporate benefits resulting from the application of Lean Six Sigma to records management processes. Corporate records and information should be usable and easily available to those who need to use it in performing their work; processes to ensure the corporation is in legal and regulatory compliance should be in place, easily understood and followed by all employees; and records and information will be protected from loss, sabotage and unauthorized access.

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