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1. BPM is a relatively new three letter acronym in the alphabet soup of technology. Can you define *exactly* what it is both from a tech and non-tech perspective and help put it into context with some of the other three letter acronyms?

BPM is the role (management) assigned to someone or something to plan, organize, monitor, control and execute a set of actions (performed by activities, tasks, services) to produce deliverables required by other units of the organization and/or its customers, in response to requests received for these deliverables. As an IT acronym, it is a “something;” a suite of software that, given a plan (model) of the desired execution, undertakes to control and execute the assigned actions, and to provide feedback on how it is doing.

Most of the “other three letter acronyms” refer to specific, technical ways in which the preceding might be accomplished. For example, if many of the needed actions were encapsulated as digital services and provided with a standardized interface such as SOAP, then the deployed BPM would become a coordinator (orchestrator) for services of this type. As such it would use a particular “service-oriented” architecture to obtain and invoke these services (SOA). If the BPM were able to respond to and alter its execution strategy based upon events outside of the process itself, then it could benefit from an event driven architecture (EDA). Similarly, as a process is executing, it can spawn events and contribute to the EDA. These events can then be used for monitoring purposes within a more generalized business activity monitoring (BAM) layer of the overall architecture.

2. Everyone says about BPM “choose what’s right for you”? How do I decide that though? What are the right things to look for if my requirements are x, what if they are y, etc?

BPM is a relatively new technology, although some realizations of it are based upon previous generations of technologies, such as workflow or EAI solutions. As with the underlying processes themselves, there are many aspects to a process (e.g. events, resources, roles, tasks, triggers, rules, and data) and many dimensions associated with each of these. If the generic process aspects and dimensions a specific organization is concerned with aren’t likely to change, then the answer is simpler: look for usable BPM products that adhere to existing standards (where they exist) for those aspects of concern, and assure a degree of scalability for the selected vendor’s solution. Standards adherence is your insurance policy against a particular vendor disappearing (or a more attractive one appearing) as well as issues of inter-operability, particularly across organizational boundaries.

As organizations begin to use BPM, their process awareness tends to improve and they begin to see value in previously uninteresting aspects of a process, such as role assignments, “publish and subscribe” approaches to activity initiation, business rules abstraction, security and identity management, document meta-data, collaboration linkages among activities, and the like. What these represent is an increase in perceived complexity (and opportunity) that may not be readily accommodated by specific BPM vendor solutions. Here, the standard trade-off issues exist between initial simplicity and adoption, and longer-term complexity and the ability to accommodate that complexity. No simple answer here.

Learn what the range of BPM solutions are capable of regarding process management and the aspects they can explicitly represent and manage, then make a decision as to which of these are most important now and how many more of these can be accommodated in the future by a specific approach or vendor.

3. To what degree do business users *really* own the process? During process design, rule definition, execution, administration, analysis, optimization? Does this change over time?

I will go out on the limb here and say that if the affected business users don't feel that they own the resulting BPM-enhanced process, or at least the aspects and portions of it they're responsible for, then the overall implementation is doomed. Transfer of ownership *is* user acceptance. The earlier this transfer begins, the better chance it will occur. Underlying this is the rarely discussed issue of process metrics and their relationship to how the various process stakeholders are measured in their respective roles. This particular problem of metric misalignment becomes increasingly acute as one begins to cross functional boundaries (as most “real” business processes do) and far worse when organizational boundaries are breached.

Over time, it is inevitable that some form of process governance group, committee, team or assigned process owner takes over the role of acting on behalf of the “business users.” Many organizations doing BPM know this and have this process manager role conceived, if not designed, as part of their plan for introducing BPM into their organizations.

4. How are business rules incorporated into BPM? I worry that the rules will be set in stone once I deploy a process, and frankly, sometimes there are nuances in rules that I don't want to get lost in a process. Is this addressed by BPM? If so, what is the best way to address this problem?

The continuum of process-rules is just that, a continuum. Some BPM vendor offerings pay relatively little attention to the aspect of business rules as something separate and distinct from the execution/flow logic of a process. Conversely, some are dominated by rules. To be fair, formal standards for business rule representation are very recent; more so than those for business process execution and flow. More pragmatically, for the “normal” business process analyst it is often difficult to

distinguish whether something is a distinct and separable business rule, something that can and should be represented as part of a business process execution model's description, or simply left within the "black box" of an activity.

If you are concerned that rules might be "lost" in the behavior of low-level activities, and/or embedded in process model behavior that is not easily changed, then find a solution (they exist) that meaningfully separates out and co-manages both rules and process execution as separate entities (the process script, the rules base). It should be added that a third dimension, meta-data (i.e. the data about the data flowing through the system), should also be accorded separate but equal attention within a BPM development and execution environment.

5. How much "process improvement" should we do when we define a process for the first time? We have been told to start out defining the process "as is", so at least the current state is standardized. However, as soon as we start to work out what the process definition is, we immediately see places where it can be improved. It's hard to let those be and stick to defining the process "as is". What's the right balance?

