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Lean Six Sigma in healthcare and the COVID-19 crisis

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In this talk we reflect upon the ramifications of two decades of Lean Six Sigma implementations in Dutch healthcare institutions in the light of the current COVID-19 pandemic. We provide an evaluation of the impact that Lean Six Sigma implementations have had on the ability of Dutch healthcare institutions to respond adequately to healthcare needs during the COVID-19 crisis. An assessment of the impact of Lean Six Sigma implementations on the ability to adequately respond to the current COVID-19 crisis is made by identifying the type of improvement projects that take place and considering the impact on the resilience of healthcare operations.
It turns out that process improvement in healthcare has had a tendency to cut capacity and flexibility which are needed to deal with excessive demand shocks, such as during a pandemic. The main reason for this failure seems to be an overly strong focus on cost reduction instigated by Lean Six Sigma during stable times. We call for a more comprehensive approach of process improvement within healthcare that takes flexibility and buffering in anticipation of excess variability and disruption into greater account. Therefore this study affects the perception of how and to which aim Lean Six Sigma should be applied in process improvement.
Besides the research method being an inferential procedure, the research focuses on the Netherlands and so the generalizability might be limited. However, Lean Six Sigma to improve healthcare processes has found broad acceptance, so the implications may well carry over to other countries.

Keywords

Healthcare operations, Supply chain dependency, Process improvement

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