



Breaking barriers to drive successful continuous improvement

WHITEPAPER



The heart of innovation: process culture

In a fast-changing business environment, innovation and agility are essential. They can be the difference between leading the market and becoming irrelevant. At their core, they are also process issues. An inability to examine and improve business processes will stifle any drive for fresh approaches and cause such inertia that the status quo becomes immovable.

Organizations that don't address a poor process culture cannot embrace the kind of continuous improvement that embeds innovation into the company DNA. Static, neglected processes, underutilized tools and unenthusiastic leadership stifle the creativity that can reside in the line of business. However, by engaging business teams and equipping them with effective, accessible tools, an organization can develop a culture of positive change and creative solutions that will drive innovation across the board.

The changing face of business



The business environment is in constant flux as new technologies, strategies and structures continually emerge. Changes in market or customer expectations can have a significant effect on the bottom line if the business is unable to evolve and adapt to the new environment.

Some of those changes will be external. Shifts in customer behavior have traditionally driven new products and services, and businesses must be attentive to what their core markets expect and want. Competitor innovations similarly challenge the status quo, causing market share to shift and/or making previously viable offerings redundant or at least less appealing.

Many experts have explored how the rapid pace of technological change causes frequent upheaval in business models. The rise of communications technologies revolutionized how businesses operated, and the continued evolution of computer systems and tools still drives widespread change. Automation, intelligent analysis and AI powered applications provide new opportunities at an accelerating pace.

Other business challenges will be internally driven. Staff movement can create knowledge gaps, and new employees can introduce unexpected skill sets or possibilities. Changes to plant or internal systems necessitate re-examination of how things are done and can introduce legal and regulatory compliance issues that must become part of the business framework.

Regardless of the cause, such shifts demand that an organization be able to recognize and address both challenges and opportunities in timely fashion.

This, in turn, requires a willingness to embrace continuous improvement. Continuous improvement holds the key in its name: It's a continuous effort to optimize the way a business operates, for the best possible outcomes. Awareness of change is not enough. Plenty of businesses have seen change occurring but failed to act, and watched their competitive advantage evaporate as a result. Several factors can stand in the way.

