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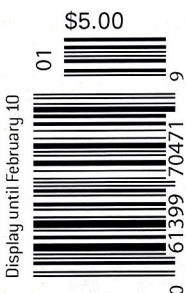
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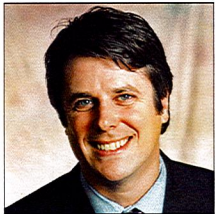
IS EMAIL SABOTAGING YOUR WORK?

By Harvey Schachter



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LEAN DYNAMITE FOR BACKLOGS



CRAIG SZELESTOWSKI

Lean thinking provides dynamite to clear away the spiral of steps leading to backlogs and prevent them from coming back once and for all.

Step 1. Increase in Incoming Demand

In Lean, variation in demand is one of the key “wastes”. I coached a public servant from a provincial Ministry of Transportation who had taken a Lean Facilitation course that I co-instruct. He was working with a program area process that granted renewals of permits for businesses to operate commercial vehicles. They had a backlog of over 4,000 files and a 90+ day waiting period to process renewals. Staff were stressed and clients, anxious to keep their businesses running, were unhappy with long delays. One of the

causes of the backlog was a variation in demand for permits during high seasons: April, when landscaping companies prepare their trucks for the new season and September, when snow-clearing companies do the same. Try as they might, staff in the Renewals process could not deal with this sudden increase in demand, and built up backlogs that they tried in vain to reduce before the next peak month hit.

Note that the seeds of backlogs are not only planted by unaddressed “high seasons”. An unanticipated reduction (or variation) in the number of staff available to perform even a steady amount of work can also lead to a backlog. Either way, the unaddressed variation in incoming client demand, or supply of staff to do the work, is where the spiral begins.

Ever feel like that ever-growing backlog of un-started or un-finished files has a life of its own? It can be hard to make progress on it, especially while clients keep calling, new requests come in and staff are busy creating backlog reports. You bring in temporary help to fix the problem but it doesn't help and you're left with low staff morale and an even larger backlog. If only you could blow up that backlog.

Others have and you can too – here's how.

How backlogs occur:

1. Increase in volume of work



2. Overwhelmed team, thus reduced productivity



3. Team spends its reduced capacity on non-value added, preventable, work

- Fixing errors
- Clarifications
- Re-drafting
- False starts
- Looking for information
- Unnecessary approvals
- Excessive processing




5. Fewer files finished, a growing backlog



4. Team spends capacity on:

- Client progress-chasing calls
- backlog reporting





Attention

The following are the busiest times every month

The first and last week of each month

The busiest days of each week are Monday, Friday and Saturday

Tuesday and Thursday are not quite as busy

Wednesday is the least busy day

Weekdays the busiest times are -
11:30 to 1:30 and
3:30 to 5 p.m.

What can you do about increases in demand?

- **Move demand to a “quieter” time of the year.** In our case study, the Department was able to use its existing legislation to require permit renewals at the same time as the vehicle registration, thus distributing demand more evenly across the year, outside of high season. Other units that we have worked with have strategically lengthened 12 month permits to shift renewals to quieter times (e.g. issuing 15 month instead of 12 month permits to place renewals a few months later, to quieter times of the year.)

- **“Nudge” demand to a “quieter” time.** With the note captured above, a staff member in a provincial service centre tried their own “nudge” to do this. I admire the heroics of the staffer

who posted this information on a bulletin board in the service centre. Senior Management: why not post this information publically so that clients can decide to move the timing of their request to a quieter time and benefit from a shorter wait?

- **Eliminate demand.** Some work finds its way into a process that shouldn't be there. It may be that certain types of demand are lower-risk and can be handled by a simpler process, or eliminated altogether.

Step 2. Overwhelm

Variation in demands creates a backlog which leads in turn to Overwhelm (or unreasonableness), another cardinal Lean waste. When an unaddressed increase in volume (or unaddressed decrease in staff availability) hits, it hits staff hard. The

There are eight Lean “Wastes” that can cause preventable work:

DEFECTS

When a piece of work must be corrected, or if it is missing information, or requires a clarification

OVERPRODUCTION

When the work is passed on to the next step in large volumes, then sits and waits, its data becoming out of date and has to be updated

WAITING

When the file stops and waits to be addressed, resulting in progress chasing calls.

