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Performance Improvement

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The Role of Performance Architect

This is the third, and last, of our three-part series of columns about process ownership. In our first column, we discussed various approaches to process ownership that we have seen in different companies. Our focus was primarily on the organizational position of the role. Our second column described what we have seen process owners actually doing in the performance of their roles. We pointed out a number of tasks that many process owners spend a lot of time doing that, while necessary for the organization, are not the best use of a process owner's time.

But we left unanswered the question of how a process owner can get those tasks accomplished. So, in this last installment, we focus not on the process owner but instead on a critical role that enables the process owner – the role of the "performance architect."

What is a performance architect?

Performance architects are people who support process owners. Whether they have such a title or not, the people in this role are doing tasks like the following:

1. They may be documenting processes, archiving, and managing process models.
2. They may be collecting process performance data and providing that information to process owners and others.
3. They may be modeling processes, technologies, and other organizational elements and attempting to use these models to influence business design and decision-making.
4. They may be analyzing complex performance problems and designing or suggesting effective solutions.
5. They may be conducting or leading process improvement projects.
6. They may be helping process owners to educate and advise other executives and managers on the importance of process design and management.
7. They may be helping managers analyze future needs and designing organizations, processes, and technologies to enable the desired future.
8. They may be helping process owners and management teams design or improve their performance management systems.

In other words, they are doing many of the activities that we described in the second installment of this series – activities that are mistakenly being performed by some process owners. The concept is simple and straightforward enough: Process owners should be managing;

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performance architects should be enabling them to manage.

Examined more closely, there are multiple levels implied in the role of performance architect. The first level (let's call it the "beginner" level) is rather clerical in nature. Someone performing at this level would be doing some of the more rudimentary tasks listed above, but not the ones requiring a high degree of knowledge or skill. For example, a performance architect at this first level would be doing the chores of process documentation (Task #1) and collection and reporting of process performance data (Task #2).

At the intermediate level, we would see performance architects with considerable expertise in performance improvement and process modeling, design/improvement. By "modeling," we don't mean someone who spends most of the time using Visio or some BPM software to convert hand-drawn process maps into digital versions. That is a skill applicable to Task #1. At the intermediate level are performance architects expert at figuring out how to help employees visualize their work as processes and help managers visualize their organizations as complex systems. Intermediate level performance architects are also experts in improvement methodology and tools; they are the guides or facilitators of improvement projects at the behest of process owners. And to succeed at this project work, performance architects at this level are actively doing Task #6 (helping to educate others on the importance of process).

At the Master level (Tasks #7 and #8) are performance architects capable of working directly with executives and managers on the design or improvement of their organizations at the whole-system level. They are senior advisors and sages – clever and effective at fostering cross-functional collaboration and in engineering lasting solutions to major performance challenges. They are working as near-peers to process owners and executives, while always keenly aware that they advise but do not execute.

Where Would Performance Architects Come From?

The challenge is that process work at these three levels requires the skills of many different disciplines. Process architects would ideally be drawn from various functional areas – from the classic staff organizations of IT, HR, Training, Quality, OD, Industrial Engineering, and from the newer, process-oriented groups calling themselves Process Excellence, Six Sigma, and the like. Process work requires collaborative effort across these disciplines and in close partnership with the business they help.

What is really needed is someone who can put a performance and process front end on any of these specialties. Typically, in organizations, you have to know the solution to your performance problem in order to contract with the appropriate group to address the problem. By approaching a particular specialized area, a manager has already put a label on his or her organizational problem. (By going to Training, for example, you've called it a training problem, but maybe the right solution is something quite different.)

But the fact is that a multi-disciplinary solution is often needed in order to fully address a performance problem. A performance architect would have to understand all of the variables affecting process and organization performance and could bring the process context to any proposed solution. They bring this context along with the performance data and analysis to the process owners so that the owners and line managers can then take corrective actions and make effective decisions about changes to the process, its resources, and its performers.

Now, it could be that bundling all these activities under the role of "performance architect" is simply not very practical. Performance architects may have to continue to reside in their specialty disciplines – but you can see that they need to become "performance generalists" regardless of title and functional home. To really have an impact on organizational performance, they need to have specific skills in process and organization analysis and design.

But whether or not "performance architect" can ever be a unified role, or whether there can or should be a department of performance architects, is perhaps beside the point. To us, there is just not a better term than "performance architect" for describing the combined competencies of

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the work – because all of the functional specialties we listed have in common an interest in making a positive impact on organizational performance, and all make some use of architectural tools (models and maps) to describe the landscape of their focus.

In closing, there clearly is a need to distinguish the role and duties of process owners from the role and duties of people who help them (whatever the role might be called). Absent this supporting role, process owners tend to get buried in the more basic tasks of process documentation and process data-collection and never get around to the activities that make a real difference.

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