Quick Read

HARVARD Kennedy School Government Performance Lab | Procurement Excellence Network

Using Process Mapping to Save Time and Money

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Introduction

Efficiency is the foundation of procurement excellence, but it often feels difficult to achieve. We know procurement processes are often inefficient – costing substantial staff time, creating headaches for vendors, and causing costly delays that mean worse outcomes for residents.

If you are currently struggling to address an overly administrative, confusing, and lengthy contracting process, you are not alone. Process problems are one of the most common issues raised by the state and local governments that the Government Performance Lab (GPL) supports.

> We suggest pairing this quick read with our Process Mapping 101 training, which includes sample slides you can use for your own process mapping session.

In this quick read, we'll talk about one of the most effective practices to streamline procurement – process mapping. Here you'll learn how process mapping can be an excellent first step toward reducing cycle times as well as a great way to build stakeholder buy-in for procurement reform.

What is a process map?

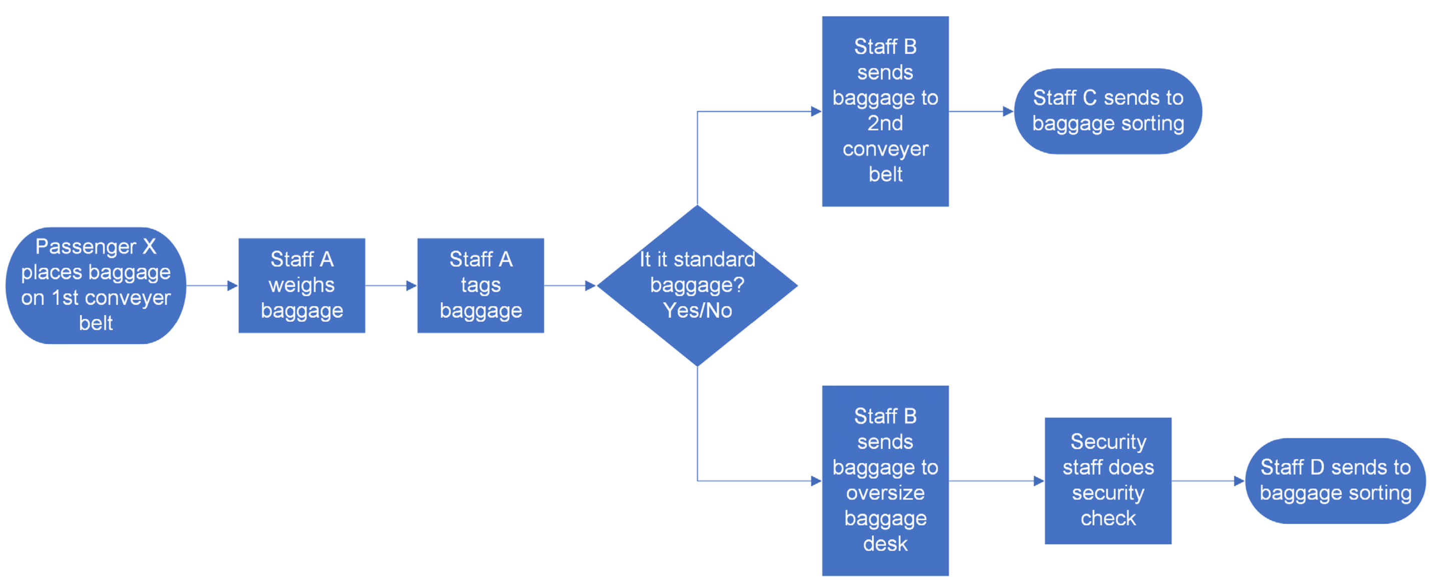
A process map is a diagram that visually displays the steps, decisions, and people involved in a specific process. Every step or decision identifies the relevant actor or actors (e.g., “Chief Procurement Officer”) and the action they take (e.g., “reviews draft of RFP”). Process maps can also allude to how a product has value added by a step or is transformed by that action (e.g., “draft of RFP becomes final draft of RFP following the CPO’s review”). The map gives you a comprehensive, 30,000-foot view of a process’s inputs, outputs, and requirements, making it invaluable in continuous improvement efforts.

