

Case Study: Lean Transformation for Courts

HM Courts Service has been at the forefront of Lean in the public sector, developing a robust Lean programme throughout the organisation. When it was introduced it was estimated that it would take over three years to break even between the investment made and the benefits returned – in fact it took just a year. **Lisa Nother**, HMCS' Lean Programme Manager, explains how this has been achieved and looks at how the Programme has brought other benefits to the agency too.



HMCS first became acquainted with Lean in early 2007 when the South East region began trialling short Lean improvement (kaizen) events as a means of enabling courts to manage their business better in spite of financial limitations. This achieved quick results and a small number of other parts of the agency also adopted the approach.

There was an increasing need for the Ministry of Justice (HMCS's parent organisation) to reduce operating costs and to preserve service standards, avoid falling service standards. HMCS needed to find out if Lean could benefit the wider business. To this end, a three-month pilot study was undertaken in May 2008 – led by consultants – at three large court centres, covering administrative functions in the civil, magistrates' and Crown court jurisdictions. The study identified substantial opportunity for improvement, resulting in an HMCS-wide Lean programme being set up in Autumn 2008.

HMCS Change Agents

To avoid spending excessive amounts of money on Lean consultancy, it was decided that HMCS would build its own Lean capability. Each region has trained a number of staff as Lean change agents using the Ministry of Justice's Lean Academy. This has been a significant achievement, ensuring that we have the know-how to keep improving in the longer term.

Change agents have driven Lean change in the business. Their role is to lead Lean implementation events in courts lasting from two to eight weeks, depending on the court's size. They work with a small team of staff within each court, using a set of Lean tools to identify waste in processes, and to work towards improving the quality of the service the court delivers.

Visual Management and Standardisation of Procedures

Two important tools used by change agents are visual management and standardisation of work processes.

Team Information Boards (TIBs) visually display information about team workload, performance and plans for improvement. They highlight any issues and so are excellent management tools. TIBs are also a good means of communication within a team – and courts use them to hold daily team meetings to discuss handling of work.

The Lean programme has introduced Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which document administrative processes, taking best practice from across the business and sharing it to reduce wasteful activity. This has raised standards to a common platform, upon which improvement can be based. SOPs are mandatory. Resulting cases in the magistrates' courts has improved so that within a month of implementing the SOP, the average time-saving for courts per month is around eighty hours of staff time. This is a huge improvement for HMCS, and for court users.

As well as introducing Lean tools, change agents have played an important role in engaging staff and encouraging problem solving. Developing a culture of continuous improvement and increasing the quality of the service delivered to court users is crucial for the sustainability of Lean within HMCS.

Lean is being introduced in all 500 courts over three years. Covering such a large number of sites over such a short space of time (more than 320 courts in the 21 months so far) has been a challenge and a steep learning curve for all involved.

Once courts have begun using Lean, progress is monitored. The 'tipping point' measure has been devised to show when courts are at a stage in their journey where they no longer require intensive support.

Courts that reach the tipping point can begin to refer to the Shingo Model for Operational Excellence to define their next steps for ongoing improvement.

Shingo is a prestigious Lean award seen as an international 'gold standard'. For more information, visit: <http://www.shingoprize.org/>

As the agency's financial position has become more stringent, it has been essential to demonstrate the impact of Lean. At the outset, it was estimated that it would take over three years to break even between the investment made and the benefits returned. In actuality, the programme broke even after a year.

While Lean has undoubtedly brought financial benefits, it has also yielded a range of qualitative benefits. Standardising work has improved productivity and helped focus more on activities that add value, while staff feel more engaged and empowered by having the chance to shape decisions about the way they work.

Lean Innovation

There are countless examples of local Lean innovation.

In the South West region, staff and change agents brought together a range of problem-solving tools to create a space for staff to take time out to focus on improvement. This is now used across HMCS.

A magistrates' court in the Midlands documented its own approach to processing legal aid means-testing applications, which formed the basis of what is now a SOP.

A South East magistrates' court removed duplicate checking from one process and stopped using auto-generated letters with a resultant saving of £4,000.

All courts have revised the way files are archived following the initiative of one court with large savings in space and financial terms.

A model Lean court has been developed, offering a powerful 'go and see' opportunity. Every team in the court uses a TIB, problem solving is a routine part of the approach to working, standard processes are in place and the entire office is structured to improve the way that work flows in order to maximise productivity and the service provided to court users.

In 2009, HMCS began working with a small number of Local Criminal Justice Boards to assess the potential for Lean improvement across the Criminal Justice System. This showed huge scope to improve system capacity and further work has been done since towards developing a 'toolkit' for other LCJBs wishing to do the same.

Staff Commitment Key to Success

It has not all been plain sailing, however. There was early concern that Lean meant reducing staff numbers, but clear messages and positive experiences helped staff to understand that Lean is about improving the way we work and helping the courts to live within reduced means.

More recently, a challenge has been to match resources to demand for events and new SOPs. This has been handled by offering more guidance and materials for courts to use before their official Lean implementation event, refining the SOP development process.

Lean is a powerful methodology, but the commitment of staff has been key to its success within HMCS, and is viewed as vital to enabling HMCS to meet financial and operational challenges by both the past Chief Executive, Chris Mayer, and her successor, Peter Handcock. Also invaluable has been the sponsorship of Keith Budgen, Regional Director for the South East, who has championed Lean from the start. The central programme team and change agents - who have devoted working and personal time to implementing and learning about Lean - have driven the programme "relentlessly" forward, as Zoe Radnor observed in her evaluation of our approach to implementing Lean.

Our greatest future challenges are making Lean sustainable, and embedding it in our culture. We will do this by ensuring staff at all levels have a proper understanding of Lean principles and how to manage Lean systems. We also need to ensure Lean permeates all parts of the organisation - not just the frontline, as the focus has been hereto. Lean must become part of our organisational strategy for the future.

Lisa has been a part of HMCS's Lean Programme since 2008, playing a key role in the development of Standard Operating Procedures, and she has been Programme Manager since August 2010. Prior to this, Lisa was an operational court manager in the South West of England.

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