| Australian Academic & Educational Services (AAES)
| Journal of Business and Administrative Studies | Vol. 1, No. 1, 2024

Exploring the Historical Evolution and Core Principles of Six Sigma: From Quality Control to Strategic Business Improvement

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Received: 01 /1/ 2024; Published: 30 /1/ 2024

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Citation: Alsawalhah, A. (2024). Exploring the Historical Evolution and Core Principles of Six Sigma: From Quality Control to Strategic Business Improvement. Australian Academic & Educational Services (AAES), Journal of Business and Administrative Studies, *3*(1), 1-12.

Abstract

Background: Six Sigma is a structured, data-driven methodology for eliminating defects and reducing variability in any process; be it manufacturing, transactional, product or service. Although its roots are in manufacturing, Six Sigma principles have been applied to improve quality, reduce costs and increase customer satisfaction in many industries. This paper outlines the historical development of Six Sigma, explains the key principles and methodologies (DMAIC and DMADV), describes the organizational structure of Six Sigma, and discusses the change from a statistical quality control tool to a complete business improvement methodology.

Methods: This paper presents a literature review about the Six Sigma methodology, noting milestones in its history, the role of industries that pioneered Six Sigma, and the foundations of Lean. This paper includes many primary research articles, review articles, and other recent articles that provide greater insight into Six Sigma, its defined methods, critical success factors for implementation, and its future direction in the era of digital transformation.

Results: he paper traces the history of Six Sigma beginning with its development at Motorola in the 1980s as a response to the organization's pressing need for dramatic improvements in quality. It then focuses on three key evolutionary points in its path to popularity, including major strategic deployments by General Electric and how it made it popular, and made it relevant in terms of financial ramifications for enterprises. The authors outline the evolution of Six Sigma through three °generations" starting with simply eliminating defects, to delivering "value" enterprise-wide value. The authors provide a detail discussion of DMAIC and DMADV methodologies, and the tools associated with each. Importance of Lean thinking and Lean Six Sigma as a new development was discussed with an aim to address process variation and waste. The author identified several critical success factors for sustaining results including leadership commitment and implementing cultural change.

Conclusion: The historical evolution from a Six Sigma life cycle framework supports the value of Six Sigma as a holistic methodology that has wide-ranging applications for achieving operational excellence. Having begun as a set of statistical processes it is now a strategic imperative with shared goals across the organization. Gordon and Gaster (2011) indicate that Six Sigma projects produce improvements that are more measureable than previous quality improvement frameworks (TQM), and that the data standard used in Six Sigma is considered higher than previous frameworks. Future education and developments will see more integration between Six Sigma and digital technologies such as Industry 4.0, and subsequent developments in the area of advanced data analytics. Six Sigma continues to provide a relevant methodology with strong potential for creating value and improving the way organizations focus on the need for improvement.

Keywords: Six Sigma, Lean Six Sigma, DMAIC, Quality Management, Process Improvement, Operational Excellence.

1. Concept and Core Principles of Six Sigma

1.1 The Statistical Basis At its most technical definition, Six Sigma is a statistical approach to measuring process capability. The term "Six Sigma" refers to a level of process performance that has a yield of fewer than 3.4 defects per million opportunities (DPMO). This statistic is well-known in Six Sigma, and it derives from the fact that we assume our process mean may drift long-term by 1.5 standard deviations (sigma) (Montgomery & Woodall, 2008). While the 1.5 sigma shift is debated in terms of validity and universality (Breyfogle, 2003), the intent of the shift remains unchanged: the end state is close to 100% quality by vastly improving the amount of process variation to as close to zero as we can get. A process that operates at a six-sigma level has such consistency, that it would be accurate to say an organization's specifications are six standard deviations away from the process mean meaning defects are highly unlikely (Gupta, 2013).

1.2 Foundational Philosophical Principles Six Sigma, though principally a statistical construct, has evolved into a broader management philosophy, an orderly process for business improvement (Pande, Neuman, & Cavanagh, 2000), and its foundational principles are already established basis for implementation:

- True Customer Focus: Every Six Sigma project begins with a full understanding of the customer, including their needs, wants, and expectations, which can be explored by a variety of "Voice of the Customer" (VOC) techniques (Griffin & Hauser, 1993). Customer needs are converted to specific, quantifiable "Critical to Quality" (CTQ) characteristics to facilitate targeted improvement (Snee & Hoerl, 2003).