Questions of this type have been asked since the beginning of "ADP" (ca. 1960): how much time, if any, should be spent on discovering an existing system, how much on diagnosing and developing new (improved) solutions, versus why not simply skip discovery altogether and move directly to the "better" solution? I would first observe that very few individuals, if any, actually know how the current system/process works. Making changes to an unknown system is rarely viewed as a good idea – too many possibilities for unintended consequences (the exception processing that actually governs system behavior). It also helps to know the current process if for no other reason than to demonstrate the potential (and ROI) for an improved process.

It has also been pointed out that a straight translation of the existing system, warts and all, may not be a bad place to start as the first implementation. It provides a familiar basis for existing users to gain experience with BPM. BPM then lends itself very well to rapid-cycle continuous improvement, given the inherent flexibility in the BPM platform itself. This gives the business users both ownership and a real sense of participation in improving the process.

6. What are the returns that are seen from BPM in business terms? What about in terms of IT?

I'm not able to "expertly" answer the question as posed. While there is lots of anecdotal evidence, none that I feel is generalizable at this point. Instead, I'll address the *types* of returns one should be seeking.

First, at the business level, BPM allows the level of discussion to be elevated to top-of-mind issues of C-level executives such as: agility, market innovation, customer experience, regulatory compliance, acquisition integration, value chain management and outsourcing, in addition to reducing transaction costs for both the customer and the company. BPM has the potential to contribute to each of these, but only if it is explained and viewed that way. I find it more useful, in fact, to talk about services (as delivered to users and clients), rather than processes when discussing strategic impact. While most senior management find business processes “boring” they understand the concept and business importance of services. It is easy to make the connection between services and their supporting, underlying business processes at the appropriate time. However, if BPM is introduced as a cost- or variance-reduction strategy, then it’s unlikely to yield much more than that.

At the IT level, BPM has the potential to give business users far greater understanding and control of their processes and, in combination with other technologies, such as SOA, to achieve a far greater level of responsiveness to rapidly changing needs. The question will be if IT is willing to enable, and then transfer, such control to business users? I believe there is a major shift in thinking about IT that’s embedded in BPM, namely a shift from application thinking to process (and service) thinking. This can, and should, have significant implications for the role of IT in modern organizations as a technology-enabling partner in the business-driven (and controlled) need for capturing, managing, improving, extending and innovating business processes and the services they deliver.

7. Why now? I’ve heard that there will be a lot of “shaking out” in this space. Wouldn’t it make sense just to wait till that’s done to see who’s still around before I get into this?

As with many new technologies, the learning time to fully assimilate and effectively use BPM will be significant. Not only for IT professionals, but as significantly for the managers, process analysts and users within the various business units whose processes are to be discovered, studied and improved. The specific BPM technology initially selected is secondary to developing an understanding of business processes and overcoming the problems of cross-functional process flows, such as the metric conflicts noted above or even, who is to be responsible for the resulting, managed process. Waiting until there are “clear winners” in terms of vendors may mean waiting a long time; far longer than your competitors are likely to wait. Finally, sticking to vendors who adhere to standards in this space provides a degree of insurance that your previous work will be compatible with other standard-compliant vendor platforms, should you decide to change vendors.

8. If I do decide to go about this, how do I get started?

Technologies such as BPM can and will have broad impacts on the organization. It will touch many people and will be “scary” to many of them, invariably leading to resistance. As such, the first priority is to gain top-level management commitment

and support. This means educating top management on the strategic capabilities and benefits of the technology as mentioned in my answer to question 6. As this is taking place, IT should establish a “skunk works” to bring in and try out alternative BPM vendor offerings. These should be evaluated against a “real” process; likely one that exists within the IT unit itself. Aside from gaining an understanding of the technology, it provides an opportunity for exploring alternative methods and models and to develop an initial methodology for discovering and improving business processes. As an aside here, while it is popular to adopt six-sigma style methodologies, take a hard look at what these methodologies are designed to accomplish and make sure that this is consistent with the improvement/innovation results one is trying to achieve via BPM. Once this is done and top management support is secured, then you should go after an important business process in a technology friendly area of the organization as a first undertaking (the so-called “low hanging fruit”).

I would also suggest that the introduction of BPM is a good opportunity to re-think how technology platform changes are justified. Rather than using older concepts of ROI, newer, options pricing models should be used as they do a much better job of capturing the nature of BPM as an enabling platform (option) against which a set of possible outcomes (with differing pay-offs and risks) can be achieved in the future.

9. What is going to make our organization successful or unsuccessful in BPM?

In the end, user acceptance and ownership. That is, the resulting business processes brought under BPM “control” are fully owned and managed by the business users, not IT. If you begin with this objective, and execute accordingly, then I believe everything else will fall into place.