

Online library of Quality,
Service Improvement
and Redesign tools

Identifying frustrating problems



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What is it?

This simple approach involves illustrating (literally drawing), discussing and solving problems in your working environment. Small problems that require 'work arounds' can be frustrating and can affect performance, time and morale. This tool is a useful way of bringing frustrating problems out in the open, helping teams to identify and solve them.

When to use it

If your team is working around problems day in day out, try this tool to help solve the underlying problems. Saving just minutes of time each day may allow you to do something that adds more value to patient care.

How to use it

Aim to do this over a couple of weeks during a time when most team members are around. You may find it helps if the team understands the benefits of a visual and orderly workspace – see the [6S](#) tool for more on this.

1. Draw a plan of the workspace, department or area of focus on a large piece of paper. It doesn't need to be a work of art, but should be recognisable to the team so they can label things easily. Keep the picture of the 'niggles' in a prominent place until most of them are solved.
2. Discuss and agree with other members of the team that, over the next few days, they will identify problems as they go along by putting a cross on the workspace plan with a short note to describe the problem. For example 'no towels left' or 'had to get a pipette'.
3. Be flexible about the next steps. Give people the permission to solve problems as they emerge. Focus on creating interest and curiosity – and make sure you acknowledge small and seemingly trivial problems. Encourage people to use rapid small-scale tests of change ([PDSA](#)) to see if their ideas work in practice.
4. Discuss at team meetings, highlighting new solutions, identifying challenges and alternative solutions if your initial tests don't improve things. Tools like [brainstorming](#) may help if ideas haven't worked, or are hard to identify. Some tricky problems may need to involve other people, or may need to have a stronger project planning emphasis.

What next?

Review progress to see if there is any slippage: the focus is 'make time to save time'. If there are issues that are outside your team's control, these may take longer to solve. You might find it helpful to try:

- asking the right person outside the team 'how can this team make your job easier?' and then explaining how they could make your job easier
- building up a case for improvement by identifying indicative costs for the amount of time wasted by measuring and calculating the cost. For example, multiply the time spent by staffing costs (remember to include on-costs).

Both may require [action planning](#) and [responsibility charting](#) (see section 1 [project management](#)).

Other useful tools and techniques

Building trust can help staff to express themselves while [managing conflict](#) can help if staff feel defensive about a problem in their area. [Lean](#) principles can help to eliminate duplication and steps that contribute to waste.

A number of other tools that help with building a visual picture of processes and departments may be useful as part of your next steps – for example, [process mapping](#), [spaghetti diagram](#) and [6S](#).