

## HOW TO IMPROVE SOFT PROCESSES WITH VA

Nathalie Provost, P. Eng, M. Eng.  
Consultant Valorex inc  
and

Roger Giroux, M.Ed., M.A. (Ph), M.PH.E  
Regional Director Région des Laurentides et de Lanaudière  
Ministère de la Sécurité du revenu (Quebec Welfare Departement)



Ms. Nathalie Provost is a mechanical engineer graduated in 1990 from École Polytechnique de Montréal, the same institution from which she later obtained an engineering master specialising in Technology Management. Her memoir covered the subject of R&D group performance.

Ms Provost began her career at Valorex, one of the few VA firms in the province of Québec. As a young engineer, she supported team leaders during VA studies in a wide range of projects, covering project management optimization, hydroelectric facility refurbishing and new product design. After four years and more than 30 VA/VE sessions, she is practicing as team leader.

Mr Giroux studied from 1968 to 1978 at the University of Ottawa and received: Bachelor degree in education (B.Ed.), Master's degree in school administration (M.Ed.), Master's degree in philosophy (M.A. (Ph.)) and a Master's degree in physical education (M.PH.ED).

From 1970 to 1977, he worked for Algonquin College in Ottawa as a French teacher and coordinator of the French department.



From 1977 to 1988, he worked at the Quebec Immigration Department. He was in charge of different departments. In 1988, he was named regional director of Laurentides/Lanaudières for the Welfare Departement.

That region includes 12 centers and a total of 450 employees. From June 1993 to May 1994, he was in charge of a special project at the head office in Quebec City. In fact he was in charge of a new departement responsible for optimizing the working processes.

---

### ABSTRACT

In 1994, 14 people from all hierarchical levels in the Quebec Welfare Department were involved in a Value Analysis (VA) study aiming at simplifying and codifying policy communications. The VA job plan, including FAST diagrams, was used to identify ways to gain time in the process while ensuring a true and uniform understanding. The analysis highlighted 3 main functions:

- design of policy;
- communication and understanding of policy;
- implementation of policy.

As shown, the cost of functions was expressed in terms of allocated time; value was defined as a new distribution of available man-hours. In this context, the recommendations focused on:

- concentrating activities that might have been duplicated early in the process;
- simplifying diffusion activities;
- allowing caseload officers, that have to apply the policies, more time for client service;
- developing a new "ready-to-wear" approach.

A 50 % potential economy for each transmitted

policy (up to \$345,000 for one of them) was identified with these recommendations. A task force is now working on their implementation.

Issues and consequences of this implementation are also discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The financial situation of many governments is quite precarious: substantial deficits and high unemployment rates are two disturbing indicators. For just such reasons, governments are attempting to review their management approaches and practices. Departments are questioning the level of service they should offer the public while trying to determine the just and equitable financial investments required to offer that service. With these objectives in mind, numerous efforts of process optimization, process reorganisation, and process re-engineering have been undertaken. In Quebec, this general movement has come to be known as the realignment of public services. Government institutions are questioning whether they are doing the right things, for the right people, the right way and for the right cost.

In light of this need, VA is an effective approach which allows governments to reach their objectives while building a synergy between the public service employees who establish the programs and render the services. A VA study aiming at simplifying and codifying policy communications in the Quebec Welfare Department (Ministère de la Sécurité du revenu) was held to gain time in the communication process while ensuring a true and uniform understanding. This example provides an opportunity to illustrate the use of VA in this particular governmental context. The following report outlines the stakes riding on this kind of VA intervention and analyses the main success factors.

