

Mapping out a process

“The older I get the more wisdom I find in the ancient rule of taking first things first. A process which often reduces the most complex human problem to a manageable proportion.” Eisenhower

“We also need to recognise that learning to lead is itself a social process rather than an individual event.” Sue Kay

The big idea

Businesses grow by processes of revolution and evolution. In times of revolution – starting out, fast growth etc – ways of working inside a business are rarely designed before they are used. Before you know it, the business is built on the first ways of doing things, regardless of whether they are the most efficient ways of working. Ask yourself why you do things a certain way. Is it because you’ve always done it that way?

Over time, business processes evolve, often subconsciously. Even if the processes were designed efficiently in the beginning, over time, ways get corrupted. Changing environments, new technologies and people who were not privy to the original design principles all have an impact. Rather like a boat gathering barnacles over time, processes gather inefficient add-ons and degrade over time.

Chances are there is an amazing opportunity for efficiency and thus performance improvement by examining the processes of work inside your business and redesigning them.

Purpose

First, we need to understand and communicate how a process works.

Flow charts are easy-to-understand diagrams showing how steps in a process fit together. This makes them useful tools for communicating how processes work, and for clearly documenting how a particular job is done. The act of mapping a process

out in flow chart format helps you clarify your understanding of the process. It helps you think about where the process can be improved.

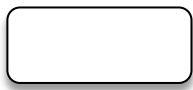
A flow chart can therefore be used to:

- Define and assess processes
- Build a step-by-step picture of the process for analysis, discussion or communication
- Define, standardise or find areas for improvement in a process

By conveying the information or processes in a step-by-step flow, you can then concentrate more on each individual step. This can stop you feeling overwhelmed by the bigger picture.

The tool

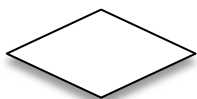
Most flow charts are made up of three main types of symbol:



- Elongated circles: used for the start or end of a process



- Rectangles: show instructions or actions



- Diamonds: show decisions that must be made

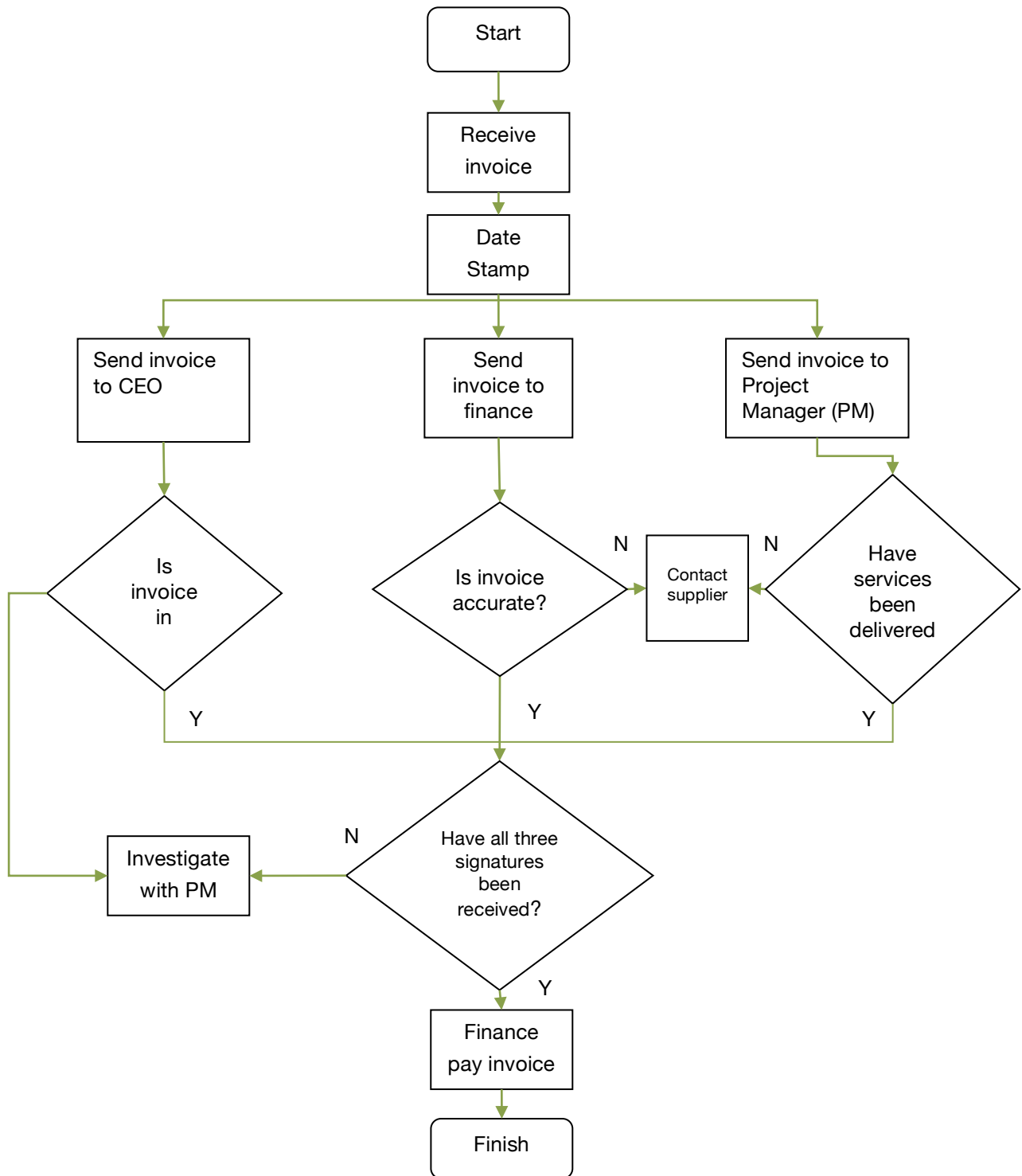
Symbols are connected one to the other by arrows, showing the flow of the process.

