



Rethinking Business Processes and Moving Forward

In 2004, when I was appointed the child support director for the state of Idaho, life was good. Money was available to accomplish goals to move the child support program forward. Because we never had enough staff to do all that was needed, we looked for opportunities to consolidate similar work to allow staff members to specialize in areas of the business. There was no real urgency to making the changes other than the desire to improve performance and increase incentives.

Fast forward to 2010: the economy was in crisis nationally, and in the state of Idaho the unemployment rate was reaching an all-time high. People were unable to find work and when they did, they made less than what they were making in the past. The program suffered a reduction in force and we had to close one office. Suddenly there was urgency: we had to find ways to continue to move forward even though the program had taken a significant hit. Idaho already had one of the highest caseload to staff ratios in the country, and the need for funding was crucial to the program's success. The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act allowed the program to match incentives for a window of time and that gave some relief, but we knew the window was closing. The program goal was to improve performance and the only way to do that was to continue to find ways to improve process.

We came up with a five-point plan:

1. Continue to consolidate work
2. Leverage partnerships
3. Enhance automation
4. Leverage data
5. Process drives the business

We held statewide meetings and brought staff to the table to determine where functions began and ended so we could continue to consolidate similar work. That enabled us to provide staff specific job duties, which allowed staff members to increase expertise and efficiencies while providing consistent service to all customers statewide. We build our processes based on the work, and train to the process for the specific functions.

Although we have six field offices around the state, the work done within those offices is

for a statewide caseload rather than a regional one. Instead of managing a local caseload, each office performs a specialized function.

We worked to create partnerships that provide dual benefits. Examples of this are the development of an employer portal and creation of an employer unit to work directly with employers. This reduces the time it takes to issue withholding as well as getting children enrolled in insurance programs. We also developed a portal for housing authorities so that they could directly retrieve the data needed to meet their program requirements. This significantly reduced traffic at our front door – another win/win for both partners.

Automation is vital to Idaho's IV-D program, especially since the staff to caseload ratio is over 800: 1. We no longer work system alerts that do not have direct and immediate value to the case or the family. We have revamped the alert system to trigger staff to do outcome-based work. An example of this is expediting the alert timeframes when payments have ended to prompt staff to work with customers before months of arrears accumulate. This often translates to getting payments started from new employers in a timelier manner. It is also an occasion for staff members to explain to customers the consequences of missing even one month of payment. In many cases, non-custodial parents now make payments in months when they know they will not pay through wage withholding.

The data warehouse is a new tool for Idaho. Although we have been working on it for years, the fruits of our labors now enable us to use data along with process documentation to transform our work. We can develop reports that provide information about “the pulse of the unit.” Using the agile methodology¹ the warehouse provides, we take data and make business changes. The process delivers both process documentation and automation changes in small increments and in a relatively short timeframe.

Today, the Idaho child support program comprises fifteen specialized units providing consistent, standardized service to customers throughout the State. Our staff is excited and continues to move forward. Although funding and staffing levels remain concerns, the program is constantly looking for opportunities to build relationships and increase productivity.

¹ The “agile” method is an iterative and incremental approach used in software development and project management that allows users to begin using a product as it is evolving. Users and developers collaborate to continue improving the product. Idaho uses “agile” methodology in its business processes, as opposed to the “waterfall” methodology, which is sequential in nature.

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