## DEPARTMENT CONTEXT

The Ministère de la Sécurité du revenu, by virtue of its mission, is a government department that contributes to social and economic development in Québec. Its main function is to fight poverty by providing needy Quebecers with last-resort financial assistance and offering those who are fit for employment the opportunity to re-enter the job market, or develop job skills that would make it easier for them to do so. Over 725,000 people in Québec benefit in one way or another from the various programs the Department administers. To serve this clientele, the Department has a staff of

almost 5,394, divided up as follows:

- Four thousand five hundred work directly with the public. They are grouped together in a division responsible for the Travail-Québec Network. The division includes 14 regional branches and 129 Travail-Québec Centres located throughout the territory.
- The Department's other 900 employees work in a supporting role for the Travail-Québec network. Together, they make up the divisions overseeing policies and programs, finance, data processing and organizational performance.

Over the last four years, the clientele served by the Quebec Welfare Department has grown considerably. Like many other governments, we have gone through difficult economic times. This has led authorities to examine the state of public finances. Their review of the roles and missions of the various departments of the Quebec Government has been baptized "Operation Realignment". It has five main objectives:

- Reduce government expenditures by \$7,2 billion by 1997
- Reduce the size of the government apparatus
- Produce goods and services more efficiently
- Maintain, and even improve, the quality of services available to citizens and businesses while reducing their cost
- Increase public awareness of what it costs when government services and programs are used.

Thus, at the precise moment we are being asked to find new ways to manage limited resources, we are also dealing, as stated earlier, with major increase in demand for services. This has placed an added burden on employees, who have seen their caseloads grow heavier with each passing day. What's more, over the same period, the Travail-Québec Network has made major changes to the job descriptions of its caseload officers, combining tasks to reduce the number of people users are asked to deal with. Thus, officers who used to handle only certain aspects of cases now must walk them through from start to finish. This means more job knowledge is required of them and their duties are more involved.

Moreover, officers have regularly had to deal with directives instructing them to perform their duties in new, sometimes substantially different, ways. Over the last few years, officers have received an average of 130 directives varying in length from one to over

30 pages. They were forever saying to whomever would listen that there were too many directives, that they were delivered helter-skelter (often, a whole slew arrived in a single week announcing major changes), and that they increased their workload considerably. Department authorities, while not disputing their claims, were unable to appreciate the extent of the problem. Certain efforts had been made in previous years to improve the situation, without much success.

During Fall '93, the Department's executive committee approved a new Departmental communications policy calling for six measures to be taken. The following two were directly related to the problem:

- 1) Coding administrative and operational communications

Objectives:

- a) Make written materials easier to read and understand.
- b) Help Department staff, and particularly staff in the Travail-Québec network, to sift through the various types of information they receive.

- 2) Simplifying Department administrative directives

Objectives:

- a) Make directives easier to understand
- b) Make it easier for staff to transmit information to users
- c) Ensure that directives are more uniformly understood and applied.

It was felt that a VA was needed if these objectives were to be attained. Agreement was reached that the analysis should provide an overall view of the Department in terms of who was issuing directives and how they were being drawn up, distributed and applied, to ensure the process was as it should be.

#### VA OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Valorex, a firm specialized in VA, was chosen to conduct this study. Valorex's role was to prepare and conduct a VA workshop and to transfer the VA technology to selected Department employees. The

Departement wished to establish partnership relationship with Valorex in the process.

Workshop preparation was done in conjunction with the Department team. First of all, the stakes resting on the study were defined, as was the exact nature of the case used to feed the process targeted for optimization. This particular case was a source of substantial tension and dissatisfaction within the ministry. The preparation and transmission of this directive were laborious as was its interpretation and execution.

A multidisciplinary team surrounding this directive was formed and one or two representatives from each concerned group were invited by the head of the Department to take part in the study. Each level of authority was represented, from upper management down to the caseload officers themselves.

A workplan based on the French VA standard NFX 150-52 was drawn up, meaning that considerable emphasis was placed on the function analysis. Environment analysis, a technique consisting of identifying functions by studying all the interactors surrounding the study subject, was chosen. Although time-consuming, this particular technique greatly simplifies the process of bringing all the team members to the same level of understanding of the situation. It follows a rigorous approach and assures as thorough a study as possible.