By creating a process map, your team can arrive at a shared understanding of all steps involved in a process and foster discussion and buy-in around which of those steps are creating more strain than value or contributing to delays or confusion.

Process maps can take many shapes and structures, but two common formats are flow charts and spreadsheets.

FLOW CHART: A series of shapes and arrows that signify different types of steps in the process. The map moves from left to right; boxes are process steps and diamonds are decisions points. This format works well for in-person group settings, where you can use post-it notes to represent each individual step of the process.

Example: Airport baggage handling



SPREADSHEET: In this format, steps are listed in each row of Excel, with columns describing the actions involved and the owner of a process step. Decisions are also listed as rows but could be highlighted in a different color to distinguish them from other steps. This technique of process mapping is a great format for virtual settings in which using post-it notes to map a process is infeasible.

Example: Procurement process

Citylandia Procurement Process Map (Formal Competitive Process)			
STAGE	**STEP #**	**STEP DESCRIPTION**	**OWNER**
IV. Bid Evaluation	3	Purchasing administrative assistant sends copies of opened bids/proposals to buyers.	Administrative Assistant
	4	Purchasing administrative assistant creates summary of opened bids/proposals and posts summary to Citylandia purchasing website.	Administrative Assistant
	5	Buyer adds opened bids to contract folder on Purchasing shared drives.	Buyer
	6	Buyer reviews bids/proposals and confirms they meet specifications and requirements.	Buyer
	7	Was the solicitation an IFB or an RFP?	Buyer
	8A	**RFP** - Buyers share all proposals with departments/evaluation committee, indicating which proposals were non-responsive.	Buyer

In the simple examples above, there are no time stamps associated with each step, but those time stamps (e.g., 10 minutes or 2-3 weeks) could be easily added on in a second review once the final process is captured.

How do I get started?

A good process map requires an organized facilitator and participation from those who understand each step best. The five steps below will help you develop a successful process mapping plan.

1. **Select the process(es) you want to map:** Identify which processes you want to better understand. While you might be tempted to create a master map of every process associated with procurement and contracting, it often makes sense to dive in first to one specific process with a clear start and end point (e.g., the approval process for contracts, or the process steps for making informal purchases under $10,000). We find that many governments start by mapping a process that has caused major confusion or delays. Keep in mind that the bigger and more complex the process is, the more meetings, focus groups, and analysis it will require.

2. **Make sure you are including the right people:** Reflect on the process and write down all the parties involved. Who are the customers? Who are the drivers and decision-makers? Whose work or review is essential to the final product? Beyond purchasing staff, procurement processes across governments often involve programmatic departments, legal, finance, and administrative staff. Keep in mind the personal dynamics of the stakeholders involved: some individuals may feel less empowered to speak up, and others may be comfortable dominating the conversation. And don't forget to include frontline staff – they often have a better understanding of how the process *actually* happens on the ground compared to managers.
3. **Create an initial process sketch**: Using background documents, short interviews, and your own anecdotal experience, write a basic list of steps that staff can work from in group process mapping sessions. Don't aim for perfection, just completion. Even if it's inaccurate, the process outline will establish the scope of discussion early and save time.
4. **Lead a series of group process mapping sessions:** In these sessions, your goal is to determine whether you have the right steps, what steps you are missing, and who is the lead person for each step. Use the first 10-15 minutes of the meeting to establish goals and give participants time to review the draft process outline. For the remainder of the meeting, move through the map sequentially and ask participants to validate, correct, or add to the map. **Our process mapping training goes into the mechanics in greater detail and includes sample slides you can use for in-person and virtual formats.**
5. **Repeat and clarify**: Be prepared to lead repeat process mapping sessions if your process map doesn't feel complete. Nailing down a process takes time! In some cases, it may make sense to break up your process mapping sessions to focus on different stages in your process with smaller groups. As you collect feedback from other teams, use follow-up calls and interviews to confirm process accuracy and fill in gaps between steps.

