Case 1: Reengineering the University Travel Reimbursement Process

The following describes the steps an individual at a large public university must take in order to get approval for travel and to be reimbursed for the expenses incurred.

First, the individual makes an informal request of his/her supervisor (i.e., the department chair) who presents the request at a department meeting, primarily for discussion purposes and initial approval. If approved by the department, the individual (who is referred to as a traveler) completes a multi-copy official University Travel Request form. This form requires at least thirteen pieces of information in addition to four signatures (e.g., the traveler, the department chair, the dean and the academic vice-president.), in that order. The request must be completed at least two weeks before the traveler intends to leave for the conference, or any related academic activity. The traveler can refer to a published list of allowable travel expenses to estimate the cost of the trip.

Once the vice-president approves the travel and the various expenses, the approved canary and pink copies of the request are returned to the traveler, the gold copy is sent to the department supervisor, and the white copy is sent to the Accounting Office’s University Travel Unit.

It is then up to the traveler to make his or her reservations. An advance can be obtained to pay for part or all of the travel and lodging. Once travel has been completed, the traveler must then fill out an official State Travel Voucher. This form requires at least sixteen pieces of information. Again, the traveler can refer to the published list of allowable expenses. When this form is completed it is sent to the traveler’s supervisor for his/her signature and then on to the Accounting Office. All receipts and documents needed to confirm that the individual did attend the conference for the originally approved purpose must be attached to the official State Travel Voucher.

Once the Accounting Office receives the State Travel Voucher, they go to their paper files and attempt to match the traveler’s specific State Travel Voucher form with the white copy of the official University Travel Request. If a match is made, the clerk enters the information into a computer program, which automatically generates a unique voucher number for this traveler for this specific instance of travel. In some cases, the Accounting Office will request additional information from the traveler, or will make changes to the total amount owed the traveler, or the university.

Once the Accounting Office has collected all the appropriate information, they then authorize payment to the traveler (or request payment from the traveler). If the traveler is to receive any reimbursement, accounting authorizes payment, a check is cut and mailed to the traveler, and a petty cash account is debited. At the same time, the State Travel Voucher is sent to the State Comptroller for approval and reimbursement. If the Comptroller approves the travel, then a check in the amount requested is cut and sent to the University. Accounting then credits the petty cash account.
If the Comptroller disagrees with the amount requested for refund, the Comptroller sends a message to the University’s Accounting Office which in turn communicates the problem to the traveler, who must then convince Accounting and the Comptroller that the amount requested is correct.

It is the desire of the University to reengineer what is apparently a business process built for control and not designed to support the strategy of the University. It is important that the new process be aligned with the strategy of the University, that is, the discovery/creation and dissemination of knowledge so as to improve the human condition. In order to accomplish the University’s strategy, professors must attend, and learn from their participation in workshops, conferences and other knowledge enhancing activities, and bring this new knowledge back to their students and colleagues. Anything that impedes these opportunities to learn runs counter to this strategy.

Please reengineer the University’s travel reimbursement process. Discuss what you believe is wrong with the current process, and discuss how you plan to remedy the situation.