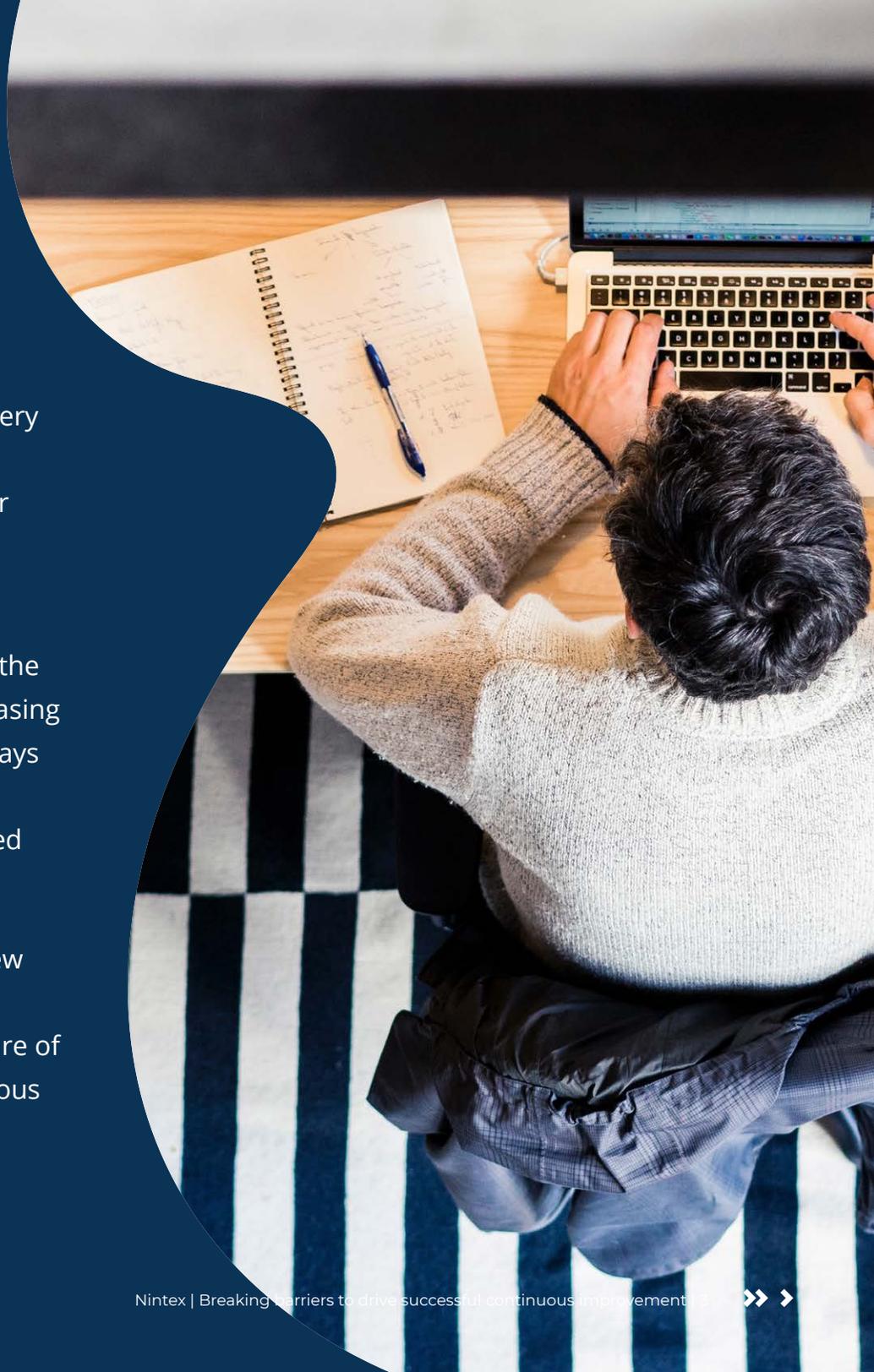


Digital transformation

The term “digital transformation” has become overused in recent years, but even when the hype is stripped away, the concept remains important. Digital transformation describes how technology reshapes an organization at every level for greater performance. The effects can be felt in every department, through process, culture and customer experience.

This is the heart of digital. While digital technologies can improve day-to-day business operations in various ways, the most important one is the customer experience. By increasing efficiency, reducing waste and errors, and offering new ways to achieve results, technological advances ultimately give customers better service, increased value and an improved experience of your brand.

Process is a key aspect of digital transformation. While new technologies may be both cause and effect of continuous improvement, they cannot and should not replace a culture of innovation. Digital transformation is an aspect of continuous improvement but isn't a substitute for it.



Barriers to continuous improvement

While many organizations acknowledge the importance of improving their business processes, AIIM research suggests that fewer than 20% believe process management is well understood or embraced within their company. A poor process culture prevents continuous improvement by reducing visibility of both documented procedures and what actually gets done. Leaders have only limited understanding of the tools at their disposal and may struggle to embrace either the idea of continuous improvement or efforts to implement it.



Barriers



Static procedures

Many organizations, when they attempt to capture process information, use methods that are static. The process as documented becomes the status quo, and cannot evolve as business requirements change. While “business as usual” is comfortable, it is the enemy of positive change. There is no “after” for process improvement. Failing to recognize and actively pursue the “continuous” in continuous improvement simply creates a new set of procedures that only reflect a point in time, and that becomes less and less accurate as that time recedes into history. While management is often happy to have captured process information, the limitations of a point-in-time approach often surface during audits and compliance checks. A failure to lead continuous improvement effectively wastes the effort involved in documenting procedures as the entire exercise needs to be repeated each time an out-of-date process comes to light.

