

Ready To Assess A Process? What Do You Ask?

You're part of a process improvement team. You've just been asked to assess a process. What do you ask? This article provides guidelines on taking those first steps of process analysis, when gathering data is so critical.

What do you ask?

A useful approach is to begin with an "hourglass" in mind. This means to take a big picture approach first, then drill right down into the specific issue, and then go back to the big picture.



With these sample questions, you'll be headed in the right direction:

1. What does this area (or you) do for the organization?
2. How does this work or department fit within organization's other processes?
3. How do you know when your job is complete?
4. What data or metrics expectations exist around job completion?
5. What is going well (in this area, or in your work or with a specific task) and what could be improved, or what obstacles do you and your area experience?
6. How effective are the systems / technology with which you interact?
7. What are some of your ideas for overcoming the obstacles?

Probe with **the first question**, "What does this area (or you) do for the organization?" or similar open-ended questions about how the process performer(s) see their area's fit in the organization. This provides two key pieces of information. One, you'll get a better sense of how this area works in relationship to the rest of the organization. Two, you'll begin to see how the process performers understand their impact to the end customer.

For example, to an accounts payable staff person this question might invoke a response such as, "Well, we pay all the company's bills so that the vendors will keep delivering the materials to the construction site on time, so that we can finish the projects when the customers need them finished." In this case, you are lucky! The staff person clearly understands the big picture! This area is "linked" to the end customer and the staff person understands that.

However, you might get a response such as, "Well, we write the checks." In this case, further probe with follow-on questions such as, "For what reason are you writing checks?" and "Then what happens to the checks?" to explore further. The follow-on questions you use, keeping in mind the biggest picture you can, will reveal both the importance of this area to the process and the process performer's personal understanding of how his/her area affects the customer.

The **second question**, “How does this work or department fit within organization’s other processes?” can actually be decomposed into three questions:

- a. What has to be done before you can do your work and who is involved?
- b. How does your area’s work happen?
- c. When this area’s work is done, what happens next and who is involved?

These sub-questions provide the depth to explore the “systemic” perspective of this process. These questions use the “SIPOC” model (Supplier, Input, Process, Output, Customer). With it, you’ll discover the Suppliers, their Intputs to the process, what is the Process, what Outputs does it create and the Customers. Narrowing the focus reveals how areas interact.

For example, an Accounts Payable staff person might say, “well, the construction sites send me the invoice packages, which I enter into the computer. Then we print the checks and mail them to the vendors for any invoices due this week.”

In this case, the SIPOC model follows:

S=Construction site personnel

I=Invoice packages

P=Accounts payable

O=Checks

C=Vendors

<Insert SIPOC graphic here>

Answers to these three sub-questions may be very narrow (“Sally, in that cubicle, then stacks the forms in my inbox”) or very broad (“Those people on the project site send packages”). In either case, you decide how much detail you’ll need. This will depend on how much time you have to conduct the session and what kind of diagnosis you’ll be doing. The purpose is to understand how areas are linked, not to test their knowledge of the linkages.

Here’s another example. During an assessment of a software company’s Order Fulfillment process, the Revenue Accountants explained that they received the signed contract from the Contract Administrators before booking the entry. (The Contract Administrators were the “Suppliers” for the Revenue Accountants.) After booking the entry, they then informed the Billing Department to generate an invoice. (The Billing Department was the “Customer” of the Revenue Accountants.)

Only when the entire Order Fulfillment process was documented in a process map did the Revenue Accountants see that they were one link in a chain of 12 other functional groups performing this process. By asking the Revenue Accountants to state their “suppliers” and “customers,” it was revealed whom to interview next.

Question three, “How do you know when your job is complete?” directs the attention to the very narrow task at hand. This is the smallest point in the hourglass. Often the process performer knows the answer; this is where she lives her life! Although it’s the shortest question,

its answer might take up the most time in the session. Be careful what you ask for – you’ll get the detail here.