- Data-Driven, Fact-Based Management: Six Sigma is a structured way to replace guess work and assumptions with data and use of scientific inference methods. Decisions regarding what is to be improved, and how it will be improved, will be based on facts that can be verified (Harry & Schroeder, 2000). The operational premise Y = f(X) supports this principle, as it is understood that the output of any (given) process (Y), is a function of its inputs and process variables (X's). Therefore, if one wishes to control the output of a process, one must identify and control the critical inputs (George, Rowlands, & Kastle, 2003).
- Process Emphasis, Management, and Improvement: Work is understood to be made up of a series of interlinked processes. Six Sigma focuses on understanding, managing and improving these processes with a view to reducing variability, wasting fewer resources, and becoming more efficient to produce better products and services (Hammer, 2002).
- Proactive and Preventive management: This philosophy moves the organization's thought process from a reactive model based on problem solving (firefighting), to a more proactive mind set focused around preventing problems and continuous improvement in processes. It is fundamentally about incorporating quality into processes at the start of the process, not inspecting it in at the end (Eckes, 2001).
- Boundaryless Collaboration: Six Sigma emphasizes cross functional collaboration between various functions within the organization…to break down silos of separate departments which can inhibit the ability to improve an end-to-end process. Successful projects will require teamwork between different parts of the organization, such as finance, operations, and marketing (Snee, 1999).
- Drive for Perfection and a Willingness to Fail: The goals set forth by Six Sigma can be quite lofty; that is to try to reach near perfection. However, the methodology recognizes that improvement involves experimentation and learning. For that reason, any culture which accepts the calculated risks that it takes to fail being built into the "Improve" phase will lead to breakthrough innovations (Hahn, Hill, Hoerl, and Zinkgraf, 1999).

2. Historical Evolution of Six Sigma

2.1 Precursors and the Quality Revolution

The conceptual foundations for Six Sigma were created by each of the quality leaders of the 20th century. Walter Shewhart developed the first statistical process control (SPC) charts while at Bell Labs in the 1920s (Shewhart, 1931), which included the notion of controlling variation in a process. W. Edwards Deming introduced his 14 points for management and Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle to Japanese industry, emphasizing continuous improvement and management's role in quality (Deming, 1986). Joseph M. Juran presented the "quality trilogy" (planning, control, and improvement) and noted the cost of poor quality as a critical business measure (Juran, 1988). In the 1980s, Total Quality Management (TQM) appeared and blossomed into a broad-based movement. However, TQM did not have a consistent path to success-based implementation; it has been criticized for its lack of financial performance, minimal statistics, and tendency to deteriorate into a "program" rather than a coordinated business strategy (Montgomery & Woodall, 2008). Six Sigma built on the lessons of TQM in being more structured, project-based, and results-focused (Coronado & Antony, 2002).

2.2 The Genesis at Motorola (1980s)

Six Sigma as a formal, branded methodology was developed by Motorola in 1986. When faced with severe competition and high warranty costs, engineer Bill Smith, who is sometimes referred to as the "Father of Six Sigma," developed the core methodology at Motorola. He connected the statistical aim of a six-sigma level of quality to business objectives of defect reduction and cost avoidance (Harry & Schroeder, 2000). Under the strong leadership of CEO Bob Galvin, and with aggressive five-year improvement targets, Motorola created a culture which incorporated Six Sigma. They also communicated outcomes such as billions of dollars in savings, and in 1988 won the first Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, largely based on their Six Sigma initiatives, thus giving Six Sigma a platform of credibility (Folaron, 2003).

2.3 Strategic Popularization at General Electric (1990s)

If Motorola invented Six Sigma, GE (General Electric) and CEO Jack Welch made it famous. Welch launched a massive top-down Six Sigma initiative for the entire company in 1995, saying that Six Sigma was the most important thing GE had ever done (Hahn et al., 1999). GE also fundamentally changed Six Sigma - taking it from a quality tool used on the factory floor, and creating a tool that was a part of corporate strategy and the way of doing business. Welch required every manager at GE to go through some Six Sigma training and tied managerial promotions and bonuses to GE's successful implementation of Six Sigma (Slater, 1999). GE took Six Sigma beyond manufacturing - incorporating applications in transactional processes, financial services (GE Capital), and product development (Design for Six Sigma). GE's rigorous correlation of every Six Sigma project with a financial metric, as well as reporting billions of dollars in benefits, provided a compelling business case for Six Sigma that was impossible for other companies to ignore (Pande, et al, 2000).

2.4 The Rise of Lean Six Sigma (LSS)

With the maturation of Six Sigma, practitioners began to understand its powerful synergy with Lean principles, based on the Toyota Production System (TPS), (Womack & Jones, 1996). Lean seeks to maximize value for the customer by continuously eliminating "waste" (Muda), defined simply as any activity that takes resources for which the customer is not willing to pay value – such as the waste of overproduction, waiting, and excess inventory (Womack & Jones, 1996). Six Sigma seeks to eliminate process variability while simultaneously solving complex problems using statistical methods (George, 2002). In comparison, Lean Six Sigma (LSS) develops a stronger overall methodology for improvement. LSS is a new improvement tool which combines the strengths of both Lean (improving through efficiency) and Six Sigma (improving through variation consistency), which benefits processes in many areas such as: cost, quality, and speed (Snee, 2010). This integration of continuous improvement has now become the dominant paradigm for continuous improvement in many industries (Antony, 2011).

