

Government of Alberta, Canada



The Situation

In 2008 customers began experiencing longer waiting times as they requested employment and income support (IS) services. A very high volume of work resulted in increased errors, which frustrated both customers and staff.

For example, in June 2007 applicants were usually served within 12 days. The wait time had increased to 32 days by June 2008 and to 45 days in February 2009. In addition, for completed IS applications the administrative error rate was about 70% and the financial error rate about 35%. The services staff also determined that the creation of specific, measurable service plans with clients was occurring in only about 25% of the cases.

These challenges adversely impacted the Albertans receiving services as well as the ongoing workload of staff.

The Solution

The Calgary RMT decided an innovative approach was needed to improve efficiency and effectiveness of services. They asked Amos Kamande, Director of Process Improvement, to assist them implement a Lean Six Sigma (LSS) process. Kamande had completed four weeks of training in basic and advanced problem-solving techniques with The Texas Manufacturing Assistance Center's (TMAC) Lean Six Sigma Black Belt program led by Russ Aikman, Master Black Belt. LSS is a rigorous, methodical, and fact-based approach that is used to solve challenges such as those faced by the IS process.

The 10th and 10th office assembled a cross-functional project team of staff (pictured above) who were working in the IS process to start the "LEAN Forward" project. Kamande coached the team through the LSS implementation process and through each phase of the DMAIC process, a structured approach needed to solve challenging business problems. They created a Project Charter to establish the nature of the problem, scope, and potential benefits. They also worked to determine the Voice of the Customer and the Voice of the Business.

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The team mapped out each process in great detail, using value stream mapping and identified activities that added no customer value. They also collected data about each process to help establish a baseline level of performance. The team drilled down to determine the root causes of the administrative and financial errors, and of the long wait times.

During this time Kamande also received coaching from Aikman on both technical and cultural issues. The team used a combination of tools to identify root causes including brainstorming, Cause & Effect matrix, and Pareto analysis. They were able to narrow the root causes to five major areas: Application & Process, Staff Practices, Staff Utilization, Policy Interpretation, and Staff Culture.

The team developed a list of 60 to 110 ideas to address each root cause. The ideas were then evaluated against a list of criteria based on customer needs and management goals. They narrowed the list of ideas and set up a pilot of the agreed-upon solutions. They also developed a Future State value stream map of the process that was much simpler than the original. The team then implemented the prioritized ideas.

The Results

The **LEAN Forward Project** realized significant productivity results and an energized problem solving workforce. In 7 months some of the positive impacts include:

- Backlog of cases reduced from 488 to 224
- IS wait times reduced from 45 to 20 days
- Financial error rates reduced from 35% to 7%
- Service Plans created with customers rose from 25% to 93%
- Increased morale of staff
- Customer complaints down sharply
- Customers and staff satisfaction were greatly improved

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Other benefits for the staff include: A less chaotic work environment, a reduction in crisis- mode, more independent decision-making, the flexibility to rotate from function to function, the ability to challenge non-value add activities, and a feeling of more empowerment to do their jobs. Team work among staff is also improved. A culture of continuous improvement has been nurtured and performance keeps getting better.

Overall, Employment and Income Support staffs are more willing to take the initiative, more committed to develop solutions, and there is buy-in and excitement as they continue to move forward.

About the Company:

One of the Government of Alberta's values is Excellence – it continues Alberta's proud pioneering history with a quest for innovation and continuous improvement.

Among the many services provided to Albertans are those provided by Alberta Employment and Immigration's **Alberta Works Program**. This program ensures Alberta has a skilled workforce, productive and safe workplaces, and helps improve the well-being of its citizens.

The Calgary region provides **Employment and Income Support (IS)** services through 10 site offices. In 2008 these offices experienced an increasing need for their services. Albertans were waiting for longer periods and staff were getting more frustrated with the volume of work. The **Calgary Regional Management Team (RMT)** decided to pilot Lean Six Sigma (LSS) techniques to improve front line customer service at the 10th and 10th site office. Amos Kamande of Productivity Alberta helped the staff and RMT to implement LSS at this site.

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