As you're building out your process map, keep some things in mind:

- Don't overcomplicate! Only add steps to the process map if they are broadly applicable and occur most of the time. Try not to let perfect be the enemy of good—a process map that is 90% accurate is probably "good enough."
- Identify an explicit actor for each step. Watch out for instances where your participants are defining the owner of a step too broadly. For example, an entire department is rarely responsible for an activity—it's more likely to be a specific person within a department.
- Make clear that the objective is first to capture the current reality of the process, NOT the ideal state—that comes next!

I now have a process map - what should I do with it?

Congratulations! A completed process map is one of the most useful tools in your procurement reform toolkit.

1. **Analyze your process map:** Review each step of the process, with an eye towards understanding what steps are: 1) value add: they improve the quality and accuracy of the final product; 2) non-value add: they are unnecessary steps that may no longer be needed, or 3) business necessary: steps that we'd all prefer not to do, but are required by policy, legislation or for purposes like safety. Some questions to consider:
    a. **What's excessive?** Are there rounds of review or due diligence efforts that take more time than they're worth? Are there too many steps given the importance of one sub-activity?
    b. **What seems missing in this process?** Are there steps we can loop in or complete simultaneously to make our process more proactive, strategic, or value-add?
    c. **Are things being done consistently?** Are there major discrepancies in whether steps are always followed? Do some people often skip certain steps?
    d. **Does this process include the right people?** Are there staff we can better incorporate into the process? Should anyone be brought into the process earlier?
2. **Step back to assess obstacles to change:** Before you jump to cut steps or revise how a sub-process takes place, take a moment to acknowledge that the idea of change is disruptive. Changing processes will change people's jobs and their experience at work. It may even feel like they're losing something important to them - even if from the outside it just looks like you're eliminating a redundant step!
3. **Pilot changes:** Start small by working with your leadership to gain buy-in for piloting a small change to the process. Your first pilot could be to:
    a. **Design a revised series of process steps**, especially if you realize that important needs are not met by the current process.
    b. **Change roles or responsibilities**, especially if there is confusion around who is responsible for a specific aspect of the process or if certain actors have been historically responsible for too much of a process.
    c. **Adjust levels of time or effort**, especially if certain process steps that don't add much value to the process require inordinate time and resources.

    The success of any pilot depends on communication, openness, and engagement with the frontline staff who run these processes. Talk about the changes you've made openly and widely and seek feedback! Is the new process working well? Are there any modifications to be made based on the experience of staff or vendors?

4. **Share, communicate, and engage:** What better way to build consensus around the procurement process than by publishing the final map? Your process map can be an invaluable resource for new and senior staff alike. Consider including it in onboarding and training procedures or creating a simpler user-friendly version or simple checklist of process steps. Make sure the process map is published somewhere readily available, so your colleagues don't have to ask you whenever they want to see it.

How have governments used process maps to cut cycle times and reduce waste?

The GPL has supported cities and states in successful process mapping efforts in the past. These governments used process maps to better understand procurement process steps, diagnose problem areas, and craft solutions.

City of Tulsa, OK

The GPL used a series of focus groups with buyers and Purchasing staff to build consensus around the steps, resources, and time required in the procurement process. Upon confirming these steps, the GPL built finalized process maps in both flow chart and spreadsheet formats and published them as a resource to be used by city staff. These process maps helped the GPL and the Purchasing Director identify excessive signature requirements, repetitive rounds of review, and procedures that placed excessive emphasis on compliance over ease and innovation. In response, Purchasing now tracks cycle times and has begun instituting efforts to reduce administrative burden.

City of Long Beach, CA

The GPL translated multiple process overview documents into a single spreadsheet-based process map. During the Purchasing Division's weekly check-in calls, the team reviewed this process map to validate details, fill information gaps, and identify key bottlenecks. Staff ended up translating the final version into a template project plan that is available for department project managers to use to plan out their solicitation process. Pairing the process map with cycle time data has been important to hone in on the places where the city is seeing delays and then diagnosing the reasons for those delays.

Conclusion

Process maps can take time but are a critical ingredient for any procurement reform effort. At its core, a process map is a tool for action – to develop consensus around a process, identify pain points, and motivate exploring new solutions. If you're ready to lead a process mapping exercise with your own team, be sure to check out the Procurement Excellence Network's Process Mapping 101 training. It includes sample slides and guidance you can use for your own process mapping session.

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

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