Based on the functions thus generated, a function tree (similar to the free-style FAST) was developed. This tree aimed to identify high-level functions with respect to the ultimate mission of the process under study. This tree also served as the basis for establishing the time required to accomplish each high-level function, with time acting as the basic value parameter. The choice of using time, rather than the dollar, as a unit of value greatly simplified the search for information and reassured all the study participants since time was a concrete and tangible quantity to which everyone could easily relate. "Just value" was therefore defined as the amount of time that *should be* required to accomplish a particular function with the expected level of satisfaction.

The creativity phase of the study was conducted with the brainstorming technique, as in most VA studies. The subsequent evaluation of each idea was done via group consensus and based on Departmental valuation criteria. However, the detailing of team

recommendations was not done during the workshop but rather by Valorex who validated them with the study team before presenting them to the Department's executive committee.

**RESULTS**

The following function tree (figure 1) highlights three main phases of the process:

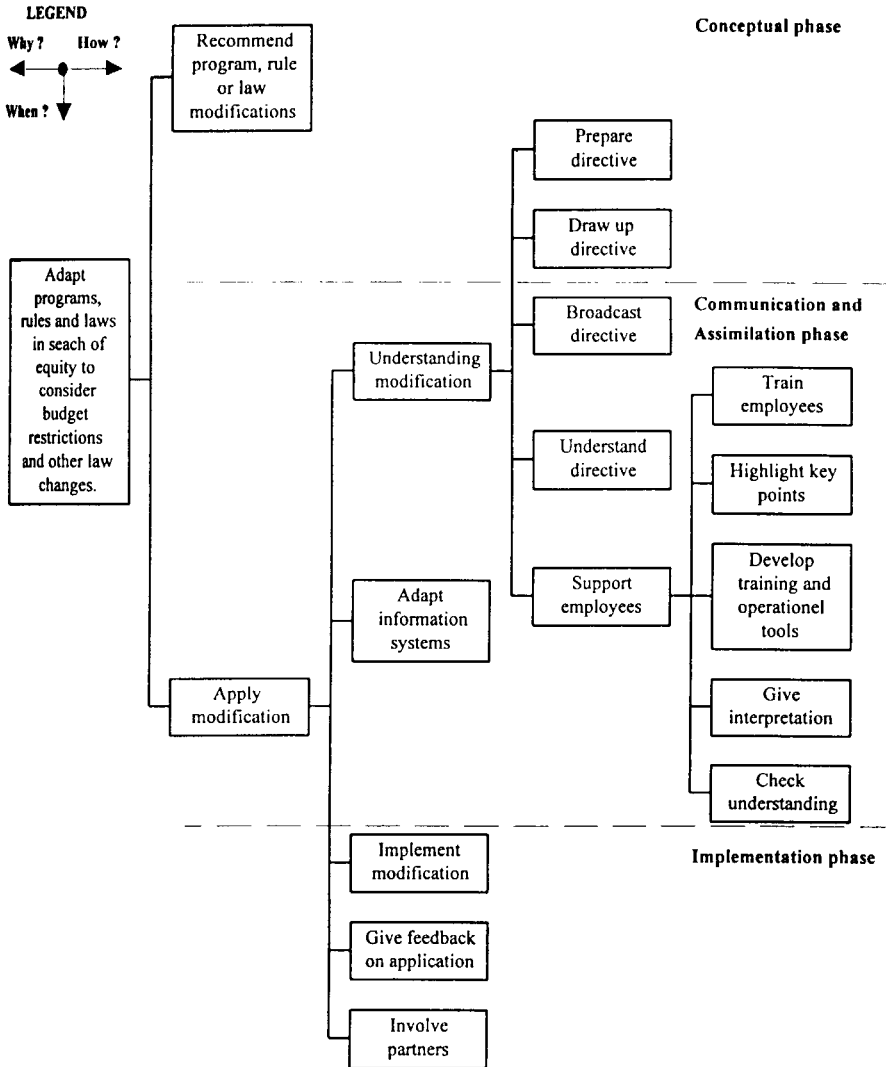


figure 1: function tree of the communication process

1. The conceptual phase during which program, rules and law changes are recommended, is the phase dealing with the preparation and the drawing out of directives. This phase is the starting point of the process, being carried out at the departement head office. In the particular case of the directive studied, it required 4% of the total time invested.

