Systemize Your Firm: Building a Process-Based Business

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify a project manager for the implementation of a process plan.
- Discuss process templates and determine a storage system with the project manager before involving the team.
- Notify the team members who will take part in the process documentation initiative.
- Identify process needs in your firm.
- Create a comprehensive & useful process manual for your organization
- Build your defined processes in technology systems for repeatable and trackable execution
- Incorporate an ongoing process review plan.

Overview:

One of the most critical pieces to building a solid foundation for growth is systematizing your firm: creating and documenting processes for all important activities in your business. Building a process-based business does five major things:

1. Helps ensure a top-notch, consistent experience for your clients, no matter who they are working with
2. Saves your team time and mental energy by not having to “reinvent the wheel” for activities that are repeated often
3. Makes simple activities easier to automate, allowing your team to focus on the things that only they can do
4. Helps you get new team members up and running quickly
5. Allows firm leaders to focus on the big picture, by giving them peace of mind that the details are taken care of

The high-level steps are:

- **Step 1:** Plan the initiative by identifying a project manager, making a few key decisions, getting your team on board, and completing a process inventory

- **Step 2:** Launch the project by assigning project owners and documenting processes
- **Step 3:** Leverage technology to automate process and build repeatable workflows
- **Step 4:** Wrap-up the initial process documentation initiative and develop a regular process update schedule

Step 1: Plan Your Systemization Initiative

When embarking on your project to systematize your firm, a critical first step is identifying a project manager and champion. This is typically someone on your team with an excellent eye for detail and passion for organization and structure, likely an operations associate, client service specialist, or Director of Operations. Bring them in to the project early so that they can bring their expertise in setting the foundation for success.

Once you've identified your project manager, work together to make some key decisions about how processes will be formatted, what high-level categories will be used for organization, and where your manual will be stored. We've provided a ***Sample Process Template*** as a reference, but some firms may want to use a slightly different format or categories. Whatever format you choose, make sure the basics are covered in the template you create.

At the process level, include:

1. Process title
2. A short description about when it should be followed, and what initiates the process
3. What category the process falls in
4. Any keywords or phrases that might make it easier to search for
5. When the process was last updated, and by whom
6. A list of tasks that should be followed

All steps in a process should include three critical details:

1. WHAT the task is
2. WHEN it should be completed
3. WHO is responsible for completing it

Your process manual can be stored in any number of ways and in any number of systems, but remember, it should be easy for team members to find the process they are looking for relatively quickly. Possible solutions for storing your manual include:

- Cloud-based "notebook" software like Evernote or OneNote
- Editable documents or spreadsheets in cloud-based systems like Dropbox, OneDrive, or Google Drive
- Cloud-based knowledge-base software

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- CRM knowledge base or storage functionality

COACH TIP: A process is only good if your team can find it and it's up-to-date! Make sure the system you select to store your process manual is easily-searchable, accessible from everywhere your team could need to work, and easily updated. Bonus if the system includes version history!

Now that you have a couple of key details down, it's time to set the stage with your team. Asking your team to document every process and function they perform can raise alarm bells if you don't give them relevant context. After all, if your boss randomly walked in one day and told you that you needed to write down how you do everything you do, you might start wondering if you needed to be searching for a new job!

Bring your team together and share why this is an important initiative — it will support a better client experience, free them up to do things they are uniquely qualified to do, and help in training their replacements as the firm grows and they're promoted to new levels of responsibility. Yes, the processes are also there just in case someone gets hit by the proverbial bus — but make it clear that this is about building a foundation for growth, not about replacing a team member in a job they love and do well.

After you've provided context for your team, let the project manager lead in sharing the sample process templates and where the manual will be stored. Ask the team for input on the process template — did you miss anything important? Would someone relatively qualified be able to read the process and complete the task without error?

Then, using the ***12 Areas to Systematize*** resource as a guide, ask your team to identify any processes that are not currently in written form or those that are documented but need to be updated. You'll likely need to either block off a good amount of time to work through this exercise together, or ask team members to complete the exercise for the tasks specific to their role and send the list to the project manager. Create a master list of processes that need to be documented/updated and then prioritize the list. If you have only a few items needed, you can easily rank them in order of importance. If you have a large number, start by "bucketing" the list into A/B/C categories, then rank within each category.

