Value Stream Maps in the Enterprise: Living Business Documentation to Drive Transformation Success

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All business benefits from documenting its key processes, logic, requirements, data flows, and key procedures. Documentation has value to users, customers, vendors, regulators, and the business itself by explaining how the corporation functions, what it creates, in what way, and for whom.

The thorny question is: how much documentation, at what level, for whom, and at what cost? Agile and traditional enterprises now solve this question very differently.

Traditional business process work often relies on highly trained BAs (business analysts) or even architects, who often sit monk-like in silos, using dedicated software – think Visio – and abstract symbolic languages to create documentation. Most common has been BPMN (Business Process Model and Notation), a complex system of 100+ symbols to document business processes and flows in detail.

Leafing through these thick documents quickly reveals their downsides: the abstract complex symbolic language frustrates the average business person, vendor or new hire. It's hard to understand. The documents are almost impossible to maintain and update in a timely way in our world of accelerating change, meaning most documents are out-of-date. They're no longer accurate, useful or fit for purpose.

The specialized staff are high-value, expensive hires; paying a large fleet of them to create and try to maintain these detailed documents proves costly. Further, the amount of documentation requires an expensive dedicated repository system to manage; the documents' size makes them difficult to consult if a user needs to pull a detail out. Crucially, the sheer volume of documents paradoxically obscures how the business actually works, what it makes, and for whom.

Today's AI or specialized search tools fail to alleviate the issue. These systems require more specialized staff and more systems to buy, set up, train, and maintain. This piles cost on top of cost, requiring more specialists for more software. Managing this complexity becomes a nightmare for the business. It's a mountain of untenable waste to hold largely outdated documents with inert information.

In contrast, while **Agile** understands that documentation is necessary and helpful, it seeks to slash the waste in this traditional business documentation, to improve everyone's understanding of the functioning of the business, to show what the work is like today, to clarify who the customers are, and to deliver value to them earlier.

The Agile Manifesto takes a firm stand: "Working software over comprehensive documentation," an idea applicable to services, activities and products not necessarily software-based. Whatever the enterprise creates, agility makes its working and value delivery the key focus, rather than wasteful documentation. So what does non-wasteful enterprise business process documentation look like?

Seeking techniques for just-enough, Agilists now turn to **Value Stream Mapping**, a Lean practice, to address the issues above. Value Stream mapping is a dynamic, co-creative and self-teaching method for the business to visualize the current state of "how the corporation functions, what it creates, in what way, and for whom."

The outcome? Producing a living, easy-to-read, easy-to-maintain and easy-to-understand picture kept visibly in the workplace or obeya room and reviewed every quarter. Unlike BPMN, value-stream maps use 12 simple, clear symbols or less.

Also unlike traditional documentation, which relies on the specialists, BAs, and architects who interview just a few employees sitting within their own silos and who may never understand where their work fits into value delivery, Value Stream Mapping brings staff representation from the right areas of the business together, often for the first time, to co-document their current flow of work at the right level of detail: not too much, not too little. The staff exposes and learns together how the business truly works now, what it makes, and for whom, in real time.

Their agenda tackles two key questions: "Moving from the customer backwards to the originator of the idea, product or service, who is involved? And how do they interact?" Their artefact resembles a stream or river, a digital, paper or cards-and-string map of the full value effort: materials, data, movement, and locations or roles. An advantage of this map – absent from much non-manufacturing enterprise documentation – is the addition of work-time for each step to the diagram.

The Liberating Structure Ecocycle Planning is often used to kickstart this workshop, which may take an afternoon, a day or even two. This is still cheaper than maintaining a large staff of specialists and the software to support traditional documentation, document repositories, and document search for many years.

And unlike traditional documentation – often a linear depiction of in-house work rarely including customers – value stream maps show how modern enterprise work is not always linear, but often circular – tracing back from the customer to start with the customer. This increases the firm's customer-centricity.

With a right-level map in play, even a short review reveals opportunities for improvement for all to see. They can then meet again to create a future-state map, identifying improvements they can work towards making. Continuous improvement(CI) naturally takes hold as they repeat this process quarter by quarter. This accelerates the drive to business agility and transformation, as the business optimizes its own flow of work together, avoiding the perils of local optimization.

New roles emerge, like Value Stream Manager. As business teams reconfigure, silos melt, so interdependencies and hand-offs decrease. Leadership, IT, HR and Finance must prepare to flex and adapt as the firm streamlines to face the customer.

A main disadvantage: Beneath the value stream map, some traditional documentation may be still required for regulatory or certification compliance. Still, the benefits of agility will likely outweigh these continuing costs.