

The IKEA Approach to Risk

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IKEA is the world's largest furniture retailer, with over 250 stores in 25 countries supplying about 12,000 products. The IKEA catalogue is published every year with 55 editions in 27 languages for 35 countries. Many people will be familiar with the iconic blue and yellow buildings, with a standard internal layout presenting home furnishings in naturalistic settings. IKEA products can be found in millions of homes around the world, characterised by functional design and clean lines. Most IKEA furniture is designed to be assembled by the consumer, so that people can build the furniture from the components when they get it home. This requires particular attention to the user instructions, to avoid unnecessary frustration and mistakes when the customer tries to assemble their new furniture at home!

IKEA user instructions use as few words as possible, with lots of pictures to illustrate the required actions. This is supported by an intuitive design which tries to make it obvious how the piece of furniture should be put together. The goal is to make the task of self-assembly foolproof, so that anyone can construct the furniture correctly just by following the simple instructions and using a few basic tools.

How different this is from most business process descriptions, including those that tell you how to do risk management! The majority of processes use words only, with few or no pictures. The underlying process design is not intuitive, so the user must refer to the process documentation to find out what to do next. The tools are not easy to use and often require specialist knowledge or expertise. And the process is certainly not foolproof, so people make simple mistakes that could easily be avoided.

Managing risk would be much easier if we adopted the IKEA approach to documenting the risk process. This means that we should:

- Provide a checklist of what is needed at the start, and clearly describe the intended outcome
- Use the minimum number of words, with diagrams illustrating the most important parts of the process
- Ensure that all instructions can be understood by a normal person, with no specialist jargon or technical language
- Design the process logically so that it is obvious what to do next
- Provide all the required tools and make sure they do exactly what is needed
- Use high-quality components that have been well tested and proved to work
- Check that nothing essential has been left out before we release the process

A common problem with self-assembly is lack of preparation. Everyone wants to start making their furniture as soon as they get it home, and they think they can do it without reading the instructions. Then they hit a problem and they have to go back to the documentation to find out where they went wrong. It would be much better if we followed the process first time.

This happens too with managing risk, when people believe they can do it themselves without having to follow a process. But a well-designed process can make it so much easier to succeed. If our risk process has simple steps in a logical order, described using few words and clear illustrations, supported by tools that work and are easy to use, then we will soon get the job done with minimum hassle and maximum satisfaction.