

GOVERNMENT APPLICATION OF VA TO PROCEDURE WITH EXTREME USER EXPECTATION DIFFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

"When the only tool you have is a hammer - every problem starts to resemble a nail" - Abraham Maslow. As VA/VE continues to be used in non-traditional applications the Value practitioner's job becomes more complex. Of the many tools available to enhance the job plan - which ones add the most value to the outcome? This case study details four key elements judged to be crucial in a recent VA effort at a government service center. These elements covered areas of strategic vision, conflict management, issue clarification, and team decision making/communication.

THE PROBLEM

This study was initiated by a service center's directors in response to repeated and consistent user complaints regarding the nature and quality of the PC

Support Group, the unit responsible for supporting the center's computers. They noted that failure of the computer systems to deliver dependable service in an expedient and cost effective manner impacted the productivity of almost every employee and program in the center.

Accordingly, the initially requested that the study be limited to PC support services, which was subsequently expanded to: "identify recommended solutions to resolve the identified user and provider problems, regardless of the source."

The Directors constrained the study to (1) evaluate their alternatives within the context of the agency's established standards and accepted configuration requirements, (2) the management of these standards cannot be reassigned, (3) any alternative that required an organizational realignment could not result in the separation or down grade of any employee, and (4) the team's recommendations would be subject to union negotiation.

Some of the conflicts identified by the Team at the outset of the study were:

- It appeared that the organizational complaints were the inevitable outcome of (1) the broad range of user expertise and needs, (2) the open, distributed computer system, (3) the range of individual service provider aptitudes, and (4) the lack of service level agreements. The result was that there were as many different expectations of provided services as there were individual users.
- Private sector information Technology (IT) managers indicated that the lack of adequate controls and standardization eventually leads to poor service and high costs. Control was a significant cultural issue with the center, however, and most managers preferred to retain individual control over their employees systems.
- While the open system network enhances business productivity, it presents complete problems of design and implementation, including integration, administration, and management. This complexity has resulted in higher costs of operation, management, and training, because the open system network contains a wide variety of products from any different vendors.
- The systems should be managed to achieve best possible service for the user at lowest reasonable cost. There was considerable disagreement, however, on how to determine and handle costs of IT, where actual costs vary significantly based on individual cost

VA APPLICATION

This case study is a report of the value practitioners. The operative question being - of the many tools that are a part of the Value Method, which were the ones that contributed substantially to the positive outcome. One could then assert that the tools not highlighted were not important. This would be an incorrect assumption. All steps of the job plan need to be applied. However, additional tools applied to enhance job plan activities can have a significant impact.

In the VA effort to solve the problem, it was judged that four elements, implemented in proper sequence, stood out as key. This case study describes these key

elements and why these enhancements to the job plan made a difference.

The first key was the decision to move outside the realm of the cross-functional team. Although random sampling of a universe of users is more commonplace in team activities than in the past - it is still a new technique to many. It was determined that, due to the highly emotional nature of the problem - random sampling was not enough.

Effective framing of the problem required two phases. (A) TOP (Target Opportunity Panels) with a large number of users followed by (B) a complete sensing of attitudes of all users. In this way both qualitative, in depth, probing and quantitative confidence requirements would be met.

Panels were conducted with both providers and a cross-section of users involved. Six such panels were conducted. 185 features (likes) and 123 faults (dislikes) of the provider service were identified in total. The areas of concern and interest were gathered without any preconditioning by providers or panel facilitators. They were procured using open-ended questioning and with probing to provide the most detailed clarification possible.

The prime outcome was judged to be that (A) many key users had the opportunity to vent their emotions on the conflicting issues. This was done within a structure that prevented out of control counterproductive complaining. (B) The team was able to obtain clarified direction from users to help them determine where the "Value Mis-matches" in the system were occurring.

In addition, (C) word of mouth that accompanied the activity helped to minimize the informal negative opinions about the provider operation. It is true that the features and benefits were tabulated and helped the team to make valid decisions on proposals for improvement, but the involvement of some users, followed by questioning of all was key to settling everyone down.

Phase B, the sensing of all users within the organization, was implemented using the direction provided in the panels. This was the key to continuing the momentum started with the six TOP events. Additional questions addressing specific VA team concerns as well as demographic identifiers were added to the survey document. Seventeen questions on identified issues were made available to system users.

The next key element used to enhance the job plan was the sensing of management strategic direction.

Although, as users of the provider system, management was invited to respond to the universal questionnaire along with everyone else, more direction was needed. As organization management they had expectations for the outcome of the VA study. These were sometimes unclear, and needed clarification to allow the team to operate fully. Management had to live with the proposals and consequences of their impact.

