

Un-necessary complexity - what it is and what to do about it

Some things are, by their nature, relatively complex – rocket science and brain surgery to name just two – but other things are complex because of choices we have made. This is not to suggest that these choices were intentionally made to add complexity, more that they led to complexity. It is only by revisiting our organisation, processes, products, or services with fresh eyes, that we are able to identify where this complexity has become un-necessary. It is an extremely valuable undertaking as un-necessary complexity attracts un-necessary costs.

Until you have carried out one or two reviews it can be hard to even start to identify the potential sources of un-necessary complexity. These are things that we would not necessarily describe as complex until someone else comes along and simplifies them. Let me start you off with my favourite example.

Paying Road Tax in the UK

To drive a car on the road in the UK you need several things. A driving licence, a car, a car registration document, car insurance, an MOT if the car is over 3 years old and – for the vast majority of cars - you need to pay a road tax, renewable annually.

The process circa 1983

The process was pretty straightforward – a reminder would arrive in the post to say you needed to renew your road tax. You would take the reminder (which also acted as a proxy for the car registration document), your MOT certificate and your insurance certificate to a local post office where you would pay the tax and receive a tax disc in return. You would then display the tax disc in the car.

Not complicated at all really.

However - I passed my driving test and was living on my own when I was 17. I was somewhat disorganised. Assembling all the necessary documents in the right place at the right time and getting to a post office before the last day of the month to 'buy a tax disc' seemed like an insurmountable task. It usually ended up with me phoning my insurance company to have them rush me a duplicate set of documents and phoning the garage for a duplicate MOT – all of which cost me money I hadn't planned to spend. If I was lucky, these documents would arrive, via the Royal Mail, on time.

I know I was not alone in my last minute panic to buy a tax disc because I usually found myself stood in the post office on (if I was lucky) the last Saturday morning of the month (sometimes it was the last day of the month) in a long queue of people looking equally frazzled. The people behind the post office counter would remain calm as they informed their customer that the documents they had offered were either not complete or didn't have enough time left on them to be used as a renewal document (there needed to be at least 1 month left on the length of the MOT or the insurance for it to be accepted). I recall being turned away on more than one occasion and then having to try to move heaven and earth to either find the right documents or have new ones issued before my car was no longer allowed on the road. It is something of an understatement to say I hated the road tax renewal process.



The process in 2016

Fast forward to today. Everything is now computerised. I get a reminder in the post 2 weeks before my road tax is due. I log on to the road tax site and type in the number on my renewal form and click next. I confirm that the car details it is showing are indeed my car details. I choose how long I want to tax my car for – 6 or 12 months, add my payment details and click complete.

I no longer have to search for my latest MOT and insurance documents, the integrated information system knows I have these. I no longer have to spend an hour making the trip to a post office, I do it all from whatever device I want from wherever I happen to be in the world. Due to the sophistication of number plate recognition systems, I don't even need to display a tax disc any more.

Each time I pay for my road tax online I complete the customer survey that asks what you think of the service and I gush with praise! I love this process. I think it is awesome. It changed my life.

I had never thought about the old process as complex. It was what it was, because at the time when it was conceived, there was no other way that it could have worked. However now that it has been brought up to date to take advantage of the opportunity technology has created, it is beautifully simple.

The benefit of eliminating un-necessary complexity

In 2014 the independent think tank Policy Exchange was commissioned to write a Technology Manifesto. It suggests that Britain could save as much as £24 billion a year by 2020 through a more efficient use of technology within central and local government. A Minister for the Cabinet Office, confirmed that 25 of the biggest services would be digitised by 2015, making it easier to do things like paying car tax, completing tax returns, or applying for the state pension online.

I really like the sound of our Britain saving £24 billion a year.

I don't know how much the road tax process cost the government before it was digitised and the un-necessary complexity was eliminated. I do however know it has saved me money as I no longer buy duplicate documents. It has saved me time – lots more time than just the trip to the post office – the hours of searching for the elusive documentation that as a teen, I never managed to keep track of. It also saved me from the emotional trauma – it may sound like I'm overstating this but really it was huge – the frustration and angst associated with the whole experience. So from a customer perspective this improvement was a huge win. I even confess to a small twinge of delight when my tax renewal comes through the door!

So if Britain could save £24 billion a year just by focusing on central and local government, what could you save? Experience shows that most organisations could save between 15%-30% in the areas they focus on.

So what is stopping you?

Knowing where to start may be what is stopping you. There are a few questions you can ask that will lead you to a good short list to start with. Un-necessary complexity begets unnecessary costs – so look at what your processes cost you and make a judgement – does it seem like too much considering what it is achieving? Un-necessarily complex processes often leave people frustrated – customers and staff alike, so do you have activities that seem overly bureaucratic or products and services that receive more customer complaints than others? Are there areas of your business

where there seems to be lots of activity but not very much to show for it? Are there aspects of your business where – if everyone would just use the same approach - life would be so much easier, numbers easier to consolidate, results easier to understand, decisions easier to make? These are the areas that you might want to look at first.

Other areas of un-necessary complexity may be less hidden (but equally unacknowledged) for example how many products and services are you offering and do you know which add the greatest value and are there product variations that add a level of complexity you no longer require? Would you believe that some years ago Kraft reviewed the level of variation within its Toblerone product and was said to have saved \$400 million per year by removing the un-necessary complexity from its related manufacture and distribution processes! What un-necessary complexity might your products and services hide?



Do you need some help?

Here in the QOREX team, this is what gets us excited.

Un-necessary complexity can be found hiding in any part of your business and it is most likely in the place that is causing you most pain. Whether it is helping a business to clarify its strategy and align its operating plans; liberate programme management from the bureaucracy that drives costs up whilst adding limited value; enable the identification and tracking of benefits so that they really are realised; or, quite frankly, just getting people to work in a consistent way so that all our lives become easier and we stop wasting time and money. Removing these un-necessary complexities is what gets us out of bed in the morning.

How do we do it? Well, we have a tool that helps us.

QOREX is a remarkable software application that maximises the performance of any business by revealing un-necessary complexity within an organisation; by removing this complexity to simplify operations; and providing a consistent and systemised approach to management and delivery.

QOREX will create and embed a positive and lasting impact on any business astute enough to use it. If that sounds like something you need, give us a call and we will see what we can do to help.