Non-compliant practices

Without ongoing input from the people who know the processes best, static procedure manuals will be treated as irrelevant. It is human nature to find shortcuts, particularly on familiar ground. If an employee is onboarding numerous clients each day, they won’t consult the manual every time. They won’t need to, and they can get away with it because they “know what to do.” As they find quicker, more convenient ways to accomplish a task, they won’t tie their innovations back to the documented procedure because they have no impetus to do so. This is where problems can arise, in the form of repeated process breakdowns, which can often result in much bigger problems down the road. Where business processes are matters of legislative compliance, shortcuts become dangerous deviations from an organization’s legal obligations. Dropping steps in processes for convenience also adds the risk of handoffs being missed, resulting in costly delays.



Barriers



Lost opportunities

An “off the books” process culture can allow procedures to evolve without optimal oversight. Besides the inherent risks of unauthorized changes to processes, helpful innovations are also lost. When teams are disengaged from process management, grassroots improvements can be squandered. As processes evolve in the line-of-business, failing to capture organic improvements means that similar tasks in other areas of the business can’t benefit from the improvement, and the potential increase in effectiveness or efficiency is reduced. Tools and procedures that enable systematic documentation of feedback and innovations give a voice to those directly involved in process execution and ensure that the benefits of new practices can be propagated across the organization. When the focus is on simply documenting processes rather than pursuing ongoing improvement, these possibilities are gone.

Apathetic leadership

An agile and innovative culture can only exist when it is advocated from the top. Unconvinced or uncommitted leadership will stall continuous improvement by failing to value process management, giving it low strategic priority and postponing or de-emphasizing projects for the sake of “just getting on with it.” Another result may be that insufficient resources are allocated to enabling the line of business to capture and improve their processes. When process improvement isn’t championed by management, it becomes invisible, and those who could potentially offer significant improvements are left with no ready avenue for doing so.

Barriers



Underutilized tools

Most organizations have some degree of process management in place, but without a supportive mindset and culture, the platforms and tools will not be fully effective. While automation initiatives can offer quantifiable improvements, without effective process management underpinning them, their full value will still be untapped. Similarly, well-captured and documented processes that do not automate manual, repetitive tasks cannot be fully optimized. Even effective workflows and automations can't reach their potential if they aren't integrated into the process platform to ensure easy development and implementation.



Establishing a foundation for innovation

The best analytics can only report on the organization's performance in a particular area. But an intentional focus on continuous improvement can take those insights and turn them into actions that benefit the bottom line. Establishing a deliberate process strategy creates an environment where continuous improvement becomes part of the landscape. Such a strategy must be flexible to adapt to evolving technologies, but robust enough for teams to engage with easily and reliably. It needs to come from the top too, with support at every level of management if it is to become part of the DNA of the business.

Creating the right environment for success



A leader-supported structure

A deliberate process strategy and structure requires active support from the business's leaders to ensure it gets the priority needed to maintain momentum. Top-level support ensures that a culture of process improvement isn't just a phrase but a mindset that is adopted at every level.

When teams are consistently empowered with tools, support and opportunities, process improvement can become embedded in day-to-day business operations, and a healthy process culture will grow. That requires investment from management, both in terms of the right tools for the job and the right attitude. Organizational agility takes time to foster, and involves seeking creative solutions to problems, not apportioning blame.

Some of that can be encouraged through practices such as process improvement workshops and forums, to emphasize the value the business places on continuous improvement. Even assigning a name that resonates with people within the organization can help raise the profile. Creating project portals and meetings to examine problems and celebrate successes can help maintain visibility for process improvement efforts. People are often more productive when their efforts are acknowledged, so recognizing those who have performed above expectations is a good way to endorse their efforts and encourage others to pitch in. Similarly, utilizing alert emails, reminders and personalized dashboards to keep process efforts front-of-mind for teams can improve engagement and build momentum.