The tool used to deal with this confusion was the Combinex Method. The team used a paired comparison technique to project what they thought their leadership meant by their initial instructions/requirements/vision. Management was then called in and forced (via the technique) to wrestle with their own criteria.

They agreed with the teams projections on some items and cleared up a few that turned out to be off base. But the key was, again, the expression of opinions that was enabled by the two phase procedure. Management was then pre-conditioned to accept proposals because they felt confidence that both they and the team were on the same page. Figure 1 shows the actual criteria and changed weightings.

The third key enhancement to the job plan was the introduction of PC Support provider "Experts". During the Evaluation Phase, area business managers who provide similar services to private sector operations were used as "sounding boards" (not second quessers) for the championed ideas of team members. At this point there were still a number of conflicting proposals and perceptions that the previous activities were unable to resolve. Hearing "reality" from private sector managers helped clarify and focus a number of nagging issues for team members. This activity also aided in reducing to almost zero the confrontational issues involved within the team. Once this activity was completed, they were ready to complete development of proposals, and make their presentation to management.

A final, deceptively simple communication tool was key to help management quickly comprehend each proposal. This was one of their informal requirements. An example of the proposal visuals are included in figures 2-5. This simple step aided considerably to an effective presentation of some extremely complex proposals.

CONCLUSION

Success sometimes breeds complacency. This is the plight for some VA projects. The PC Service problems described at the beginning could have easily fallen into

that trap. This government service center had great success at applying Value Methods to traditional applications. This problem, however, required more. A number of procedures added to, and helped changed the direction of the study at key times. It was judged by the value practitioners that these enhancements to the job plan were fundamental to the positive outcome. In overcoming a confrontational situation combined with a high emotional investment by users, and team members alike, effective tools are worth their weight in gold.

CRITERIA WEIGHTING PROCESS

PROJECT:	FUNCTION:	RAW SCORE (WEIGHT)	RANK
COMPONENT:	CRITERIA		
A.	Cost	13	8.1
B.	Timeframe	0	1.6
C.	Effect on IRS Staff	7	6.3
D.	Consistent with Attachment A (Restrictions/Guidelines)	16	10.0
E.	Address Identified Problems	5	3.1
F.	Acceptance (Union & Organizational)	7	6.3
G.	Reduce Complaints	15	9.4
H.			

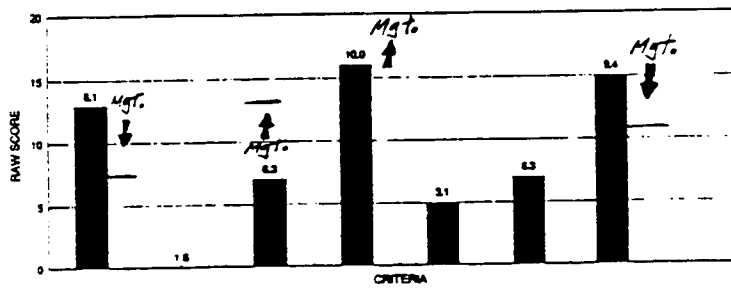


Figure 1: Criteria Evaluation with (live) Management changes

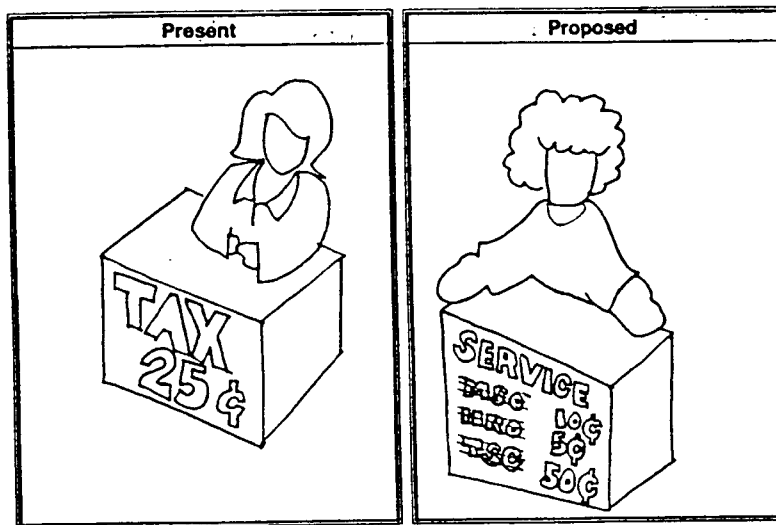


Figure 2: Team Presentation example

