

EFFICIENT WORK FLOW: THE HAPPINESS FACTOR

What does efficient work flow and happiness have in common? I would suggest everything.

I have noticed, from my 10 years of being on the floors of service oriented organisations that one of the factors that contribute to workplace happiness is flow. I am not one for the trite or hype but I have seen time and time again the happiness effect. Happy staff, happy customers, happy managers, happy business owners.

To Flow or Not to Flow

Efficient work flows simply mean that everything flows with minimal obstruction. See my illustrations below.

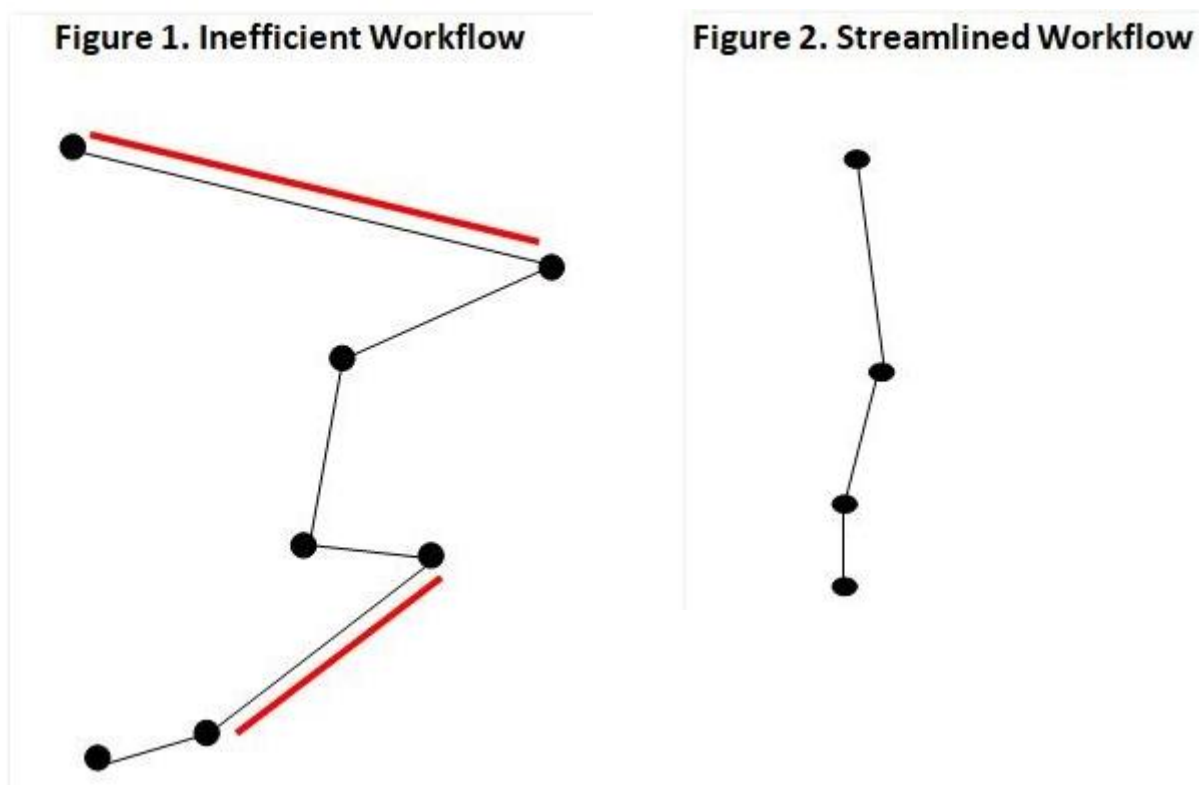


Figure 1 - demonstrates what I see in many places and also what I personally experience as a customer. The workflow simply has too many process points in the system - relating to people and their relevant tasks. And often, it can resemble a google map showing the red lines of slow or jammed traffic.

Figure 2 - is the ideal state. Though there will still be people and related tasks along the work flow course, there is minimal obstruction, duplication elimination, increased automation with the goal of total free flow.

You will also notice here that the 7 process points and length of process time as shown in Figure 1 have been consolidated into the 4 points in Figure 2 and has been considerably shortened.

Effects of Slow Flow

Those organisations that are experiencing the obstacle driven flow as per figure 1 generally exhibit the following:

- Unhappy staff
- Dissatisfied customers
- Increased complaints

- High error rates resulting in higher rework rates resulting in lost productivity...
- Invoicing delays
- Diminished cashflow and profitability
- Increased lead times to job starts
- Reactive / urgent work culture

I could go on but probably the most important point to add, is that this kind of inefficiency can drive staff and business owners to the brink of disgruntled exhaustion (and over the edge in some cases).

The Streamlined Workflow Happiness Factor

Firstly, if you take the effects of inefficient workflows from the bullet points above and create their opposite, they will be some of the results from a streamlined process. However, the effects on those that have taken the time to streamline flow have been:

- They start to smile;
- They walk with a greater ease. You sense a weight has been lifted off their shoulders;
- They are happy because their staff are happy;
- They are happy because cashflow is better;
- They are happy because they don't have to work as long hours or juggle so many balls in the air at once;
- They can start doing the things that they have delayed for years;
- Their happiness returns.

Here are some actual statements from businesses I have helped through this process.

...we had significant challenges and bottlenecks in the areas of paperwork and cashflow. I felt like I was behind all the time. Over a period of a few months, systems were created and implemented, our tradesmen adopted the new way of doing things, invoicing was happening quicker and the chaos started to ease.

...we have achieved a more fully process driven business with significant reductions in turnaround time frames, particularly relating to administration, with quoting times reduced by half. Increased role and responsibility clarification of staff and management along with the introduction of a new job management system.

From Chaos To Calm

Lastly, the other interesting effect I have also observed from those who are in the process of going from chaos to calm (or who have done the journey) is that we often have to begin the sometimes emotional wrenching process of redefining who we are and what this 'new' life of ours is going to look like.

While we have been working 80+ hour weeks, rarely taking holidays and always putting out fires, we have had little space to do anything else than work, sleep and eat, let alone think. Then, when things start to flow, time is freed up and we are not in chaos mode, inner-world thoughts and feelings start to surface that have always been there, but were just waiting to get our attention.

This process that I have seen many go through and experienced it myself, while not seen as an immediately 'happy state' (given how shitty we can feel on the emotional and physical recovery journey), is the beginning of a whole new season of life; one where work doesn't define who we are nor suck the life out of us but where the happiness factor takes on a whole new meaning in a more deliberately lived, wholehearted life.

Ray Hodge speaks and consults to businesses and organisations, a notable event being the Department of the Australian Prime Minister and Cabinet. His emphasis is on improving critical efficiencies to dramatically increase key results. He has coached and provided consulting services to leaders and teams for over 25 years.