

Selecting the Best Method for Process Baselineing

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When launching a process improvement effort, your foundational step is understanding how your business currently works and how it needs to change. I call this “process baselining”. It gives you the baseline or starting point upon which your process improvement efforts can be built. Baselining involves:

- documenting the process steps along with their supporting information (i.e., roles, timing, volumes, metrics, etc.),
- understanding the places where the process breaks down (breakpoints), and
- identifying areas of waste (i.e., redundancies, delays, etc.).

You can use various methods to create this Process Baseline –individual experts, business analyst interviews, group collaboration, or a blend. Admittedly, I am a collaboration bigot. But getting a group of people in a room is not always the most beneficial or cost-effective way to initially define the current process. So let’s investigate the possible methods, along with their pro’s and con’s, to determine which works best in what situations.

Using Individual Experts

Experts are those people who understand how a process works from end-to-end. They may be the process owners or simply experienced users or managers of the process. From their experience, an expert can document the process and associated suggestions for improvement which can then be used as a foundation for process improvement. If you are assessing multiple processes, you may identify an expert for each.

Based on the Pro’s and Con’s listed in Table 1, this method of establishing the process baseline is best used when you have strong, experienced, well-respected experts for each process being analyzed and little time. It brings the most value when the processes you’re analyzing are fairly simple, contained within one department or division and performed by only a few individuals.

Pro’s	Con’s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low cost. No travel or other expenses involved. Just the knowledge of the expert is required. ▪ Minimal resource involvement. Only the individual experts and the Project Manager are involved in the initial definition. ▪ Quick development timeframe. Since little or no collaboration is involved, the time commitment is limited to what’s needed for the expert to commit his/her knowledge to paper. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One perspective. This is one person’s view of the world and therefore may not accurately represent the end-to-end process. ▪ Differing output format. If you’re analyzing several processes, the format of the information provided by the experts may differ. One may use a form of process maps, one may use text, one may use graphics, etc. These differences can contribute to overlooked redundancies, hand-offs, and requirements. ▪ Lends itself to biased evaluation of results. People will ask where this information came from and will judge it accordingly. If, in their opinion, the “expert” is knowledgeable they will accept the information as a valid foundation; if not, you’ll end up reworking the foundation before being able to move forward. ▪ Can promote a “mine” vs. “ours” attitude. The expert may be sensitive about their work and therefore perceive comments or alterations as criticism. This can lead to issues with the interpersonal relationships of the team and will need to be managed delicately. ▪ Discrepancies not easily identified. Since individuals are creating these baselines without the benefit of collaboration, conflicting hand-offs and expectations are not easily apparent.

Table 1 – Pro’s & Con’s of the Individual Expert Method of Process Baseline

Business Analyst Interviews

This is a common method for developing a process baseline. The Business Analyst (BA) interviews all the knowledge experts and consolidates their input into a set of process maps, capturing associated process breakpoints and improvement suggestions as they go. Sometimes these interviews are standardized by using a common set of questions as a guide for each interview. From experience, the BA can probe for details that those not familiar with the process would overlook.

Based on the Pro’s and Con’s listed in Table 2, this method of establishing the process baseline is best used when you have a BA familiar with the business and several knowledgeable individuals involved in the day-to-day workings of the process. It brings the most value when the processes you’re analyzing are moderately complex and contained within one division or line of business.

Pro’s	Con’s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Moderate cost. No travel or other expenses involved. Just the time of the BA and various subject matter experts. ▪ Multiple perspectives. You get a consolidated view from multiple process experts. ▪ Standardized output. Output for each process is presented in the same format since it was created by the same person. This makes comparison of processes and assessment of improvements easier. ▪ Limited resource involvement. While there are more people involved in this method, the resources are limited to a few key subject matter experts and a BA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discrepancies are not easily resolved. While discrepancies in process steps, timings, volumes, owners, and break points are easily identified using this method, they are not easy to resolve. Resolution requires cycling back with previous interviewees to get agreement to changes identified by others - a tedious and challenging process. ▪ Longer development timeframe required. Performing interviews requires planning, scheduling and documentation. With the BA as the single focal point, this process must be single-threaded. ▪ Version control. With documentation being developed and/or updated from each interview, version control can become an issue. This problem is exacerbated if the documentation is reviewed for accuracy by interviewees.