NOT USING HUMAN TALENT

When people have the capability to add more value, but are not enabled to do so.

TRANSPORTATION

When the file has to be transported too far, increasing waiting and follow up .

INVENTORY

Piles of work accumulating, while the information in the files ages, needs to be updated, and client complaints must be answered.

MOTION

When people have to move too much to do the work.

EXCESSIVE PROCESSING

When the process is too complex, too many steps, requires too much effort to complete the work

natural physiological response is “fight or flight”. This response served us well long ago when the sight of a tiger in our cave triggered our brains to release cortisol and epinephrine boosting us to outrun the tiger, or at least outrun another human. Sadly for modern knowledge workers, these same hormones short circuit the deep thinking parts of our brain required to do the highest value added work. The only remaining brain functions unaffected are the taxonomic functions – making to-do lists – but not actually starting the tasks in the list. The effect of this is to reduce productivity, just at the moment when individuals and teams need to be at their most productive.

How can you reduce overwhelm?

- **Reduce incoming demand** (see Step 1.)
- **Cross-train to balance work assignments** – when high season hits, certain jobs are hit hardest. In the example of the commercial vehicle permit renewals process, the unit cross-trained staff to shift into the high-overwhelm roles, reducing overwhelm and maintaining productivity.
- **Simplify the process.** Eliminate the steps (and work) in the process that do not add value. In the renewals example extra printing, copying, cover sheets for files didn't add value and were designed out of the process, making it easier for staff to manage.
- **Eliminate preventable work** and the Eight Lean Wastes, covered in the next section.

Step 3. Team Spends its Capacity on Preventable Work

Preventable work, such as correcting errors or clarifying information, causes an unnecessary interruption to the process exacerbating the problem of backlogs. John Seddon calls this “Failure Demand”, demand on resources caused by a failure to do something, or do something correctly. By examining the profile of incoming calls, the renewals team in our example

discovered that the permit application forms were difficult to understand. Once they re-designed the form to be more user-friendly, and to reduce errors and clarification, a major proportion of the preventable work disappeared and presto, their capacity to reduce the backlog increased.

How can you reduce Preventable Work and the Eight Wastes?

- **Get a Lean mentor/facilitator** (public servant or an outside facilitator, with a solid track record in Lean Government) to lead an improvement session. The public servant leading the charge at the provincial ministry took a facilitator course that I co-led and led the process improvement event to create buy-in, map the process, identify the non-value steps and sources of Preventable Work, and to eliminate them using Lean thinking and the Lean toolkit.
- **Teach your team** about Preventable Work and the Eight Wastes – then create habits to eliminate them as second nature – the team in our case study began doing daily 10 minute stand-up meetings to identify and eliminate waste.

Step 4. Team Spends its Capacity on Client Progress Chasing and Backlog Reporting

Unhappy clients make phone calls or send emails to complain and ask for a status update on a file. This is pure preventable work created mainly by the failure of the process to deliver the final output as quickly as the client needs it. By speeding up the process, and using freed-up capacity to swiftly complete the job, you can reduce the number of incoming calls and blow up the backlog spiral.

How can you reduce the effort spent on Client progress chasing calls and backlog reporting?

- **Improve the process**, address variations in demand, reduce overwhelm,

eliminate preventable work so that clients get what they need faster.

Post-Script

Blowing up a backlog is usually a function of addressing three major factors:

1. Unaddressed increase in client demand or decrease in workforce supply, which causes
2. Overwhelm, reducing productivity, which is lowered further by
3. Preventable Work and non-value added activities which together, cause a downward spiral of growing backlogs and despair.

Eighteen months and several peak periods later, the team in the permit renewal process delivered renewals in three to five days, and the backlog has not returned. In fact, they found the inspiration and capacity to eliminate a backlog of over 1,000 files in a second process, reducing the waiting time for a permit for a first-time applicant from one month to a couple of days. All without investing in technology, headcount, or working harder.

They understood that to be sustainable, a one-time process improvement is not enough to eliminate a backlog forever. Without continuous improvement, backlogs can easily return. Processes, like nature, are subject to entropy – it takes energy and good habits to maintain a high level of performance or else performance (as actuaries say) regresses back to mediocrity, or chaos. In a future article we'll explain how to create and sustain good Lean habits to break the backlog spiral permanently. ☺

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