

Need to improve operational efficiency?  
Learn how to apply process improvement techniques, such as Lean and Six Sigma.

# Process improvement techniques: the public sector embraces Lean and Six Sigma



**Until recently, the concept of lean working was largely confined to commercial companies. However, with the potential business benefits now widely acknowledged, public sector organisations are adopting both Lean and Six Sigma techniques to deliver efficiency and improve service.**

### Why Lean working?

Public sector organisations must be efficient and fit-for-purpose. Many are looking to acquire new skills to deliver continuous improvement and meet their organisational targets.

Lean working provides a set of tools and techniques designed to reduce and eliminate waste or “non-value” activity in any given process. Improving a process can lead to significant efficiencies and service improvements.

There are five principles that underpin the use of Lean:

- Specify value in the eyes of the customer.
- Identify the value stream and eliminate waste.
- Increase performance and capacity by creating a continuous flow of “value-add” activities.
- Involve and empower employees.
- Continuously improve in the pursuit of perfection.

Lean is seen as an attractive option for many organisations because start-up is relatively easy, skills can be transferred to staff (making it an accessible tool as part of the improvement agenda) and the benefits are significant in terms of improved performance and efficiency.

### Who uses it?

Though originally a concept used in the automotive industry in post-war Japan, the tools and techniques were quickly adopted by logistics, military, construction and financial organisations. Only recently have UK public bodies, particularly in health, started to use the tools that have readily crossed sectors to good effect.

### What is Six Sigma and how does it differ from Lean?

Six Sigma is also focused on process improvement, but tends to be data-driven and is concerned with eliminating defects in the process. By comparison, Lean is more visual and more aligned to mapping core processes as a means of identifying value and, in particular, non-value aspects of any given process.

Unlike Lean, there is a formal accreditation of Six Sigma professionals rising from *Yellow Belt* to *Master Black Belt*.

Ideally, a process improvement project would use the tools available from both disciplines and this is AMTEC Consulting’s preferred approach. There is increasing convergence between the two techniques, with the concept of Lean Sigma fast becoming the adopted term used by clients and practitioners alike.

Don’t get taken in by jargon – both are tools to support performance improvement and in AMTEC’s experience (and the documented case studies of others) do so to good effect - see below.

“**Staff involvement throughout the process leads to real questioning around why processes are delivered in a particular way, for example: “Looking at this, I am not sure why we do it this way.”**”

“**One local authority pilot project, tracked by the Audit Commission, halved the number of steps in the re-housing process and reduced average end-to-end time for housing repairs from 46 to 5.9 days. ([www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk))**”

“I believe the trick is to apply the right tools and techniques to address specific problems and goals. In a complex business environment this is challenging, but our partnership with AMTEC is helping us to learn and apply these skills whilst providing an appropriate level of support and guidance.” *Ged Malone, HSE*

### **What is the best way to approach Lean and Six Sigma?**

Tools such as Lean will by their nature result in change and impact upon service organisation and delivery. Lean working should not be seen by staff as something that is “done to them”, but as a technique that they can deploy to bring about real improvement in the way they deliver services.

While many organisations try and turn process improvement tools, such as Lean and Six Sigma, into a science and “black art”, AMTEC seeks to apply the principles in a practical way, ensuring that the skills can be readily transferred to staff.

AMTEC adopts the DMAIC approach, which is underpinned by a number of best practice tools. This approach is applied systematically to the core processes of any organisation:

- **Defines** (what are the value added processes?)
- **Measures** (what is the cost of input and the results achieved?)
- **Analyses** (what are the opportunities for improvement?)
- **Improves** (what projects will lead to improvement?)
- **Controls** (how do we realise the benefits and continuously improve?)

### **AMTEC and Lean in the public sector**

AMTEC consultants are experienced in delivering significant process improvement by pragmatically applying industry best practice and realising benefits through change and effective performance management. The team is deployed across central government, local government, health and defence.



## ***Pilot project assesses the potential for process improvement at HSE***

**Skills and knowledge transfer were key components of a project to explore the potential benefits of applying process improvement techniques at a public body.**

### **About the HSE**

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) wanted to explore the possible application of process improvement techniques to produce simpler and fit-for-purpose processes that would enable staff to focus on delivery.

A pilot project within the contracts and procurement function aimed to generate real improvements to key processes, while ensuring an alignment with customer expectations and HSE strategic goals.

### **The Approach**

AMTEC Consulting was appointed to deliver an accessible and pragmatic introduction to process improvement tools and techniques (including Lean, Six Sigma and Change Acceleration) and to enable staff to realise the benefits of improved process and performance management, with an ability to apply the learning in practice.

An “Open House” session began the process of awareness building and helped to

identify members of staff who would work closely with AMTEC.

Specific, highly interactive training followed and was well received by staff at all levels. The training attendees generated a phenomenal number of potential applications! Once again, Lean Six Sigma process improvement principles were used to facilitate this in an accessible, pragmatic and user friendly way, and continued to demonstrate how this methodology could add value in everyday situations, not just projects.

### **The Outcome**

Through this pilot exercise, AMTEC generated an appreciation of process improvement principles and transferred skills and knowledge to those seeking to replicate benefits across other areas of the organisation.

There is a momentum to using the tools and techniques as a means of driving improvements and efficiencies. This commitment will be key to embedding the organisational approach to continuous improvement.