

Minnesota Common Ground: Transforming Public Health Information Systems

The Business of Public Health

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The "Business" of Public Health

The terms "business" and "business process" are not ones that are used much in public health. But in fact they relate to the overall purpose of our programs and the specific activities and tasks we carry out every day. Been very clear about our business processes is critical to designing information systems that support our work and improve public health practice.

What is a Public Health "Business Process"?

A business process is a set of related tasks designed to produce a desired programmatic (business) objective. A business process looks at the details of how we do our work in public health. In addition, business processes:

- Are in response to a triggering event
- Are a collection of activities or steps (tasks)
- Involves entities/participants
- Rarely takes place in isolation. It may be comprised of activities that span across and/or within multiple business units such as departments, organizations, divisions, or branches.
- May contain inputs from and outputs to other business processes
- Can be viewed at various levels of granularity
- Have a clearly defined objective and purpose
- Contains entities that work towards a common goal

- Produces something of value for the benefit of an organization, stakeholder or customer
- Has an outcome that is measurable and may be assigned parameters for establishing performance gains
- Meets customer and/or stakeholder needs and expectations
- Involves the flow of material and/or information (transactions)
- Has a known method or set of business rules, also known as an algorithm to define activities. When the method is applied to the input, certain outputs are created as a result of the business rules.

Using these criteria, examples of business processes in public health may include evaluating prevention programs, conducting community health assessments, developing strategic plans, and disseminating public health data and information.

Business Process Analysis

Business process analysis is a methodology that digs deep to our business processes to answer the question of, "How do we do our work now?" Business process analysis:

- Defines our goals and objectives
- Models the context in which we do our work
- Identifies rules associated with how we do our work
- Describes in detail the tasks and workflow of our work
- Identifies common task sets



Center for Health Informatics
85 East 7th Place
P.O. Box 64882
St. Paul, MN, 55164-0882
www.health.state.mn.us

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The purpose of conducting business process analysis is to develop a deep understanding of how we do our work so that we can identify redundancies, opportunities for improvement, and areas that cannot or should not change. In order to improve upon our business processes, we must first take a close look at them and examine if we should be doing things differently. We do this through Business Process Redesign.

Business Process Redesign

Business process redesign answers the question of, “How should we do our work?” This process:

- Examines current tasks and workflow
- Identifies inefficiencies
- Identifies efficiencies with repeatable processes
- Redefines business processes and business rules
- Remodels the context of our work
- Restructures tasks and workflow

Often the end result of conducting business process analysis and redesign is the development or improvement of an information system. Because of the large investments required in developing information systems, it is critical to go through the steps of business process redesign to ensure that the information systems being developed will improve our work rather than remain status quo. If it is decided that an information system should be developed as a result of our improved business processes, the next step is to go through a Requirements Definition phase.

Requirements Definition

Requirements definition answers the question of, “How can an information system support our work?” This process:

- Defines specific tasks to be performed for optimized business processes
- Describes the implementation of business rules

- Describes in words and graphics how an information system must be structured
- Determines scope of next phase of activities

Summary

Business Process Analysis, Business Process Redesign, and Requirements Definition methodologies can be effective tools to critically analyzing the work of public health and developing improved work processes and information systems to support those processes.