COACH TIP: If you're just getting started with systematizing your firm, the highest priorities should be processes that directly touch and impact your clients — things like client review meetings, client service items, and trading.

A good way to test the processes is to ask if someone relatively qualified would be able to follow the process and complete it without error.

Next, we'll talk about how to start making progress in documenting your processes.

Step 2: Launch the Systemization Initiative

You have the templates and you have the list of processes that need to be documented. What next?

The foundation is set, so it's time to get to work in documenting all of the processes in your business. Divide up your list of "to-be-written" processes among the members of your team who are working on the project, and get clear on the expected deadline for each.

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COACH TIP: Have a new team member? This can be an excellent opportunity to document or review existing written processes. Give your new hire the process template and ask them to document or review processes they are learning. Having a new team member document the process helps to ensure no critical details are overlooked by experienced team members who may perform a step automatically.

Use the template and any guidelines you created in the last lesson to begin working through the list of processes, remembering the "What/When/Who" format:

1. For each task in the process, begin by defining what needs to happen, in a succinct way.
2. Then, get clear on when it needs to happen. Often, the "when" will be relative: "14 days prior to the review meeting," "1 day after the previous step is completed," "Within 2 days of the call." To ensure you can build the process as a workflow in your technology systems, confirm that the "when" for each task has both a trigger date (ex: date the workflow is started/date of the meeting/date a previous step is completed) and a time offset, referenced in number of days (or hours, if your CRM allows).
3. Finally, document who should complete the task — by using the ROLE, not a specific NAME. Tasks should be assigned to the "Operations Associate" or "Senior Wealth Advisor," not "Tom" or "Glenda."

As you are documenting your processes, make sure that client-facing service processes all have at least one "check-step": a task in the process to contact the client and ensure that the issue or request has been resolved satisfactorily. If the client requests a withdrawal from their account, a final task should be to call and make sure the client received the check. If a client requests a change of beneficiary, the process should include steps to 1) Ensure the client received the beneficiary change form and sent it back 2) Confirm the custodian has processed the change, and 3) Communicate with the client to let them know the change has been confirmed with the custodian.

Included in this lesson are a few example processes for your reference:

- *Example Client Review Process*
- *Example Client Survey Process*
- *Example Client Event Process*
- *Example Client Onboarding Process*

As team members complete their documentation, processes should be turned in to the project manager for quality review and compilation. As part of the quality review, the project manager should ensure that the proper format (template) was used, there are no obvious gaps in the process defined, and that there are no grammatical errors. Once each process has been reviewed, add the process to the overall process manual in the location you determined, making sure that each process is properly categorized and tagged, and mark the process item as "complete" on your "to-be-documented" list.

Monitor progress on a weekly basis by updating the team on a "documentation percentage complete" metric at your regular team meeting. Documenting processes can easily be pushed aside for seemingly more urgent tasks, so it's important to keep the initiative top-of-mind for your team.

Step 3: Leverage Technology to Build Workflows and Automation

Documenting your processes in a procedures manual is an important step in building an efficient business and a consistent client experience, but if you don't use technology to support your processes, you're only getting a portion of the potential benefit!

There are many ways to use technology to support your operations; in this lesson we'll cover building repeatable workflows and automation based on your new process manual. By building your processes into workflows and templates, you reduce the chances that steps in a process are mistakenly missed and give your leadership team a way to monitor all of the activities in the office to ensure nothing falls through the cracks. After compiling the processes into a detailed manual for the organization, your project manager should begin building key processes into your CRM, project management software, and automation services.

While we won't dive into CRM selection in this lesson, we will assume your CRM system has workflow capability as a core function. If a process touches an individual client or prospect, it should be created as a workflow in your CRM system so that all activities can be tracked to completion and reported on in a central place. Typical "client-specific" processes that should be managed in your CRM include those in areas like client service, prospecting, and client reviews.

