

AFFILIATED CORPORATE SERVICES, LLC
ACS RESOURCE CENTER

SMALL BUSINESS PROCESS DOCUMENTATION CHECKLIST

A practical guide for capturing how recurring work moves through your business

WHY DOCUMENT A PROCESS?

Business processes often develop gradually. A task begins with one person, expands to another department, acquires approvals, spreadsheets, emails, software systems and workarounds - and eventually the organization may know that the process works without having a clear picture of how it works.

Useful process documentation shows what starts the process, what it requires, who performs the work, how responsibilities move, what controls apply, what result should be produced, and how performance is evaluated.

PROCESS DOCUMENTATION IS NOT THE SAME AS AN SOP

A process describes how work moves from beginning to end, often across several people, departments or systems. An SOP provides more detailed instructions for performing a particular procedure or activity within that process. One business process may contain several SOPs.

1. Identify the Process

- ☐ Give the process a clear, recognizable name.
- ☐ Identify the person or role that owns the overall process.
- ☐ State why the process exists and the business result it should produce.
- ☐ Identify the event or condition that starts the process.
- ☐ Define where the process ends.
- ☐ Identify important activities that are outside its scope.

Process Name: _____

Process Owner: _____

Process Begins When: _____

Process Ends When: _____

QUICK CHECK

Could two employees independently identify the same beginning and ending points? If not, the process boundaries may need clarification.

2. Identify Inputs and Requirements

- ☐ Identify the information required to begin.
- ☐ Identify required materials, documents, records, approvals or authorizations.
- ☐ Identify systems, software or databases required.
- ☐ Identify requirements received from customers, vendors or other departments.
- ☐ Determine what happens when a required input is missing or incomplete.

Key Inputs: _____

3. Define the Expected Output

- ☐ Identify the primary output or result.
- ☐ Identify who receives or uses the output.
- ☐ Define what successful completion looks like.
- ☐ Identify important quality, accuracy or timeliness requirements.
- ☐ Identify records that demonstrate completion.

Expected Output: _____

Customer / Recipient: _____

4. Identify Everyone Involved

- ☐ Identify employees, roles, supervisors, managers and departments involved.
- ☐ Identify outside vendors, contractors, customers or other stakeholders where applicable.
- ☐ Identify who has final responsibility for the completed process.

OWNERSHIP MATTERS

Process ownership should not disappear simply because work passes from one department to another.

MAP HOW THE WORK ACTUALLY FLOWS

TRIGGER → INPUT → WORK → HANDOFF → VERIFY → OUTPUT

5. Document the Major Process Steps

- ☐ List the major activities in the order they normally occur.
- ☐ Identify who performs each activity.
- ☐ Identify where information or work changes hands.
- ☐ Identify decision points that change the process path.
- ☐ Identify approvals required before work can continue.
- ☐ Identify important deadlines or timing requirements.
- ☐ Identify where separate SOPs or work instructions support individual activities.

Step	Major Activity	Responsible Role	Output / Next Handoff
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

6. Examine the Handoffs

- ☐ Identify every point where responsibility transfers.
- ☐ Define what the receiving person needs before accepting the work.
- ☐ Identify how the handoff occurs - system, email, form, meeting, verbal instruction, etc.
- ☐ Define who is responsible when information is incomplete.
- ☐ Identify whether receipt or acceptance must be confirmed.
- ☐ Look for work that routinely waits between steps.

QUICK CHECK

When something stalls, can everyone determine who currently owns the next action? If not, the handoff needs greater clarity.

7. Identify Decisions, Approvals and Controls

- ☐ Identify significant decision points and who has authority to make each decision.
- ☐ Document approval requirements and financial or authorization limits where applicable.
- ☐ Identify quality, safety or operational controls.
- ☐ Identify conditions that require escalation.
- ☐ Document what evidence of approval or verification must be retained.

BE SPECIFIC

Avoid vague instructions such as "Obtain management approval if necessary." A better process definition identifies when approval is required and who is authorized to provide it.