There are many other flow chart symbols that can also be used. However, remember that an important use of flow charts is in communication. If you use obscure symbols, chances are your communication will not be clear. As ever, keep things simple!

To build a flow chart, you need to:

1. Brainstorm process tasks, and list them in the order they occur. Ask questions such as ‘What *really* happens next in the process?’ and ‘Does a decision need to be made before the next step?’ or ‘What approvals are required before moving on to the next task?’ Start the overall flow charting process by looking at how things are today, often called the ‘as is’ model
2. Start the flow chart by drawing the elongated circle shape, and labelling it ‘Start’.
3. Move to the first action or question, and draw a rectangle or diamond appropriately. Write the action or question down, and draw an arrow from the start symbol to this shape
4. Work through your whole process, showing actions and decisions appropriately in the order they occur. Link these together using arrows to show the flow of the process
5. Where a decision needs to be made, draw arrows leaving the decision diamond for each possible outcome, and label them with the outcome
6. Show the end of the process using an elongated circle labelled ‘Finish’

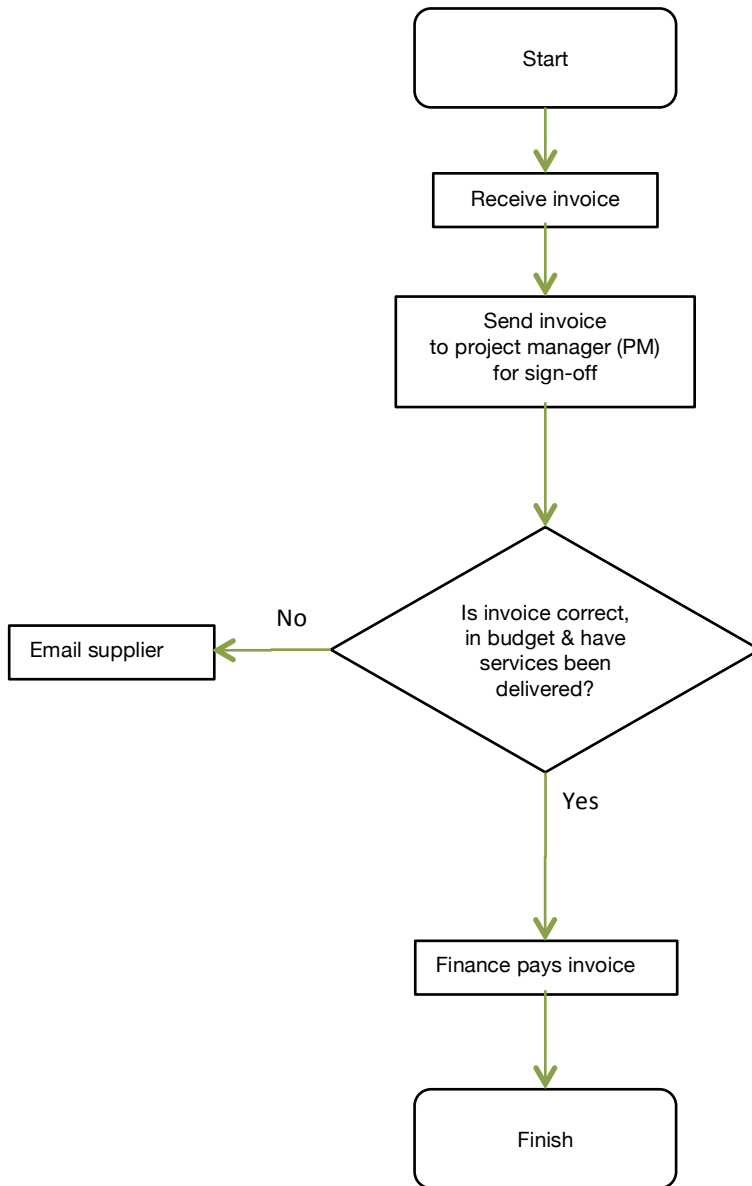
The following example shows part of a simple flow chart, which illustrates what happens in a medium to large scale enterprise when it receives an invoice from a supplier:



Flow charts can quickly become so complicated that you can't show them on one piece of paper. This is where you can use 'connectors' (shown as numbered circles) where the flow moves off one page, and where it moves onto another. By using the same number for the off-page connector and the on-page connector, you show that the flow is moving from one page to the next.

7. Finally, challenge your flow chart as to whether it represents the most efficient way of doing the job. Work from step to step asking yourself if you have correctly represented the sequence of actions and decisions involved in the process
8. Improve the process by looking at the steps identified and think about whether work is duplicated, whether other steps should be involved and whether the right people are doing the right jobs
9. Produce the future model and note clearly the changes and differences between the 'as is' model and the new future model.

The example below shows part of a simple flow chart after the team that constructed the above flow chart met to discuss how they could streamline the process:



Take the next step

Think about a recent task you have undertaken. It might have been buying a TV, booking a holiday or making a meal. How would you map that process? How does it look when you analyse it in that way? What steps could you improve on or change?

Top tips

- Walk through the process slowly so you ensure you capture all the key steps
- If they don't come to mind easily, physically observe or undertake the work
- Talk to colleagues or friends about how they do things that you might have in common and see what processes they use
- All too often the finished product ends up being a combination of fact and wishful thinking. Make sure you record things as they actually are for the 'as is' model

References

Kay, S (2010), Scratching the Seven Year Itch: A Commentary in A Cultural Leadership Reader, Eds: Venner, K & Kay, S. pp: 8-15 London: Cultural Leadership Programme