If your processes were created using the format we describe in the above lesson (what/who/when with trigger date and offset # of days), setting up your workflows in the CRM should be a straightforward process. Make sure that all client-specific workflows are set up as such, so that the workflow is linked to your individual clients. The project manager should work with your internal CRM expert or CRM vendor's support team for specific directions to build out the workflows correctly.

Internal processes that do not directly link to clients should be created either as a workflow in your CRM or as a template in a project management software system like Asana, Trello, or Smartsheet. Typical "internal processes" that can be managed in project management software include those in areas like compliance, marketing, human resources, office management, and business planning.

One benefit of building workflows and templates in your CRM and project management software is the ability to automate tasks. A good way to identify potential automation steps are those that fall into the format of "If/Then" or "When/Then" where the tasks are standardized and don't necessarily require a human touch. For example, "WHEN a new client review meeting is created in the CRM, THEN send a confirmation email to the client." As your project manager is reviewing workflows and templates, they should highlight steps that have automation potential. You might be surprised what level of automation you are able to implement using standard functionality in your CRM and integration apps like Zapier.

COACH TIP: It may be helpful to notate in your process manual any technology workflows or automation that is based on each process; this way, in the event a process changes, you can make sure that the appropriate changes are made in your technology systems as well.

Leveraging technology to support your processes is an ongoing initiative for most financial advisory firms; as new integrations and technology tools are introduced to our industry, the possibilities continue to expand!

Step 4: Celebrate Systematizing Your Firm and Continue the Momentum

Congratulations! Now that you've developed a comprehensive process manual and built each process into the appropriate technology system, your business is on a much more solid foundation. This was a big initiative — so take a moment to reward your team for their hard work and celebrate as a team!

Your team came together to help build a stronger business that will provide a better client experience and more peace of mind for everyone on the team (and especially the firm owners!) There are numerous ways to show your gratitude. Choose one or more of the following ideas to say “thanks” to your team:

- Celebratory team dinner
- Cash bonus
- Spa or hobby gift cards
- Fun team outing like bowling, hiking, mini-golf, or a movie
- Extra paid time off

Moving forward, it’s important to develop a regular schedule for reviewing and updating processes. As your organizational structure, technology, services, and other elements change, make sure your process manual and technology workflows change as well. Always have a “process champion” identified for your office and consider adding “process review” as an annual or quarterly project during times that may be slower for your office.

Any time you hire a new team member, it’s also a great time to review your process documentation. Have the new team member make note of any gaps between the written process and what they are trained to do, then have the process champion make updates as needed.

Summary:

“A business that looks orderly says to your customer that your people know what they’re doing.”

— Michael E. Gerber, The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It

Systematizing your firm is one of the most important steps to building a foundation for the firm of your dreams — whether your dreams include substantial growth, better work/life balance, or greater enterprise value. But most importantly, a process-based business delivers an exceptional client experience and prevents costly errors to your clients.

The keys to successfully systematizing your firm are to plan well, designate a champion, and make the initiative a priority. If you’ve successfully followed the steps we’ve outlined in this course, you, your clients, and your team should soon begin to experience all of the benefits!

FAQs:

- I’d like to have specific goals for my team to document processes as part of their bonus plan. Any suggestions?
    - In general, we think this can be a great strategy. Like always, make sure that any process-documentation goals are SMAC-certified: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, and Compatible. If you decide to link process documentation to a quarterly or semi-annual results-based incentive plan, we recommend having monthly partial-goal deadlines to ensure your team is making progress.

- How often should my team review the processes?
    - In a way, the processes should be reviewed every time they're used. If things have changed or the process no longer works as intended, it's time for an update! Make sure you have an intentional review process at least annually for all processes, and every 2-3 years make sure you take a step back and ask, "Why are we doing it this way?"

- How can we test our processes?
    - A great way to test your newly-documented processes is to have someone on the team who does not typically execute the function try to follow the process and see how smoothly it goes.

Resources:

Learn more and download the resources referenced in this document from the ***Systemize Your Firm: Building a Process-Based Business*** course in Carson Coaching Online.

- **Process Template**
- **12 Areas to Systemize in Your Practice**
- **Client Review Process**
- **Client Survey Process**
- **Client Appreciation Event**
- **Client Onboarding Process**