*Conducting Business in a Newly Integrated Office:*

# A Transactional Process Improvement Approach

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Universities that want to improve and harness their grants and contracts operations can choose from several different approaches when designing their improvement plans. One of the options is merging offices or restructuring the pre- and post-award functions. This can improve efficiency, increase business flow, and benefit faculty and staff.

A fully integrated grants and contracts office (pre- and post-award) is a multi-faceted system of interrelated processes and transactions. By design, it supports the university community by providing a single location for assistance within the life cycle of a sponsored project - from inception to closeout. Paying attention to details is what ensures the plan will be successful. The process of integration can be daunting but the appropriate approach leads to less duplicated effort and provides more value to its stakeholders.

An effective process improvement plan normally follows these stages:

1. Developing the Plan and Setting the Course
2. Aligning the Office with the Plan
3. Executing the Plan
4. Assessing the Plan
5. Adapting the Plan and Being Flexible

## Developing the Plan and Setting the Course

Strategic planning in a newly integrated office is an organizational activity that is used to set priorities, focus resources, strengthen operations, and ensure that the office is working towards a common goal in an ever-changing environment. Identify the critical needs, priority areas, and the business impact when developing the plan in order to keep the goals focused. It is crucial to develop a framework for action by using a systems approach that starts with the end in mind. Setting up a plan without considering the end users may cause the process to be derailed.

These are important elements in any integration plan: Provide actionable items, incorporate external and internal environments, and integrate existing systems to align the office around the strategy.

Break down the process silos by contributing to an understanding of how processes intersect and impact one another and stakeholders. With the combining of the pre- and post-award offices, there can be major stigmas regarding which office owns which process. Working through process mapping and looking at the grant and contract process with a holistic approach can breakdown the stigmas.

## Aligning the Office with the Plan

Strategic alignment is the process of bringing the actions of the newly integrated offices and the staff into line with the office's newly planned objectives.

Bringing the alignment into balance requires tough choices and difficult trade-offs that will position resources toward new behaviors within the office processes and practices. Strategic alignment also focuses on having the human capital strategy-aligned with the mission, vision, goals, and organizational objectives. The process must be backed by office members who bring positive energy, cooperation, and resources to the effort. Ensure that management focuses on sharing the best practices for the office. Obtaining best practice is done by breaking down old processes, sharing information, and outlining the break down points. Have the office help with this process to reinforce open communication and help align them with the new plan.

Human capital and workforce planning are critical factors for strategic alignment. Revising position descriptions and re-distributing workload based on the organizational direction may be necessary. When going through the alignment process, there may be members of the office that do not agree with the changes or cannot handle the changes. The first step is to meet with staff individually to peel back the layers on why they believe the process will fail. Give staff a safe place to voice their concerns to help sway their perceptions. Keep in mind that when change happens not everyone can handle it.

## Executing the Plan

Executing the plan requires a certain degree of risk and a lot of hard work. Start to prepare for ongoing change by rolling out the initial processes and associated tools. Process improvement in a newly integrated office refers to making a process more effective, efficient, or transparent. A process is an orchestrated sequence of activities and associated tasks required to meet goals and objectives. An office that conducts process improvement focuses on proactive problem resolution in order to avoid operating in crisis management mode. A well-defined and designed process commands the flow of work and all its possible paths in meeting the office's objectives.

Creating process maps and documents becomes a valuable tool for understanding and executing the plan. Documents help identify opportunities to enhance value, eliminate waste, redundancy and improve flow. Integrating the strategic priorities with other support functions helps document the process, the dependencies, assumptions and constraints. Lastly, view the process through the eyes of the stakeholders such as faculty, staff, and other peer departments.

## Assessing the Plan

A basic key to assessing the plan is to set metrics that support the office's strategy and values. The metrics ultimately tell the office where has it been, where is it heading, whether something is wrong, and when goals are reached.

Incorporate learning and feedback to promote continuous long term improvement. For example; place a link on the signature line of your emails to a survey where your stakeholders can evaluate the office and comment on the changes occurring. Receiving comments (good or bad) from the external users will help the office keep up with the changes. This process assists with maximizing for future operations. Give the office recognition in different ways to ensure they are appreciated for their contributions. Some examples include: a simple thank you, a note of gratitude, recognition in an all staff meeting or an afternoon desert in their honor.

## Adapting the Plan and Being Flexible

Regularly evaluate, manage, and measure the process using data-driven information. Measuring impact creates a common vision. The very action of identifying the measures and collecting the data creates a set of shared expectations within a group. This helps when an idea for change comes up against an obstacle. Work with the external users to find out which process is not working and how it should be adjusted to ensure practical benefits.

The office needs to be flexible to the changes that are occurring and understand that the instability caused by this change will level out and become stable again. It may be difficult for some to see the bigger picture.

After the plan is in place and the office has started to work in their new processes, it is a good idea to have "harmonization" meetings with outside stakeholders. The purpose of the harmonization meeting is for stakeholders to share information and solutions. The meeting should cover the changes that are happening or have occurred and how the stakeholders feel about the new services. This will give additional feedback on how the changes are affecting them as a whole.

A process improvement approach in a newly integrated office will result in better decision making and will help facilitate growth and success.

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