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The Dangers of Change Approval Processes

Change is a constant in any organization, especially in today's rapidly evolving technological and business landscape. Properly managed change can lead to increased efficiency, innovation, and improved competitiveness. However, the processes designed to manage and approve these changes, particularly Change Approval Processes (CAPs), can sometimes become a significant impediment to progress and even pose dangers to the organization's overall health. While intended to mitigate risk and ensure stability, poorly designed or overly bureaucratic CAPs can stifle innovation, create bottlenecks, and ultimately undermine the very goals they were intended to achieve. This paper explores the dangers of poorly implemented change approval processes, drawing upon external sources to illustrate these risks.

1. Stifled Innovation and Reduced Agility:

Perhaps the most significant danger of cumbersome CAPs is their tendency to stifle innovation. When change requests are subjected to lengthy reviews, multiple layers of approval, and excessive documentation requirements, employees are discouraged from proposing new ideas. This is particularly damaging in organizations that rely on rapid innovation to maintain a competitive edge.

As pointed out in a Deloitte Insights article, "Agile change management: How to navigate the next normal," overly rigid change processes can hinder agility and slow down an organization's response to market changes. The article states: "Organizations with overly complex and bureaucratic change approval processes often struggle to adapt quickly to new opportunities or threats. This can lead to missed opportunities, lost market share, and ultimately, a decline in competitiveness." (Deloitte Insights, 2020)

Furthermore, long approval cycles can render a proposed change obsolete by the time it is finally approved. The world moves fast, and a change that was relevant and beneficial six months ago might be irrelevant or even detrimental today. The fear of navigating a complex and time-consuming approval process can lead to a culture of risk aversion, where employees prioritize maintaining the status quo over pursuing innovative solutions.

2. Increased Costs and Delays:

The complexity and length of CAPs directly translate into increased costs and delays. Time spent preparing and submitting change requests, attending approval meetings, and managing documentation can significantly impact employee productivity. Moreover, delayed changes can result in missed deadlines, increased project costs, and frustrated customers.

An article by ServiceNow, "The True Cost of Poor Change Management," highlights the financial impact of inefficient change processes. "Poor change management can lead to project failures, production outages, and security breaches. These incidents can result in significant financial losses, including lost revenue, regulatory fines, and reputational damage." (ServiceNow, n.d.)

Moreover, the indirect costs associated with demoralized employees who are constantly frustrated by bureaucratic hurdles can be substantial. This frustration can lead to decreased job satisfaction, increased employee turnover, and a general decline in morale.

3. Increased Shadow IT and Workarounds:

When legitimate channels for implementing changes are perceived as too slow or cumbersome, employees may resort to "shadow IT" or other workarounds. Shadow IT refers to the use of unauthorized hardware, software, or services to bypass official IT channels. While employees may be motivated by a desire to improve efficiency or solve a problem, shadow IT introduces significant security risks, compliance issues, and data integration challenges.

A Gartner article, "The Dangers of Shadow IT and How to Avoid Them," emphasizes the security risks associated with shadow IT. "Shadow IT can create significant security vulnerabilities, as unauthorized applications and devices are often not subject to the same security controls as officially sanctioned IT resources. This can make organizations more vulnerable to cyberattacks and data breaches." (Gartner, 2023)

Similarly, employees may develop ad-hoc workarounds to circumvent cumbersome change approval processes. These workarounds can introduce inconsistencies, errors, and ultimately undermine the integrity of the organization's systems and processes.

4. Reduced Visibility and Control:

Ironically, overly complex CAPs can actually reduce visibility and control over the changes being implemented within an organization. When employees circumvent official channels or resort to shadow IT, management loses sight of what changes are being made and the potential risks they pose. This lack of visibility can make it difficult to manage risk, enforce compliance, and maintain the integrity of the organization's IT infrastructure.

5. Increased Technical Debt:

Finally, poorly designed CAPs can contribute to the accumulation of technical debt. Technical debt refers to the implied cost of rework caused by choosing an easy solution now instead of using a better approach that would take longer. When change requests are rushed through the approval process or when employees resort to quick fixes to bypass cumbersome procedures, the result is often poorly implemented solutions that create long-term maintenance and integration challenges. This can lead to increased costs and complexity in the future.

Conclusion:

While Change Approval Processes are essential for managing risk and ensuring stability, they can also present significant dangers if not designed and implemented effectively. Overly complex or bureaucratic CAPs can stifle innovation, increase costs, encourage shadow IT, reduce visibility, and contribute to the accumulation of technical debt. To mitigate these risks, organizations should strive to create agile and streamlined change approval processes that balance the need for control with the need for speed and innovation. This includes regularly reviewing and simplifying the approval process, empowering employees to make decisions at lower levels of the organization, and investing in tools and technologies that automate and streamline the change management process. By taking these steps, organizations can harness the power of change while minimizing the risks associated with poorly designed change approval processes.

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