

Post the Path

Why Use this Approach: Use “Post the Path” to identify and order the steps in a process. Using this method, you can overcome ambiguity and disagreement about process steps. You can use the results to create a narrative use case or a process flow diagram.

Who Should Be Involved: You will need three to five stakeholders who are familiar with at least a portion of the target process.

What you’ll need:

1. You will need a work surface for the team of stakeholders – a wall, a dry erase board, or flipchart pages side-by-side on the wall. You can also use a small table surface, roughly two by four feet for a four-person stakeholder team.
2. For each process, you will need roughly 20 “sticky note” sheets or notecards for each person.

How to Prepare:

- Ask the team to identify a process title, typically from a list that team members previously created.
- If the boundaries for the chosen process seem vague, ask team members to determine the step that begins the process and the step that ends the process.
- Ask team members to reflect silently about the process from beginning to end.

Procedure to Follow:

1. Have each team member WORK SILENTLY to identify each of the process steps – writing ONE-STEP PER NOTECARD. This silent work may take several minutes. Some team members will finish quickly; others will not.
2. The first person to finish arranges his or her notecards in a horizontal row on the work surface, ordering each process step in sequence from left to right.
3. Each subsequent person creates his or her own row, but matches each notecard with those having a similar description, creating a column of similarly named steps. For example, if I had a notecard with the phrase “Get cash withdrawal,” I would place that notecard in my row, but position it just below the notecard that said, “Take cash from ATM.” Together these columns and rows create a “matrix” of process steps.
4. As a team member places the notecards, he or she may discover that a step is missing from the matrix. The team member should feel free to split the matrix of notecards and create a new column to accommodate the missed step.
5. When everyone has arranged the notecards, ask them to work to identify and resolve terminology differences, ambiguity, missing steps, and disagreements on sequence. The team may decide, for example, to split one step into two.
6. Next, have the team determine the “best” steps – those within the matrix that best describe the process. Start in the left-hand column and select the notecard from that group that most accurately describes that particular process step. Move that notecard to the first row and discard the other notecards in that column. Continue working across the matrix, one column at a time, to create a single row of notecards that best describes the steps in the process.
7. To eliminate the risk of getting the notecards out of order, ask someone to write a sequential number on each notecard.

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Rules:

1. Ask team members to write in big, clear letters to improve readability. If the team uses notecards, encourage them to use the unlined side.
2. Use simple, direct phrases when writing process steps. A format of verb and object works best (e.g., "Insert ATM card"). Include a subject in the phrase only if it is not implied by the overall process name (e.g., "customer" is implied in the process title "Customer Gets Cash from an ATM"). When an action is taken by another role in the process, be sure to indicate that role - "ATM provides cash," for example. Always use active verbs and avoid using inactive verb forms such as "is" or "will be."
3. Encourage the team to focus on completing the "main path" – the shortest, easiest set of required steps.
4. The team may discover that the steps in an "exception path" should be written. Such a path leads to an incomplete or erroneous process outcome. Number these exception path notecards as well. Indicate where the exception path branches from the main path by writing on that "main path" notecard "go to," plus the number of the first exception path notecard.
5. The team may discover an "alternate path" should be written. This path leads to a complete and successful process outcome, but may require more steps than the "main path." Suppose there are two alternate paths beginning after "main path" step "3." Number the notecards in the first alternative path as "4A1, 4A2," and so on. Number the notecards in the second alternative path as "4B1, 4B2," etc. You can number the notecard where the two paths converge as step "5."

Notes:

1. "Post the Path" also works well in a one-on-one meeting with a stakeholder for understanding process steps. Use a stakeholder's desktop with sticky notes or notecards.
2. On average, a stakeholder team who is familiar with this technique can define the steps for a process in about 15 minutes.
3. These notecards provide high-quality data for producing a narrative use case or a process flow diagram. The stakeholders can review and improve the draft you provide.

Adapted from *Game Storming* by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanujo; O'Reilly Media, Inc; 2010