It doesn’t matter whether you work in banking, food service, government, the nonprofit sector, travel, transportation, or any other service industry. Quality is important. It is important to your customer; it is important to your competition; and it needs to be important to you. The tools in this module do more than simply help identify sources of problems; they help you start improving the quality of your service and your process.

FLOW CHARTS

Have you ever asked: “Why does it take so long to get a simple voucher approved?” or “Why do we have so many steps to follow in processing this type of policy? Isn’t there a simpler way?” A tool to help you answer such questions is the process flow chart.

The process flow chart is a special kind of diagram that pictures the steps of a particular job in sequence. This diagram helps track the flow of information, paper, material, or people through the system of delivering a service. The flow chart may show that the system is more complex than anyone realizes. If you or your problem-solving team can see how the
material or paper or person moves through the system, you may be able to come up with a simpler way. There may be repeated or unnecessary steps. Once you know the actual steps in the process you are studying, you probably can find ways to combine or eliminate unnecessary ones. Simplifying the system that delivers the service is a good way to begin improving quality, efficiency, and productivity.

An important use of the flow chart is helping to identify the points in the system that need to be controlled. One or more steps may be critical to providing the service on time or in an effective manner. Or you may discover where in your process trouble usually happens. Such places are ones you will definitely need to control. The flow chart helps you find the most effective point to control. (Modules 5 and 6 discuss methods for controlling a process.)

**PROCESS FLOW-CHART SYMBOLS**

A process flow diagram is fairly easy to construct. But first, you need to know the flow-chart symbols.

*Operation:* This is the work that's required to complete a task. You are doing something such as filling prescriptions, creating data files, changing reservations, folding towels, or adding new items to the menu.

*Move:* Something—information, a person, paper, supplies—travels from one point to another. Cleaning supplies go from central receiving to the storage area on each floor. A technician takes blood samples to the lab for analysis. Daily receipts go to the front office for tabulation.

*Inspection:* Someone tests or verifies that the material, information, form, or activity is correct and meets the requirements. This person decides whether the material, form, or activity should continue to the next step or if a correction, addition, or some other change is needed.

*Delay:* A delay means waiting; for some reason, you can't go immediately to the next step in the process. A delay can occur before an operation, an inspection, or a move, as well as after. For example, the drive-through teller has to wait for the balance inquiry before sending the customer her cash. Frozen foods sit in the supermarket aisles waiting to be stocked in the freezer.

*Storage:* This is a holding area. Computer invoices sit in an in basket until the billing clerk checks catalog prices. Housekeeping stacks clean linens on carts after folding. Policies are stored on microfilm.