

Waiting for the next generation BPM



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Business Process Management (BPM) is becoming increasingly popular. New players, new solutions, new initiatives, they all are further on convincing us of the value of and the need for the process-driven enterprise. But are the expectations set correctly?

Last week, I attended the first plenary meeting of the Belgian chapter of the BPM Forum (www.bpm-forum.org). The BPM Forum wants to be an open, independent, not-for-profit platform for the exchange of BPM-related knowledge, best practices, ideas and opinions.

For this first meeting, there was a lot of interest and, even more important, also from the end-user community. The latter is a clear indication that BPM is gradually becoming mainstream.

Unfortunately, the general content of the presentations and some of the questions asked at the end of the meeting made me think that we might not yet be on the right track.

BPM is not the objective

First, we have to give the usual warning. Having or doing BPM is not an objective as such. Whatever the value BPM can bring you, it will not solve all of your problems. Business Process Management can help you becoming a better, more productive and more agile enterprise, but BPM is not an endpoint.

Indeed, having a perfect understanding and control of the behaviour of all of your business processes only partially enhances your ability for change and innovation. BPM will help you making better decisions, but BPM is no guarantee for always making the right decision.

Therefore, as any instrument, it has to be used wisely, which can mean for certain organisations that it must be used scarcely. Reaching too far for the "complete" solution will introduce undesirable overhead and operational rigidity outweighing the gains of the initiative. Some of the questions that were asked at the end of the BPM Forum meeting were clear indications that some users, once again, are hoping for the all-encompassing miracle solution. It is not.

Anyway, above argumentation is not the most important consideration. More important is the unfortunate observation that today's BPM is insufficiently focusing on the right target. Organisations should not manage business processes, they should manage participant interactions.

Business processes are not your business

Let's face it, today's BPM thinking, technologies and methodologies still are all squarely focused on the "us-thing": the organisation itself.

Of course, in many cases, significant BPM-benefits can be found within the organisation itself. However, most of these opportunities will address very traditional needs such as increased productivity, more effectiveness and cost reduction.

Again, these are all very desirable advantages and if you can use BPM to get these advantages, please do!

Nevertheless, you must also be aware of the reality that all such initiatives are on the road of diminishing returns.

Already for years, organisations are on the business improvement path with initiatives such as BPR, TQM, Six Sigma and now, outsourcing. All of them give you some incremental competitive advantage, for a while. Unfortunately, sustained competitive advantage needs something more and today's BPM is insufficiently focusing on this something more.

As we all know, Business Process Management is not exactly a new paradigm but has its roots already some 20+ years ago. With the recent wave of EAI-technology, new players entered the market and new capabilities became available and BPM got some kind of a revival. However, today's BPM still is very much the same game as several years ago.

In essence, what we call today a business process is only a sequence of activities, whereby information and objects are passed between a numbers of actors in a co-ordinated way. As such, this is hardly more "strategic" than an EAI-style integration, passing data between applications, transforming them, routing them. It is essentially a focus on the "how things are done". However, as with EAI, the "how" is not the most important aspect. The real focus has to be on the "what" that becomes possible at the "higher level".

Also business processes have their "higher level". Companies do not exist for the purpose of having nice business processes. Companies do exist in order to create some kind of value for two or more types of participants. Therefore, the focus of BPM or whatever acronym that will supersede it, has to be on this value creation and on the associated interaction between the various participants.

In addition, in today's evolving business environment, the notion of the "company" as we knew it before is gradually becoming an obscure artefact. While internationalisation and globalisation are extending the reach of organisations across the globe, other trends such as decentralisation, virtualisation, networking and outsourcing are growing the same organisations thinner and thinner, increasingly blurring the boundaries between "us" and "them". Therefore, organisations should no longer manage "their own" business processes.

Unfortunately today, hardly any BPM-tool or methodology adequately addresses such needs. How do you document complex inter-company interactions in your modelling tool? How do you define, let alone, simulate value creation? Can you drag-and-drop one of your departments into the partner space when you outsource their activities? How do you handle complex decision-making and risk assessment?

Lots of questions to answer and few solutions today. Nevertheless, this must not be a burden. Even without the availability of the appropriate tools, you can already envision the future direction and take this into account while making your decisions for the next BPM-steps. Perhaps, this will result in a more tactical and less all-encompassing BPM-strategy. However, knowing the right direction is always better than having the best GPS-tool.

Have fun!

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