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Business Process Modeling Case Study

Client:	Riptown Media Inc.
Description:	Improving the Request Management Process for the Design Department
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Background

Riptown Media is a subsidiary of a foreign owned online gambling company. Its focus is on marketing, product development and customer service. The Design department in particular is swamped with requests from other departments. And yet, work is getting done and internal clients are pleased with the quality. Work however is arriving late. Some projects are not getting done fast enough to meet formal Web deployments which can only be done once a week due to the complex nature of their business model and the topological layout of the server farm.[1] Once the deployment day has passed, departments have to wait another week to see changes made to the production servers.[2] It's not just Web-based work that's arriving late. Print-based and other non-Web dependent work is not getting the quick turnaround as before. Print designers are often seconded to do Web work which is risky due to a lack of training (or interest!).

Richard, the leader of the team, feels the demand for work growing and is clearly under pressure to hire more designers and Web developers. Even though the company is doing well financially and can justify expanding his team, he feels this may not solve the core problem. Richard's cautious apprehension is reminiscent of Parkinson's Law, "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."[3] In this case, work may simply expand with more designers and he will be back where he started.

It is difficult to quantify how much late projects are costing the company. There have been marketing campaigns where Web-based work was out of synch with their print and electronic media launches. Specialized URLs in offline ads would lead to nowhere. In these cases it is hard to measure visits to something that doesn't exist.[4] It is clear that this problem is costing Richard time. Richard is a rising young executive who commands a six figure salary and participates in very high level strategy as part of the management team. Currently, he is spearheading a total rebranding of the company an important repositioning effort to remain competitive. Since Design is responsible for the user experience for all online products, Richard's in charge of improving overall usability as this affects customer retention. The initiatives just cited are part of the overall strategy to help grow revenue by 10% each year. These facts also provide further insight into what will be needed to improve the request management process.

Why are projects not getting done on time? It is Richard's conviction that this question needs to be answered before more people are hired. Is it a case that deadlines are unreasonable? Is it an issue of capacity facing Design? Or, is there a simple bottleneck in the system that needs to be unblocked?

Assessment

After spending some time with Richard and his team some important observations were gathered.

Richard has built a solid team of people who are talented, motivated and productive. Those Design members interviewed asked in advance if they could do their work while giving answers to questions about their process. The context was ideal.

The flow chart in Appendix A shows requests come into the Design department through Richard. Richard then either forwards the message on to a Design team member or bounces it back to the sender for more clarification. These unstructured missives are often caught in several recurring loops before they are passed on to a designer, Web developer or a copy writer for pre-production or full implementation. The nature of these requests comprises of changes to the Web site, request for company logos, to designing and building a complete online product/campaign (which is usually responded with a request for a meeting). Since the graphic design field has become infinitely more complicated due to the World Wide Web, the limitations of this platform conjures up many follow up questions back to stakeholders from the Design team. An example of this is a manager wanting a landing page to spin 360 degrees when the visitor arrives. It can be done but it opens up a whole discussion on choices of technology and other execution matters. Regardless, Richard deals with these follow up questions on behalf of his staff. Several days could pass from the time a request is sent to Design to the time the staffer begins working on it. This happens for even the most basic request.

Email too seems to be at issue, here. Although email programs may thread information in a discussion format, the real thread is lost with too much tangential information where the subject line no longer jibes with the content. This issue is clearly evident at Riptown. It was also evident that email is becoming a lawless method for initiating and tracking the progress of work from the first request all the way down to final deployment. However, it is clear everyone knows how to use email. In this company manual text entry into Blackberry's are being used more than voice-based telephony. Although the Blackberry has increased the speed of responses, it has reduced the asynchronous quality of answering an email at your desk allowing for more thoughtful and reflective responses.

Finally, sitting down with Richard reviewing with him observations from the Design team he too was multitasking answering with quick replies to emails coming in every few minutes. Richard's management of email is such that very few messages are archived. It is not clear which issues are open and which are closed. Richard claims he spends at least 75% of his week dealing with email requests. This will become an important metric with regards to Return on Investment (ROI) for any solution proposed to solve the request management problem facing Design and the company at large.

Recommendation

To improve the way requests are handled and responded to in a timely manner and in turn get the work out quicker, an alternative process has been mapped out in Appendix B.

If one were to overlay Appendix B over Appendix A, Appendix B isn't radically different from Appendix A. A major difference is that the information that's being passed back and forth is now stored in a structured database. All of the players involved in the request management process interface directly or indirectly with a request tracking system called JIRA. Richard's contribution has changed as well. In some cases, his input is optional. The nature and direction of this flow shows that he is involved much later than when the request is made and much closer to when the work gets deployed.