8. Document Exceptions and Alternate Paths

- ☐ Identify common exceptions and missing-information scenarios.
- ☐ Define what happens when a request is rejected or a deadline cannot be met.
- ☐ Identify system or equipment failure alternatives where appropriate.
- ☐ Define escalation requirements.
- ☐ Identify who can authorize an alternate process.

DON'T DOCUMENT A BROKEN PROCESS SIMPLY BECAUSE IT EXISTS

Employees often develop workarounds to compensate for unclear responsibilities, outdated systems or unnecessary steps. Before formalizing the current workflow, ask: Is this how the process should work - or simply how employees have learned to make it work?

CONTROL AND IMPROVE THE PROCESS

9. Define How Performance Is Measured

Possible measures include turnaround time, error or defect rate, customer response time, first-pass completion, rework, cost, backlog, on-time completion, inspection results or customer satisfaction.

- ☐ Identify the most important measures of process performance.
- ☐ Define what acceptable performance looks like.
- ☐ Identify where performance information comes from.
- ☐ Identify who reviews the results and how often.

Key Measure(s): _____

Expected Standard: _____

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE

Measure what helps manage the process - not simply what is easiest to count.

10. Identify Records and Documentation

- ☐ Identify required forms, checklists, system records or electronic entries.
- ☐ Identify approvals, sign-offs, inspection or verification records.
- ☐ Identify customer or vendor documentation.
- ☐ Define where important records are maintained.
- ☐ Confirm employees can access the current forms and documents they need.

11. Look for Process Improvement Opportunities

- ☐ Repeated data entry, duplicate work or recurring rework.
- ☐ Unnecessary approvals, excessive handoffs or bottlenecks.
- ☐ Unclear responsibilities or information that routinely arrives incomplete.
- ☐ Manual activities that may be appropriate for automation.
- ☐ Steps that no longer provide meaningful value.
- ☐ Controls that occur too late to prevent errors.
- ☐ Heavy dependence on one employee's undocumented knowledge.

ASK THE PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY PERFORM THE WORK

Managers may understand how a process was designed. Employees performing the work often know how it actually operates. Use both perspectives.

12. Assign Ownership and Keep It Current

- ☐ Assign a process owner and record the current version or revision date.
- ☐ Identify who approves significant changes.
- ☐ Establish a reasonable review frequency.
- ☐ Review documentation following significant process changes.
- ☐ Incorporate useful employee feedback.
- ☐ Update related SOPs, forms and training when the process changes.
- ☐ Remove obsolete versions from normal use.

Process Owner: _____

Current Version / Date: _____

Next Review: _____

Process Documentation Readiness Check

- ☐ Can we clearly explain why the process exists and where it begins and ends?
- ☐ Are required inputs and expected outputs defined?
- ☐ Can we identify who owns every major activity and handoff?
- ☐ Are important decisions, approvals and controls documented?
- ☐ Do employees know what to do when the normal process does not apply?
- ☐ Can we determine whether the process is performing successfully?
- ☐ Are supporting SOPs, forms and records current and accessible?
- ☐ Have employees who actually perform the work reviewed the documented process?
- ☐ Is someone clearly responsible for keeping the process current?

FIVE QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING

1. Where does work most often wait?
2. Where do errors, incomplete information or rework most often occur?
3. Which handoffs depend too heavily on verbal communication or individual memory?
4. Which steps would stop functioning if one experienced employee were unexpectedly unavailable?
5. Which activities add value - and which exist simply because "we've always done it that way"?

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

Individual activities within a documented process may need their own detailed SOPs. See the ACS resources What Makes a Good SOP? - 10 Essential Characteristics and Small Business SOP Starter Checklist.

Eligible businesses may also request one complimentary Operations & Process Introductory Assessment. ACS reviews one recurring process for clarity, consistency, workflow, responsibilities, handoffs, controls, measurement and improvement opportunities.

No fee. No obligation. No requirement to purchase an ACS service.
acsllc-nc.com/assessment

EXPECTATIONS DEFINED. PERFORMANCE MEASURED. RESULTS MANAGED.