2.5 The Three Generations Model

The evolution of Six Sigma strategic emphases can be described in three generations: • Generation I (circa 1980s): Emphasis was placed on defect rate reduction and quality improvement specifically at the process level in manufacturing settings (e.g., Motorola). The primary objective was defect reduction. • Generation II (circa 1990s): Emphasis shifted to business performance, emphasizing that projects are linked and tracked to cost reductions and bottom line results (e.g., GE). • Generation III (circa 2000s-Present): The focus expanded to generating value for stakeholders including customers, employees, and shareholders. Includes using Six Sigma to create revenue, design new products (DFSS), and to look at the entire business system (Hahn, Doganaksoy, & Hoerl, 2000; Montgomery & Woodall, 2008).

3. Organizational Infrastructure for Success

Unlike previous quality initiatives, Six Sigma relies on a dedicated and structured organizational infrastructure to drive change and ensure sustainability.

3.1 Leadership Commitment and Champions The single most important critical success factor for Six Sigma is unwavering commitment from top management (Snee & Hoerl, 2003). This goes beyond mere endorsement; leaders must actively sponsor projects, allocate the best talent, and hold the organization accountable for results. **Champions** are senior-level managers who own the projects, remove organizational barriers, and ensure that improvement efforts are aligned with strategic business goals (Antony & Banuelas, 2002).

3.2 The Belt System Six Sigma :employs a hierarchy of trained professionals in project management assignments, modeled after the martial arts belt system:

• Master Black Belts (MBBs): The top individuals. They serve as in-house coaches, mentors, and trainers for the Black Belts and Green Belts employees. They are also vital for deciding which improvement projects would be appropriate for the organization to undertake, plus they provide advanced statistical support (Henderson & Evans, 2000).

• Black Belts (BBs): Full-time change agent/project managers directing complex, cross-functional improvement projects. Black Belts can receive an extensive training (typically 4-5 weeks) on the DMAIC methodology, an array of statistical tools, and project management skills (Hoerl, 2001).

• Green Belts (GBs): Employees that work on six sigma projects on a part-time basis completing their normal job functions. They supervise smaller projects in their own departments or are team members in large BB oriented projects (Kumar, Antony, & Douglas, 2009).

• Yellow Belts: Team players who have basic information about the six sigma concepts and tools, plus they participate in projects.

3.3 Project Selection and Financial Linkage

Six Sigma is a project-driven methodology. Projects are not chosen randomly; they are carefully selected based on their potential to deliver a significant breakthrough improvement and a measurable financial impact (Snee & Rodebaugh, 2002). This rigorous selection process, often guided by a formal project charter and validated by the finance department, ensures that resources are focused on efforts that provide the greatest value to the business. This direct link to bottom-line results is a key differentiator from TQM (Juran, 1988; Montgomery & Woodall, 2008).

4. The Core Methodologies: DMAIC and DMADV

4.1 DMAIC: The Improvement Cycle for Existing Processes

The DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control) cycle is the most commonly used Six Sigma methodology. It offers a structured, five-phase pathway to address problems and improve existing processes. The end of each phase has a "tollgate" review to evaluate project progress by champions before they give approval to continue (Pyzdek, 2003).

• Define: Objective: Clearly define the business problem, project goals, scope, and customer needs. o Tools: Project Charter, Stakeholders' Analysis, Voice of Customers (VOC) analysis, SIPOC Diagrams (Suppliers, Inputs, Process, Outputs, Customers), High Level Process Maps (Gupta, 2013).

• Measure: Objective: To create a baseline of current process performance condition and to verify the integrity of the data. o Tools: Detailed Process Maps, Data Collection Plans and process, Measurement System Analysis (MSA/Gage R&R), Process Capability Studies (Cp, Cpk), Run Charts, Pareto Charts, and Histograms (Breyfogle, 2003).

• Analyze: Objective: Use data to find, verify, and prioritize the root causes of a problem. o Tools: Fishbone (Ishikawa) Diagrams, 5 Who's, Brainstorming, Hypothesis Testing (t-tests, ANOVA), Regression Analysis, Correlation Analysis, Failure Mode and Effects Analysis (FMEA) (Montgomery, 2008).

• Improvement: o Objective: To create, test and implement solutions based on the root causes identified. o Tools: Design of experiments (DOE) for optimizing solutions, Brainstorming, Pugh Matrix for solution selection, Pilot Studies, Kaizen events (George, 2002) .

