

# Imagining the Future of Lean Six Sigma, Part 1

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A friend and colleague asked me a difficult question recently. He queried, “What do you think the future of Six Sigma and Design for Six Sigma (DFSS) will be? Will it continue, or is it a dying idea?” I did my best to offer my personal perspective while caught a little unprepared for such a thought.

While trying to answer him, and in considering the question since, I realize that in doing so, I was forced to consider the successes and the challenges of various business and process improvement programs in a way that forced me to think not only about where they are, and whether they will remain powerful programs or fade into the background, but also what I thought they should be, or where I would take those programs that I influence. It was a good exercise.

So, while I may not be the best person to play oracle on the subject, I offer my personal insights and observations. Perhaps while considering them, or refuting them in the context of your own experience and predictions, you, too, can begin to formulate a vision or plan for your own programs going forward.

Let me begin with some thoughts about the Lean methodology. While experiences and insights vary, for most of us, Lean is a business improvement philosophy introduced in Jim Womak’s and Daniel T. Jones’ book, *Lean Thinking*, and borne out of Toyota’s remarkable manufacturing and productivity success in the early 1990s. Today, it is still a strong methodology in the automotive industry and has permeated most American manufacturing industry, as well as other sectors, such as

the medical realm.

Lean attacks the enemy titled “waste.” Waste comes in eight to nine forms these days, depending on whom you ask. This demon is real and affects everyone. I perceive that most manufacturing business in the U.S. has experimented with Lean, and many have successfully adopted the methodology. As mentioned, it has also transitioned to non-manufacturing sectors with success.

I expect that Lean will live on. It fields two very powerful advantages:

1. It attacks an enemy we can all perceive.
2. It is a relatively simple methodology that is reasonably adopted and executed by most anyone; it does not require great skill other than some proficient problem-solving.

I also perceive an ongoing evolution.

Lean has become commonplace enough that most manufacturing engineering, production engineering, industrial engineering, manufacturing management and process improvement roles identify it as a required skill set. However, I perceive a change going on, too.

I perceive fewer investments in big training events in the Lean methodology. My evidence is notional, based on the activity I see among businesses and colleagues with whom and which I interface. Much of the learning of the method is now taking place on the job or is provided by in-house experts, rather than out-of-house consultants. I suspect the role of Lean expert will reduce in number as we go forward.

Lean has almost utterly failed to succeed where the greatest waste exists, in the office. This is because, having been borne on the manufacturing floor, Lean-thinking people tend to try to apply manufacturing solutions to office waste. Unfortunately, U-shaped production cells and 5Sed desktops do absolutely nothing to improve office productivity, nothing! The work takes place inside the computer, and locations are far less influential than communication channels.

It is the rare Lean expert that has been able to translate the manufacturing-founded philosophy to the office environment effectively. These individuals are worth their weight in gold. If they become influential enough, the next Lean movement or revitalization will occur in the “transactional” realm.

Also, Lean has evolved some habits or practices that cause a little backlash. One such is an over-reliance on complex process-value-stream-mapping practices and a standard of manufacturing’s most popular process solutions. Linked with that is the practice of conducting large “events” in order to execute Lean improvements.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

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Lean, in its true nature, was always, and has always meant to be, simple. Many unnecessarily over-complicate the process of deriving root cause, and calculating the value or cost of waste just so they can stamp a textbook solution on it and repeat the process for the next target process.

Those businesses that recognize the overboard practices for what they are, and successfully swing the pendulum back toward a little more commonsense and everyday incremental-improvement approach will succeed and live a good, long Lean life. Those that give up and lose faith, turned off by the complexity and waste of conducting the methodology in such an overboard fashion, will miss out because they have missed the point.

Unfortunately, some businesses are doing the latter. However, I perceive that enough businesses and experienced people are doing the former, and relying more on commonsense and less on textbook examples that Lean will live on. The hype may continue to fade, but the skill request on the job descriptions will remain.

*Please tune into the Chemical Equipment Daily for part two of this two-part series. What's your take? Please feel free to comment below! For more information, please visit Nicol via [www.bizwizwithin.com](http://www.bizwizwithin.com) [1].*

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