

Streamline...Simplify...

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Getting things done in organizations is usually far from simple. If you are running an organization you can accept this complexity as a given—something you just have to live with. Or you can do something about it and make your workplace simpler, more productive, and more satisfying for customers and employees. *That's what simplification means--making it easier for your people to get things done and for your customers and other partners to work with you.*

Our first encounter with simplicity as a business issue was at General Electric (GE) in 1989. The then-CEO Jack Welch sought to transform the company from a slow-moving, bureaucratic, top-down, overly analytical organization to one that would be fast, flexible, and boundaryless. It was through the GE Work-Out process that the company accomplished this transformation, and "simplicity" emerged as one of the key goals of the effort. In Welch's view, speed and simplicity were intertwined—and both were critical for GE's success.

It became very clear: to move faster and be more responsive, GE would have to reduce the number of steps required to get things done and make it easier for everyone to understand how to take those steps. Consequently, WorkOut focused on simplifying processes, both internally and externally. But simplicity at GE was more than just process streamlining—*it was a mind-set and a culture that eventually permeated the way managers organized and led the company.*

Today people in many organizations still feel the effects of complexity on a day-to-day basis. As a result, they work longer hours with greater stress, and feel less and less productive. They attend meetings, sort through e-mail and voice mail, cope with changing priorities and demands, manage relationships with dozens of people inside and outside their organizations—and at the end of the day often don't feel they have accomplished very much.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Much complexity is caused by the way we structure our organizations, construct our business processes, design our products and services, and manage our people.

As a leader you have a choice. You can either add to complexity and make things more confusing or you can simplify work and make it easier for people to get things done – simplify structures and processes; reduce clutter and wasted time; and make all people feel as though they are truly contributing and not just churning on a giant gerbil wheel. Workers at all levels want to be as productive as possible and experience a direct line of sight between their efforts and their organization's results. The job as organizational leaders is to help them make that happen.

Simplification is not the only answer—but it's a good place to start.