2. The communication and assimilation phase broadcasts the directive and supports those involved in its application. This phase transmits the information from the head office to the caseload officers. In the present case, 45% of the time invested was devoted to this phase.

3. The implementation phase aims at applying the directive presently and to give feedback on application. It is during this phase that caseloads are addressed, thus targeting customer service with a direct impact on service beneficiaries. Of the total time invested, 51% was devoted to this phase.

Based on this information, we can conclude that this process has a multiplying effect as the information flows down towards the customer. It also appears that the more liberty individuals have in interpreting the information, the more the process gets bogged down and the greater the diversity of interpretation and subsequent compliance.

Within this context, four (4) principles guided the development of recommendations:

1. Concentrate early on in the process any activities which are at risk of being duplicated.
2. Simplify all actions associated with the communication and assimilation of information
3. Maximise the time regional and local personnel invest in customer service.
4. Develop a "ready-to-wear" approach with respect to communication

The recommendations stated that twice as much time be invested in the conceptual phase so that the information could be as complete as possible and would take into account the needs of the beneficiaries before its release. This action, it is hoped, would reduce by half the time required during the second phase since the effort required to interpret the information would be reduced to a minimum. Finally, the time invested in the third phase, the implementation phase, would be maintained at present level since this time is to be directly invested in customer service.

In the case of the present directive, a potential savings of 50% could be achieved within the first and second phases. In other words, instead of costing 5 200 man-days to conceive, communicate and assimilate the directive, one could expect it to cost only 2,700 man-days. When translated into monetary terms, the potential savings would be \$345,000 for this particular directive.

As a result of this VA, 25 recommendations were made to the Department's executive committee. All were accepted. An implementation team was set up to provide the necessary follow-up. The team is made up of five individuals from the divisions affected most. Its structure is:

- The implementation team: to direct and coordinate the entire project
- The technical committee: to provide support to the implementation team, validate the work of the other teams and ensure the recommendations from various teams are consistent with each other
- The inventory subcommittee: to identify all Department communications and their intended audiences
- The change subcommittee: to put forward a new process for designing and implementing change
- The process subcommittee: to draw up a process for developing and transmitting administrative and operational written materials that ensures adequate links are maintained at the time of change between information originators and users
- The training subcommittee: to review the training process and adjust it to fit actual

employee needs as dictated by the new communications model developed.

The work of various committees is scheduled to be completed by the end of December 1994. This means that when the results of the experiment are made known in May 1995, we will be in position to provide examples of improvements made possible by the VA.

#### STRENGTHS OF VA IN A GOVERNMENTAL CONTEXT

As one can see with the present example, VA has three main strong points within the scope of a governmental study.

1. First of all, VA allows the removal of barriers between different levels of authority. A multidisciplinary team has already proven its worth with regards to the integration of the skills and experiences from various sources. In this particular case, it made it possible to understand the numerous constraints at both the operational and managerial levels. Participants were required to explain themselves and to understand each others' positions.
2. VA allowed participants to quantify those elements that, all too often, are not. It is often quite difficult in a bureaucratic context such as that of a governmental organisation, to estimate costs related to carrying out a process. VA enabled to establish the cost of specific functions, thus providing a base for a realistic estimate of costs incurred by the process.
3. Finally, the VA approach focuses energy towards action. Expectations are created by the involvement of people from all levels and inaction with regards to proposed recommendations becomes difficult in light of a consensus amongst numerous individuals favoring their implementation.

#### STAKES INVOLVED IN A GOVERNMENTAL CONTEXT

During the analysis of the communication process, four specific elements were highlighted. These elements deserve special attention since they reflect the constraints which, in all likelihood, are common



