



THE PROCESS OWNER

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To ensure that someone with clout is looking at and taking action to improve the performance of an entire cross-functional process, many organizations are appointing an individual as the Process Owner of each core process. A Process Owner plays several or all of these roles:

- Monitors process performance and reports periodically to senior management about how well the process is meeting customer requirements and internal goals, as well as about any indications that the process is being suboptimized
- Chairs a cross-functional Process Management Team, which sets goals, establishes the process plan/budget, monitors process performance against the goals, and takes action in response to opportunities for process improvement
- Serves as a “white-space ombudsman,” who facilitates the resolution of interface problems
- Serves as the conscience and champion of the process
- Evaluates and, in highly structured organizations, certifies the process

Without a Process Owner, the “white spaces” tend to be ignored. As each line manager manages his or her piece of the process, functional optimization or process suboptimization is likely to occur.

Like a matrix manager, who oversees the cross-functional performance of a product or a project, the Process Owner oversees the cross-functional performance of a process. Unlike a product or project manager, however, the Process Owner does not represent a second organization structure. Individuals are not continually torn between their commitments to their vertical (line) and horizontal (product or project) managers. In effective Process Management, reporting relationships remain vertical; the functional managers retain their power. The horizontal dimension is added if the functional managers are judged by their departments' contributions to one or more processes and if Process Owners ensure that interface problems are resolved and that process considerations dominate functional interests. There is one more distinction between a Process Owner and a product or project manager: products and projects come and go; processes are permanent.

Given this pivotal role, the selection of the Process Owner is critical. While not all of these characteristics are essential, a Process Owner tends to be someone who:

- Holds a senior management position
- Holds a position that gives him or her major equity in the total process (the most to gain if the process succeeds, and the most to lose if it fails)
- Manages the largest number of people working in the process
- Understands the workings of the entire process
- Has an overall perspective on the effect the environment has on the process and the effect the process has on the business
- Has the personal ability to influence decisions and people outside his or her line-management responsibility

The Process Owner's responsibility is usually associated with the position, rather than with an individual. For example, we worked with a telephone company in which the vice president of finance was appointed Process Owner for the billing process. When he left that position, his successor became the Process Owner.

We were initially surprised by the low level of conflict between effective Process Owners and the managers of the functions that contribute to the processes. We believe that good Process Owners do not threaten line managers, because they are doing things that nobody has done before. They are adding value without taking anything away from other managers.



Concepts in this article are covered more fully in Rummler-Brache's [Process Improvement Certification Workshop](#).