• Control: Objective: To maintain the improvement gains and ensure the process remains stable in the long-term. o Tools: Statistical process control (SPC) Charts, Control Plans, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), Mistake Proofing (Poka-Yoke), Process Monitoring Dashboards (Montgomery & Woodall, 2008).

4.2 DFSS and the DMADV Methodology: Designing for Quality

The customer needs or when a product or service is being developed for the first time, organizations will consider Design for Six Sigma (DFSS). The most common DFSS methodology is DMADV (Define, Measure, Analyze, Design, Verify).

• Define: Establish project goals and customer CTQs.

• Measure: measure customer needs and specifications and look at what the competitors do • Analyze: Analyze alternatives and develop and design high level alternatives.

• Design: Design the detailed process or product that will meet the customer needs. Simulations and modeling will often play a role in the design.

• Verify: Verify the design with pilot tests, implement the new process and ascertain that it performs at a six sigma level (De Feo & Bar-El, 2002; Snee & Hoerl, 2005).

Table 1. Key Differences between the DMAIC and DMADV Six Sigma Frameworks

DMAIC	DMADV
Focus: Improving an *existing* process.	**Focus:** Designing a *new* process or product.
Goal: Eliminate defects from a current process.	**Goal:** Prevent defects in a future process.
Method: Reactive problem solving.	**Method:** Proactive quality design.

SOURCE: from(Selvi & Majumdar (2014).

5. Critical Success Factors and Execution Issues

The success of a Six Sigma effort is not guaranteed; it relies on a specific set of critical factors. Research has established the following as important in regard to achieving sustainable results:

• Management Commitment and Leadership: Ongoing and visible senior level support can not be underestimated (Snee & Hoerl, 2003).

• Organizational Infrastructure: A clear structure of Champions and Belts is needed to implement projects (Hoerl, 2001).

• Cultural Change: Shifting to an approach that embraces data-based decision making, collaboration across functional silos, and continuous improvement (Schroeder et al., 2008).

• Appropriate Training: It is imperative to have a strict training program for all Belts in statistics, project management, and change management, including ongoing training (Kumar et al., 2009).

• Selecting Good Projects: Aligning

6. The Future of Six Sigma

Six Sigma will continue to evolve to meet the challenges of today's business world.

6.1 Integration with Industry 4.0 and Big Data Industry 4.0

with a focus on IoT, Big Data and AI, delivers an excellent opportunity to advance Six Sigma (Sony, Antony & Douglas, 2020). Sensory and systems create massive, real-time data streams that can be exploited to monitor processes within appropriate limits; Machine learning will enable the identification of root causes and optimization of processes, which was previously impossible. The ability to integrate with Industry 4.0 gives Six Sigma data science, deep learning, machine learning, or virtual reality to achieve results faster within the DMAIC cycle and with more informed business decisions (Yadav, Luthra & Garg, 2018).

6.2 Growth in Service and Transactional Industries

Six Sigma is still (from an origins perspective) inherently a manufacturing tool. However, it does have a great success record when applied to the service industries such as healthcare, finance and logistics (Antony, Gijo & Childe, 2012). In healthcare, Six Sigma has been used to reduce patients' waiting times, prevent medical errors and decrease infection rates (Woodall, 2006; Antony et al., 2006). In finance, some Six Sigma examples are the reduction of errors when processing loans, reducing errors in billing for customers and increasing their satisfaction index (Jones, 2004).

6.3 Sustainability and "Green" Six Sigma

More and more organizations use Six Sigma principles to further their environmental and sustainability objectives. "Green" Six Sigma employs the DMAIC framework to improve environmental performance and minimize operational cost by reducing waste and energy consumption and pollution (Duarte & Cruz-Machado, 2017).

7. Conclusion

The history of Six Sigma tells a great story from its initiation as a statistical quality initiative known at Motorola, to its current standing as an internationally recognized and accepted strategic business improvement process. The events in history also demonstrate the flexibility of Six Sigma with important milestones such as the popularization of Six Sigma by General Electric and the championship of methodology with Lean principles. The basic principles of improvement, focus on the customer, data-based decisions along with a methodology in structure (DMAIC and DMADV) supported by infrastructure has allowed organizations to make sustained improvements to their quality, efficiency and bottom line. I think Six Sigma's greatest contribution to organizations is integrating routinely problems solving, through a systematic way, based on projects that produces a culture of continuous improvement and organizational excellence. As organizations grapple with the challenges of the digital age, Six Sigma is well positioned to facilitate evolving once again using technologies such as integrating with Artificial Intelligence for the next level in performance breakthroughs. The essence of Six Sigma, the basic principles, is timeless which will always provide intrinsic value to organizations wanting to achieve world-class performance and sustainable competitive advantage.

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