

don't get stuck on auto pilot

It's easy for small businesses to get stuck on autopilot – the motto can too easily become: “We do it this way because we've always done it this way.” It can seem hard to justify change when everyone is fighting fires in other areas.

But change is inevitable. The way technology constantly changes will force your processes to change. Customers constantly want things done in different ways, so your staff are probably always coming up with different ideas for doing things. Change will happen – in a controlled or an out-of-control way.

Big companies use formal change processes such as Six Sigma and Kaizen. Small businesses can take a leaf out of their book simply by looking at all of their processes and involving the people who perform them in coming up with ways to improve them.

One of the cornerstones of Six Sigma is the DMAIC project management methodology, which is easy to adapt to an SME. You could tackle each of the following steps in a series of meetings over several weeks:

1. **Define** the problem, the opinions of the customer, the opportunity for improvement, and the project goals. Be specific in exploring and really defining the problem – don't let people immediately start jumping to solutions.
2. **Measure** the performance of the current process. Gather hard data as much as you can, or make the most educated guesses you can where necessary. Having numbers will help you work out if a change will really work.
3. **Analyse** the data to get to the root causes of poor performance. Identify the relationships between cause and effect, and try to ensure all factors have been considered.
4. **Improve** the current processes based on the information you've now uncovered. Here's where the team can have their say in how to do things better.

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5. **Control** the improved process by putting in regular checking and control systems in place. Be prepared to make modifications as the best ideas sometimes do not survive the reality test!

Having a solid change process does wonderful things for staff morale and has immediate benefits for your organisation. It creates a happier and more professional workplace, and often gives you the opportunity to start a conversation with your customers and find out what they really want from you and your business.