

Business process management

How human services programs can make time for what really matters

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Two perspectives on a more streamlined and accessible program

Imagine walking into a human services program looking for assistance to support your family—you are stressed, tired, and nervous. At this challenging time in your life, you attend an orientation and meet with your case manager. All they ask is that you complete a couple of forms and a short assessment. They help you set goals and connect you with relevant services and opportunities. Your conversations focus on who you are and what you want to do, not where you have been. They don't ask you to complete a stack of administrative forms. You have a sigh of relief at being connected to the services you sought without having to document or share your life's story yet again. How would you feel as a participant?

Now imagine yourself as a human services case manager. You have minimal paperwork and assessment information for your participants to complete. This opens up time for you to hold deeper conversations with them, meeting them where they are and tailoring their services to their needs. You have a manageable caseload size, and systems help you do your job rather than adding redundancy and burden. Your job feels easier, and you see both your impact on participants and how your work fits into the goals of the program. How would you feel as a case manager? ▲

Human services programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), can improve the experiences of participants and staff by using strategies from the field of business process management¹. Business process management can help human services programs assess their processes and practices to understand what is working well and where they can make improvements to strengthen service delivery^{2, 3}. Some examples include streamlining paperwork and operations, refining program documentation, leveraging technology, and clarifying staff and organizational roles for service coordination and delivery. Recent applications of business process management strategies by various human services programs show promise for improving the outcomes of families and children by reducing sources of stress and boosting satisfaction for both participants and staff. There is also potential for these strategies to free up staff time to build more responsive relationships with participants and have more opportunities for skill building, which in turn could improve self-regulation skills—otherwise known as life management skills that have the potential to help people cope with stress and move toward employment⁴.

The role of business in human services

As a human services practitioner, you probably work in a public or nonprofit setting and may not think of your work as a traditional business. However, in the context of business process management, the term “business” is used to describe the ways you operate and carry out your responsibilities to deliver services. ▲

Over the past five years, Mathematica has used business process management with TANF and other human services practitioners across the country. Those practitioners have described how business process management has improved staff satisfaction and participant experience and praised its value as a way to support building and using data and evidence (Table 1). This brief shares examples of human services

programs that have applied business process management strategies in partnership with technical assistance (TA) providers and gives an overview of how programs can undertake similar work to strengthen service delivery. It concludes by providing additional resources related to business process management to support practitioners on their continuous quality improvement journey.

Table 1. Examples and benefits of business process management described by human services programs

Business process management strategy	Potential business process management changes	What do programs that have used business process management say about its potential benefits for staff?	What do programs that have used business process management say about its potential benefits for participants?
Streamline paperwork and operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplify forms • Improve forms' readability by revising their layout and format • Streamline orientations and intake processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced administrative burden • Created more time to meet participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced burden and trauma related to repetitive, invasive questions • Reduced confusion • Increased satisfaction
Refine program processes and policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly define roles • Align processes with program goals • Update program manuals • Create clear job descriptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created meaningful partnerships between staff • Helped manage workloads • Defined staff roles and expectations • Identified staff skill sets to support the job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided a more cohesive program experience
Leverage technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement user-friendly data systems • Create easy-to-access reports • Allow digital or online submissions and signatures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced administrative burden • Allowed for easier use of data • Created better process for coordinating service delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralized and secured information • Reduced time spent on paperwork and administrative functions • Made services more accessible
Coordinate service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop communication plans, strategies, and systems • Focus on creating warm hand-offs (meaning a direct connection to a person) • Identify needs and challenges proactively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased referrals between partners and programs • Improved response times • Promoted better collaboration between staff • Strengthened partnerships and communication • Supported positive team culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swiftly connected to needed services upon request • Made services more accessible • Increased participant engagement • Increased satisfaction

Note: The benefits are based on feedback from human services leaders who engaged in business process management activities in partnership with Mathematica.

Human services programs have used business process management to transform and strengthen service delivery and improve program experiences

Many business process management efforts start when a program finds that a service or policy change is not having the impact staff and leaders hoped for. For example, programs implementing a new service delivery strategy can experience challenges when their business processes no longer align with or support their new service delivery model. By transforming business processes, programs can improve experiences for staff and participants.

This was the case for one county human services program that administers TANF, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program employment and training program, and a range of other employment and training services. The program found that staff did not have sufficient time to implement their new employment coaching model because they were hindered by cumbersome processes and requirements. In collaboration with a TA provider, the program analyzed more than 200 documents across six workforce programs to eliminate forms and data elements that were not required or that did not add value. They also redesigned forms in a visually appealing way that improved readability and promoted a consistent format and color scheme—in other words, branding. Wherever possible, the program looked to align paperwork across its programs to eliminate duplicate data collection and move toward a more coordinated service model. A program leader noted that these changes “helped [the program] reduce the paperwork burden for individuals who engage in [its] federal workforce programs while streamlining processes for staff without compromising compliance standards for these programs.”

Other human services programs have focused their business process management efforts on revamping their program processes and policies. For example, a program administering TANF and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in a large, urban city found that their procurement department took too long to process contracts and there were too many hand-offs in the process. In collaboration with a TA provider, the program examined, revised, developed, and tested new policies and procedures for On-the-Job Training (OJT) contracts. They also created a procurement assistant position to increase ownership and streamline the process. This staff member ensured that the workflow moved forward.



Improvement culture

“These efforts have helped to streamline our services and save staff time. Customers appreciate the simplicity of our new forms and orientation materials. We continue to focus on Lean philosophies and continuous process improvement, as this has become part of the culture with our staff.”

