

Is it a Process or a Procedure? Understanding the Difference

We continuously work with clients to [develop new systems](#) to help them run their business smoothly. However, creating a system isn't always a simple task. Every system requires a plan of action, resources, and personnel to implement it. It often helps to think about systems as a combination of processes and procedures, and many managers don't really understand the difference between the two.

A [process](#) is a high-level operation that spans the organization. A process consists of various functions and defines the step-by-step protocol or series of actions necessary to accomplish a specific task or objective. Thought of another way, a process is how you define the steps needed to achieve the objective. The process also outlines what is needed to achieve the end result, including different departments and resources within the organization.

A [procedure](#), on the other hand, is more detailed and lower level, defining the specific protocol to accomplish part of the process. The procedure outlines the order of specific steps required to achieve an end result, and a series of procedures taken together make up a process.

Successful systems bring together processes and procedures in a way that defines them as a set of instructions.

So a process is cross-functional, defining what is done and by whom. It is typically defined as a flow chart or a decision tree, where one step logically leads to another step or activity. There are triggering events that lead to a choice in the decision tree, all designed to lead to a desired result or outcome.

Within the process, specific procedures are defined, outlining how a specific task is to be done and who performs that task. Included as part of the process are metrics for successful completion.

When you break down the process into a set of defined procedures, those procedures become work instructions. The instructions define multiple procedures and the roles of various individuals responsible for those procedures, so when they come together they define a successful process.

Your success at defining [processes, procedures, and instructions](#) will ultimately determine the success of your business system. You have to use processes and procedures together, outlining process diagrams with procedural detail to implement the diagrams, showing the steps in the process to which the procedures refer. Using this approach, the staff gets a greater understanding of the context and implications of a cross-functional process, and how each procedure contributes to that process. Note that a well-written procedure with a lot of detail often can alleviate the need for complex instructions.

Developing business systems, understanding how to break down processes and procedures will go

a long way toward defining the systems that are essential to any operation.