It's not enough to tell staff about process improvements. Management must listen just as carefully. Open communication requires planning and commitment championed by team leaders and the managers best placed to engage teams at the various levels. Being open to suggestions, concerns, and ideas ensures that those with new ideas have an opportunity to share them. That may not happen organically when continuous improvement is not yet ingrained in corporate culture. Leaders may need to ask for opinions and seek out influencers and key participants for feedback. Businesses should consider conducting surveys to gather perspectives from front-line teams and identify opportunities for improvement. Broad conversations about continuous improvement should lead to action plans to focus process efforts, set goals, and quantify results for individuals, teams, and the wider business.

Encouraging innovation takes courage and trust, however. Management must build a reservoir of good will to allow teams to experiment with new ideas. If failure is criticized or punished, few will step out of the status quo to explore better ways of operating, and ingenuity will be stifled. Organizations like Google invest significantly in trial projects and practices, and communicate the value of staff innovations throughout the business. When leaders cultivate and communicate the importance of value-adding innovations, teams will begin to seek better ways of working. The resulting drive for continuous improvement results in an agile and innovative organization.



Engaged, involved teams

Process improvement cannot be the responsibility of management alone. Too many organizations focus on leadership driving new methodologies or implementing new tools at the expense of harnessing the real engine of change — engaged teams that know the processes and have built-in incentives to improve them.

Building a culture of process excellence relies on a strong sense of ownership from the line-of-business. When people don't feel responsible for a process or its outcomes, they have no motivation to promote change. The key is to identify and distinguish those who have a role in managing the processes — primarily process owners, experts and champions.

Process owners should take overall responsibility for the effective operation of the process, tracking the performance of its component activities and the effect of the process on the business. Theirs is a strategic perspective with a management approach. Process experts, by contrast, are those with a deep operational understanding of the processes. They know the key elements that are essential to success. An effective process framework allows these two types of stakeholders to collaborate, innovate, debate and implement improvements so that continuous improvement becomes ingrained.

They'll be motivated to pursue continuous improvement by enthusiastic process champions, who focus on the process journey rather than individual activities. They hold the communication and engagement plan, sharing information, celebrating success and providing forums for owners and experts to develop their processes. A process champion can foster friendly competition, build teams, and actively communicate expectations and encouragement to keep continuous improvement front-of-mind for teams. Innovation and creativity rely on harnessing the wider organization's experiences and insights, curated by process experts and owners.

The efforts of process owners, experts, and champions can be supported by tools that provide effective and accessible engagement frameworks. Being able to gather and implement improvement ideas directly from the teams involved is vital to a business's agility. Similarly, those who know the processes best must be able to provide meaningful feedback and know that their input is both seen and responded to in a timely fashion. Ongoing communication around new ideas keeps the continuous improvement conversation alive and encourages buy-in from the teams that have the greatest experience with the processes themselves. Maintaining this kind of engagement is part of the process champion's role and requires coaching, communication, and the ability to challenge teams in fun ways.

The right tools

Continuous improvement is a culture, not a technological solution. It can't be purchased "out of the box." That said, there are technology tools that can facilitate and encourage the kind of agile innovation that fuels process excellence. The key is recognizing the important elements among so many options.

As we've said, team engagement is vital for capturing, managing and improving business processes. A process management platform must be simple and clear enough for the line-of-business to engage with, but powerful enough to address complex enterprise processes. Beyond being able to access the procedures, teams need easy-to-use feedback functions and personalized dashboards that make their responsibilities clear.

In addition to process management tools, process automation is another vital capability in improving business processes. Whether through digital forms, automated workflows or targeted RPA bots, automation offers the capacity to reduce errors, eliminate wait times and cut costs, resulting in better outcomes for the customer and improved profitability. The best process solutions incorporate automation within the management platform, enabling those who know the processes best to pinpoint opportunities for digital enhancement. By merging automation and process management, technical specialists also can develop workflow solutions with confidence, having all the key requirements at hand, gathered by the subject matter experts.