A. JIRA Request Management System

After looking at various project management systems from open source (e.g. PHPcollab), to software as a service (e.g. Basecamp), these systems are out of scope in solving the basic problem of request management. Richard's company do not have dedicated project managers to drive this software in a meaningful way. Also, Riptown needs to ensure that parallel systems do not replace what's already working. Many stakeholders, for example, are on the go and in meetings all day. They will want to continue to rely on email through their Blackberry's but still be in the loop regarding the status of open requests. As it turns out, the software solution was not very far away. The Software department uses a system out of Australia called JIRA. This Java-based system works well for them since Java is the programming language used to develop their products and JIRA is fully customizable. With JIRA, Riptown can grow the system as needed and at the rate they choose. JIRA is currently being used to track bugs in Riptown's software. On the surface, it's a form-based system where customizable fields can be created in minutes to help tighten requirements gathering with respect to requests. A stakeholder can be in a meeting, get a status report by email (generated by JIRA) and can respond by email if access to a Web browser (and in turn the JIRA interface) is not available at that time. This is accomplished using a special email address that talks directly with JIRA, can respond or create a new issue and the assignment defaults to a Project Coordinator. Without outlining every feature of JIRA, its main job and benefit is to structure requests and create a more organized accountability trail. Since JIRA works more like a public forum, the system has the psychological effect of keeping people focused on the issue at hand reducing tangential discussions not related. If there is a tangent that should be looked into, the author is encouraged to open a new issue.

Finally, JIRA is brilliantly tied into the Web deployment process automating a lot of areas that will reduce time and mistakes on deployments. Since the software has been already purchased (and tested!), the cost to Design is a portion of the yearly cost of version updates negotiated the Chief Operating Officer at $500.00.

B. Hire a Project Coordinator

Richard should no longer manage requests. Less expensive personnel can be employed to vet requests against common requirements variables. These variables would be facilitated by the Project Coordinator and can be hard coded with the customizable form feature in JIRA. Although there are many details to discuss beyond this brief, the coordinator will free up important time that Richard needs to focus on important high level issues facing the company. The 75% of time Richard currently puts in to deal with request management would be turned over to a Project Coordinator with a salary range of $39,000 - $50,000 (CDN). For this brief, we will go with a rounded median figure of $45,000.[5]

Return on Investment

Richard is a well paid department head in his company. His annual salary including bonuses is around $120,000.[6] He spends 75% of his time managing inbound requests into the design department. This would mean, at a minimum, that $90,000 per year is spent on dealing with these requests. The problematic nature of these requests has more to do with expediting them than evaluating them. Hiring a Project Coordinator at $45,000 per year would lower the cost in dealing with requests to $45,000 per year. As part of Design's budget they will share in the annual licensing cost of JIRA with their share being $500 per year. Total yearly investment in this new process will be $45,500 and not the $90,000 they are paying now. No new equipment will be required as the system is currently running on an internal server. Very little training will be required (at least in the short term) as stakeholders will continue to use email to communicate and respond to requests. The ROI in implementing this system will be 50% after the first year but will breakeven within 6 months from the time the Project Coordinator starts.

The company has set a goal of growing revenue at a rate of 10% per year. Given Richard's responsibility to contribute to the growth of the company, by removing him from managing requests he can now focus on this goal with other members of the management team. Even if Richard's work is responsible for contributing to only 0.1% to the company's growth, with annual gross revenue in excess $200,000,000[7] that too is strong potential ROI.

Implementation Strategy

1. The Project Coordinator is to be hired before Design or others outside of Software Development use JIRA.
2. The Software team has created a 5 page document on JIRA complete with screen captures of the interface. It needs to be re-written so it is understood by non-technical people.
3. A presentation should be made to all department managers using Design as a case study for JIRA and speak to the long term benefits for other departments to use this tool not only with regards to design requests but manage their own internal communications better.
4. Advertize to the rest of the company to communicate any issues that may concern Design through a specialized email address.

Conclusion

The request management process in the Design department is expensive and inefficient. Even worse, a valuable asset is being employed to oversee it. Repositioning Richard to work on strategy will serve the company better. A less expensive solution for managing requests has been identified and been proven to work by another department. Although this form-based system requires very little training, there's room to grow it within the enterprise. Like some technological solutions the human element is sometimes forgotten. To drive this solution and at the same time bring down costs a coordinator at a fraction of Richard's salary is all that is required to drive a new and improved request management process for the Design department. There may be unrealized gains with this move but it is safe to say that whatever those gains are, expect a decent return on investment and anything else on top of that can be counted as a bonus.

End Notes

1. Solving this problem would require another case study.
2. The company can perform what's commonly referred to as "manual deploys", but at the time of this writing the company had been getting tech support personnel to literally drag file by file to 6 individual Web servers. Software Development is trying to diplomatically bring leadership to this process. It was Technical Support that wrote all of the scripts for their weekly formal deployment. Software is working on a script to do targeted deploys instead of the "catch all files" approach that happens once a week.
3. Wikipedia.org. (October 16, 2008). *Parkinson's law*. Retrieved October 31, 2008 from Wikipedia's Web site: http://www.wikipedia.org
4. A problem later solved by setting up promotional URLs well in advance of the content being produced.
5. Salary.com (October 2008). *Traffic Clerk*. Retrieved October 31, 2008 from Salary.com's Web site: http://www.salary.com (length of URL for the actual search results for Traffic Clerk has been replaced with a Tiny URL, http://tinyurl.com/5pku2b)
6. As this is a private company, disclosure of employee remuneration packages was not permitted. A more general figure however was quoted.
7. As this is a private company, disclosure of exact annual gross revenue was not permitted. A more general figure however was quoted.