Listen for remarks around common aspects of work: Who is doing the work? When do they do it (in what sequence)? Where is the work done (what office or with what system)? What work is done? What work is NOT done? To what degree is the work done (how much precision is done or is required)? How often is the work done?

For example, an accounts payable staff person says, “Before I even see the invoice, George, who sits in the near by cube, opens the mail every day to sort out all the ones that are for Vendors from A to L for me.”

In one sentence, you’ve just learned who (George), when (prior to this staff person in sequence), where (nearby cube), what (opens mail), what’s not done (he skips non-invoice mail), and what frequency (every day). That’s a lot of key information you’ll use to map the process.

A matrix like the following assists keeping track:

Who	When	Where	What	Not	Degree	Often

Ask **question four**, “What data or metrics expectations exist around job completion?” at the same time as the previous question about completion. Probe around explicit measures (what is included in their performance report or as a monthly reporting to their manager) as well as unwritten expectations around measures.

You might need to ask specifics, such as, “how many invoices are received in Accounts Payable every day?” or “how many vendors exist” or “on average, how many invoices are paid with every check.” If they have any sample monthly performance reports it may reveal other metrics around quality, service, speed and cost expectations.

For example, accounts payable staff often knows how many vendors exist and how many invoices per timeframe. Ask about how the staff person is measured to reveal unwritten expectations. Is it based on number of checks printed each week, or how quickly the vendor delivers the materials to the job sites (linking back to what that person explained in question 1)?

Question five, “What is going well (in this area, or in your work or with a specific task) and what could be improved, or what obstacles do you and your area experience?” allows the process performer to self-evaluate. Allow the process performers to share with you the enhancements they have already made. Honor their work done. They may need probing around “obstacles.” Use jargon that works in your organization, or try alternatives such as “what prevents you from being effective” or “for what reasons do things take extra effort on your part.”

Using the Accounts Payable example, your staff person might reveal that although he is measured on number of checks written, the manager keeps a personal log of number of calls received from upset vendors. That manager also receives feedback from the construction crew about shipment delays. This staff person might even whisper to you that since he knows this goes on, he calls each Vendor to ensure any late payments don't affect shipments. This "extra" work is worth documenting and indicates a measurement system that if made explicit, could simplify the entire workflow.

Question six, "How effective are the systems / technology with which you interact?" will reveal how integrated (or not) the information systems enable (or disable) the process in question. Ask for concrete names of these systems, and the nicknames or jargon they use. These names become useful for gaining credibility later.

Listen for words like, "...then I re-key that report into this system" or "...then I download the file so that I can reconcile ...". How the process performers interact with systems is critical to gathering process data because systems are a big part of the "how" aspect of getting work done. Although it may seem like a small part of this person's job, often large, integrated systems touch many parts of an organization and you've just uncovered one small piece of a bigger puzzle.

In the Order Fulfillment example above, this question revealed that the 13 functional groups kept their own customer database on Excel. We learned to illustrate this in a process map that raised the urgency of a need for a single customer database.

Question seven, "What are some of your ideas for overcoming the obstacles?" lets you to pull back to the big picture and take in all that has been discussed. Allow the process performers to dream a little and consider the "ideal world." The process performers who do the work have excellent ideas for improvement. They just may not have had an audience before. Allow them to share how they would "fix" the problem in an ideal world. You may find some excellent ideas in this discussion!

In the Accounts Payable example, the staff person might say, "Well, if the construction crews would enter the invoice information at the site, we'd have early warning about upcoming cash requirements and could plan our check runs accordingly." It's not uncommon for it to be "someone else's" problem at this point, but perhaps they have an effective idea around single point of entry? It's always worth asking!

By now, you've gained some insight into what to ask when assessing a process. Remember to begin with an "hourglass" in mind. Take a big picture approach first, then drill right down into the specific issue, and then go back to the big picture.

With the seven questions in your toolkit, you'll be ready to assess any process.