Organizations also must measure and assess outcomes. Ongoing analytics provide evidence of the effectiveness of continuous improvement and can highlight opportunities for further evolution. By tracking key metrics through APIs and integrated reporting, a good process platform both promotes ongoing continuous improvement and helps the organization focus and refine continuous improvement efforts over time.



CASE STUDY

The right tool supporting continuous improvement



Australia's Department of Justice and Regulation in Victoria found a lack of cohesion and consistency in its business processes. Processes were being captured and managed in a collection of Word documents and Visio charts, scattered across the organization. Procedures were difficult to find and follow and were rarely updated because ownership was not clear. This led to errors and inefficiencies in dealing with day-to-day activities.

Recognizing the problem, management investigated and invested in a process platform that made it easy to access and update the processes. The platform's simple visual tools encouraged engagement, and its support for assigning ownership made it easy for users to take responsibility for keeping processes current. That meant that formerly neglected processes could be easily referenced and, where relevant, updated to match the realities of various operations.

By bringing the line-of-business into the process management conversation, the department achieved greater clarity over procedures and increased compliance. As people became more familiar with the tool, those changes became part of the day-to-day business. The platform promoted continuous improvement at the grassroots level.



CASE STUDY

Success breeds success with automation solutions

Ufone is a telecommunications company based in Pakistan, and is a part of the global Emirates Telecommunication Corporation Group that serves more than 20 million subscribers. Ufone embarked on a digital transformation journey to improve their company culture and customer outcomes. That began with automating manual administration tasks, which shaved 15 working days from common procedures. Implementing automation solutions into the finance department led to savings of more than 1,000 hours per month on regular tasks.

Seeing the improvements from automating workflows, Ufone was inspired to investigate other opportunities. Having quick-to-develop and effective automation solutions encouraged other business units to examine their processes for inefficiencies and manual tasks that could be automated. The availability of the technology created momentum for improving processes, leading to innovations in employee-facing processes, network rollouts and task management. All of these have added up to improvements in the overall customer experience.

Enable agility with continuous improvement



Organizational agility is the increasingly essential capacity to respond quickly to shifting conditions and contexts. It is vital in today's hyper-competitive business environment, which requires companies to try new things, assess the results, and then either expand the initiative or pivot to a new direction. This can't be done when core processes and practices are fixed in some long-past point in time. Static, lost and neglected processes threaten compliance and increase errors, costing time, money and customer satisfaction. What's more, while processes are locked in unexamined documentation, potential innovations and new ways of working are lost as the line-of-business adapts procedures for themselves, by themselves. Even the best process management tools can't stimulate a culture of continuous improvement if they don't engage business teams, with full support from every level of management.

What's required is a positive change of culture — and a culture of positive change. Beginning at the top, organizations need to set a strategy that values creativity, innovation and responsible risk. Leaders that support and communicate the importance of ongoing improvement create momentum for it, ensuring that contributions are recognized and encouraged. That engages the real powerhouse of continuous improvement — the line-of-business. With the right tools and a strong sense of ownership, teams can bring their expertise to the wider organization, offering innovative solutions and accelerating effectiveness. Those tools will in themselves inspire change, with new capabilities shedding light on outdated practices and key points where technological evolution can bring greater efficiency.

It's not a one-time project, though. Continuous improvement is an ongoing commitment and repeating cycle. Although agile development often works with the concept of sprints, the pursuit of organizational agility is much more a marathon. But when a commitment to innovation is intentional it becomes an ongoing investment, transforming the business and empowering staff to contribute more meaningfully to the tasks in which they participate, benefiting both the customer and the teams serving them.



About Nintex

Nintex is the global standard for process management and automation. Today more than 10,000 public and private sector organizations across 90 countries turn to the Nintex Platform to accelerate progress on their digital transformation journeys by quickly and easily managing, automating, and optimizing business processes. Learn more by visiting www.nintex.com and experience how Nintex and its global partner network are shaping the future of Intelligent Process Automation (IPA).