—Human services program case manager

How human services programs can engage in business process management

Human services programs can use the [Learn, Innovate, Improve \(LI²\) framework](#) to guide their business process management activities. The LI² framework gives practitioners a systematic, evidence-informed approach to improving service delivery and programming. This framework provides the structure for identifying a problem, developing and testing potential solutions, refining the solutions, and retesting them until the program is satisfied with the result. For a business process management strategy, programs will want to:



Learn about the current state of operations, which processes and procedures are working well, and which processes and procedures could be improved; assess organizational readiness and motivation for change.



Innovate strategies to address the challenges identified during the Learn phase without sacrificing what works well. Programs can identify quick wins to tackle right away while saving resource-intensive strategies for later, if needed.



Improve on the innovation by testing and refining the strategies developed. This is a critical part of any change process, but especially with business processes. Solutions to one problem could pose other problems downstream. Programs should take time to learn what isn't working, innovate a solution, and test again.

Using LI² to do business process management takes persistence, organization, time, and a willingness to try again and again. Table 2 provides an example of how a human services program could use LI² to do business process management to improve program paperwork. It also shows real-life examples of strategies used by these programs to engage in business process management in partnership with a TA provider. Learn more about how to move through the three phases of LI² through the [LI² practice guide](#), and find more on streamlining paperwork [in this brief](#).

Table 2. How to use LI² to do business process management to improve program paperwork: A paperwork reduction example

LI ² phase	Example steps
Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Assess the organization's readiness for change. (See this toolkit for more information.)Define what success would look like for your program at the end of your business process management work.Develop a working group to lead the effort, composed of staff in different positions or at different levels.Collect and build a matrix of all forms being used in your program.Develop a consistent list of questions to use when you talk with staff about which forms they use and don't use, which ones add value or burden, and what the recommendations are for improvement.Consider other forms of data collection, such as shadowing or surveys.Analyze forms and data collected from staff to identify themes.Understand state policy for requesting changes to state-required forms.Summarize recommendations from the Learn phase.

LI ² phase	Example steps
Innovate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss recommendations as a team. Make decisions about forms (which to eliminate, combine, streamline, keep as is, etc.). Consider incorporating research findings from behavioral science. Think about your audience, the action you want them to take, and how best to reach them. Consider integrating behavioral nudges that can aid you in achieving your goals. For more information, see this guide for practitioners. Create program brand, including color scheme and layout. Redesign forms using consistent branding. Streamline language to improve readability. Determine whether any processes need to change because of the paperwork redesign.
Improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify staff to pilot the redesigned forms on a small scale (meaning testing one small change with a few staff). Develop a road test plan that includes learning objectives, timeline, and data collection approach. Train staff on the redesigned forms and processes. Collect data to determine how the redesigned forms are working. Summarize findings and make recommendations for refinements. Repeat!

How a human services program addressed challenges experienced by case managers using business process management

After a TANF program implemented a new employment coaching model, case managers reported not having sufficient time to follow the model. As a result, the program undertook a business process management effort to identify the root cause. Through a series of interviews with case managers and their supervisors during the Learn phase, the TA provider identified administrative burden as limiting the time case managers had to invest with program participants. The program and its TA provider co-created a solution during the Innovate stage. They created a new position, compliance specialist, who would take ownership of administrative activities and work in tandem with case managers. Through a series of meetings, they reallocated responsibilities from the case manager role to the compliance specialist. Because it was difficult to know how these positions would need to work together to ensure solid communication and coordination, the program moved directly to the Improve phase to pilot the new position on a small-scale and develop practices on the ground. The TA provider conducted observations and interviews with case managers and the compliance specialist to identify what worked well and what needed refinement. The program tested this model over the course of several months before finalizing a job description for the compliance specialist, writing guidance in their program operations manual about how case managers and compliance specialists work together, and expanding the pilot to the rest of the program. ▶

Looking forward

Business practices can affect a program's ability to deliver services that make a difference in their clients' lives. Strong practices can allow programs to invest their time and energy in the thing that matters—helping families thrive. Human services programs can use business process management to address challenges in their program, such as having too much paperwork; a lack of consistency in practices across programs or partners; and confusion or overlap in staff roles. The human services program staff who have worked with Mathematica to revise their business processes shared how business process management helped them improve communication with participants, reduce burden on participants and staff, and increase participants' engagement in program services. Business process management, when used in partnership with a structured learning framework (such as LI^2 ¹), can help programs continuously improve their practices, assess what is working and what is not over time, and modify their approach as needed. Implementing business process management in human services programs can help unlock the potential of human services delivery by promoting business practices that work hand-in-hand with service delivery instead of operating as obstacles. When that happens, both staff and participants can benefit.



Business process management in action

"Our goal was to change the mindset of the youth we serve, as we noticed many of them were just looking to receive cash assistance and not quite understanding the required steps or the additional benefits of enrolling into the program. This led to updating several key forms to make them more appealing to the youth we serve, [including] adding images and simplifying the language ... to get straight to the point."

—Human services program case manager

References

¹ Other frameworks that individuals and organizations can use to improve their business processes include Lean, Six Sigma, and Total Quality Management.

² Gartner. "Business Process Management." <https://www.gartner.com/en/information-technology/glossary/business-process-management-bpm>. n.d.

³ Benedict, Tony, Nancy Bilodeau, Phil Vitkus, Emmett Powell, Emmett, Dan Morris, Marc Scarsig, Denis Lee, Gabrielle Field, Todd Lohr, and Raju Saxena. *BPM CBOK Version 3.0: Guide to the Business Process Management Common Body of Knowledge*. 9781490516592.

⁴ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. "Building Core Capabilities for Life: The Science Behind the Skills Adults Need to Succeed in Parenting and in the Workplace." 2016.