Table 2 – Pro’s & Con’s of the Business Analyst Interview Method of Process Baseline

Group Collaboration

Group collaboration involves bringing a group of 8-15 subject matter experts together with a skilled facilitator to build the process baseline. The facilitator may be the Project Manager, Quality Lead or an external resource. The key is that they are proficient in leading a group to build the necessary process models. An experienced facilitator will also be able to serve as a neutral process guide, manage group dynamics, surface discrepancies and bring them to resolution, and track outstanding issues.

Based on the Pro’s and Con’s listed in Table 3, this method of establishing the process baseline is best used when you have an skilled facilitator* and a large number of subject matter experts involved in the processes. It brings the most value when the processes you’re analyzing are complex, cross multiple departments within the organization, and require consensus from numerous stakeholders.

Pro’s	Con’s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shared understanding. It’s amazing how often folks involved in the same process don’t truly understand how their actions affect those upstream and downstream. This method builds team relationships by understanding who 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High cost. You may incur travel, lodging, and outside consulting costs when using this method. Virtual meetings tools are an option, but will not provide the same shared team experience. ▪ High resource involvement. 8 to 15 people will be focused on this, and only this, effort for 1 to 3 days.

Pro's	Con's
<p>does what and why.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Moderate development timeframe. While planning is required, the elapsed time is minimized by having a focused 1-3 day effort rather than dragging it out over weeks or months while juggling other projects and commitments. ▪ Multiple perspectives. This "meeting of the minds" allows the opportunity for healthy discussion and debate. It ensures that the resulting baseline is accurate and that breakpoints are clearly defined and agreed to by all. ▪ Joint ownership of results. Group collaboration promotes an "ours" mentality and ensures support of the results after the meeting is over. ▪ Standardized output. This makes comparison of processes and assessment of improvements is easier. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Additional planning required. Holding a collaborative group working session requires a clear understanding of the scope of the processes involved so that the necessary players can be identified. Early scheduling must occur so that all parties are available to participate and rooms are reserved. ▪ Limited to no more than 5 processes. Attempting to baseline more than 5 processes over 3 days isn't feasible. There are ways to mitigate this limit – breakout groups or blending methods – but regardless there will be a limit for how much the brain can handle.

Table 3 – Pro's & Con's of the Group Collaboration Method of Process Baselineing

Blending Methods

Combining either of the first two methods with Group Collaboration can maximize the benefit gained. The initial baseline developed by the individual experts or business analyst can be used as a starting point for the group; thus speeding up the process while still creating a shared group understanding. This blending can compensate for some of the pitfalls of individual analysis by ensuring that the final baseline is adopted by the team.

Conclusion

Process baselining is the foundation for process improvement. It adds the element of reality to the blue sky wish list approach often used when redesigning, re-engineering or improving processes. You can create the baseline using one or more methods including individual experts defining the process they're familiar with, a business analyst interviewing subject matter experts or collaborative group sessions with all experts in attendance. But baselining is not intended for process improvement alone. It can also be used for employee education & training, as a starting point for Business Process Management automation, or as a tool for assessing implications of Mergers and Acquisitions.

*To find a skilled facilitator, check out these websites:

- National Facilitators Database - www.nfdb.com
- International Association of Facilitators "Find a Facilitator" – www.iaf-world.org

Ms. Adams is the Managing Partner of Chaosity LLC and specializes in Project Facilitation and Business Process Analysis. As a certified facilitator and quality manager, Ms. Adams is able to extract the experience and knowledge of Subject Matter Experts and quickly transform it into the specific outputs required to achieve your business objective. She guides teams in identifying and transforming their process knowledge and business requirements into viable project and system deliverables that incorporate quality principles consistent with methodologies such as TQM, Six Sigma, and Lean. Ms. Adams is co-author of the book "Facilitating the Project Lifecycle: Skills & Tools to Accelerate Progress for Project Managers, Facilitators and Six Sigma Project Teams" and a regular speaker at International Facilitator, Quality, Business Process and Project Management Conferences.

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