A Practitioner's Perspective

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Process Architecture on a Budget – Part 2

My last column introduced a case study that involved developing an enterprise-wide process architecture without the usual time, expense, and intrusiveness. Hence the title – "Process Architecture on a Budget." That Column described the client, the background to the assignment, the framework used, the products developed, and how we achieved the all-important "executive commitment." You'll need to have read it to make much sense of this short column that wraps up the case study with a mix of observations and lessons learned.

A Goal

From previous writings, you might have noticed that I have a brevity problem – blog posts grow until they're more like columns, and my BPTrends columns have stretched to 8 or 10 pages, more fitting for a feature article. My last column ended by looking forward to this one and my wish that it "… will be the short Column I'd hoped this one would be." Starting now, I'm going to dial the column back to a more reasonable and less intimidating length. Wish me luck – like height and a full head of hair, this is something I'm not genetically programmed for.

What we'll look at in this column are some observations about the case study in three main areas:

1.   The use (or not) of published reference models as a starting point

2.   On-hand resources and artifacts that were helpful

3.   Difficulties with our "Enabling" and "Governance and External Relations" areas

The Use of Process Reference Models

Given that the goal was to develop the process architecture quickly and economically, it might be surprising that we didn't really use any of the available reference models on this project. Let's look at why, beginning with an example.

Last year, I worked on a response to an RFP from a large utility that wanted to develop the first few layers of their process architecture, a similar job to this "process architecture on a budget" case study. I avoid RFPs like the plague, but this time I threw caution to the wind and got involved. The prime respondent was a mid-size consulting firm that I respected, one that would take on the heavy lifting of organizing the response team and producing the document. I would stick to providing advice on one of my core areas of expertise, process identification and description.

The wrinkle was that the RFP stipulated the use of a utility industry process reference model as the starting point. Having been through this before, the response team knew that there was likely to be no saving in using a reference model. In fact, it would probably take more time with less satisfactory results than if process identification was done "from scratch" within the organization. To some, that's almost heresy, but bear with me.

Working through the Detail

The reference model, even if it's specific to your industry, will of necessity be quite generic at the higher levels – "Develop Product," "Sell Product," "Provide After-Sales Service," and so on. To gain support for the model, you'll have to make it more specific to your organization, and that

means getting down into the details. Unfortunately, you will discover a LOT of detail to work through, which in itself is time-consuming. Then, in order to have a credible high-level model, you'll have to eliminate some detailed activities, include others that are recognizably based on what is actually done in your enterprise, and, in all likelihood, identify some new ones. Much of this will have to be re-cast in terms that make sense in your organization, and then assembled into subprocesses, business processes, and process areas (per my last column) that are ultimately recognizable as "what we do." In practice, this doesn't add up to the hoped-for time savings.

Returning to that RFP… We proposed a "from scratch" approach similar to ones that had worked well for other clients, without relying on a reference model. Needless to say, we didn't get the job. Neither did a highly experienced colleague of mine who assembled his own response team. A little probing later revealed that the client didn't really want to do business with smaller bidders like us, although they were happy to receive some free analysis and ideas. They wanted to deal with a global firm that had already done this at other utilities so they could (in theory) take advantage of previous work. That's a good illustration of why I avoid RFPs – I might even do a column on the topic sometime.

The point of this is that we decided from the outset, on our "on a budget" project, that we wouldn't rely on off-the-shelf reference models to speed up our progress. I've checked with a few other professionals, and the story is the same: The reference models aren't as big a help as people hope they'll be. That isn't to say that we didn't use them at all, but we didn't use them as a starting point. Instead, one or two process reference models were used as… (wait for it) a reference. That is, we went to the reference models and scanned the relatively exhaustive lists of activities they contained to see if there was any clue to a significant area we had missed.

A Common Issue with Reference Models

This leads us to the real problem with some of the more popular process reference models: The term "process" is in the name, but the models themselves are much more functionally-oriented than process-oriented. If you're looking for the identification of end-to-end business processes, you'll be disappointed. A better term would be Reference Activity Model – a good catalogue of all the activities that an organization could carry out, but not organized into the "triggering event – activities – final result" chains that characterize end-to-end business processes. I won't name any models specifically, because their defenders tend to be rather strenuous, but I'd suggest a close look to see if the reference models you're considering are really going to help you in identifying processes as opposed to cataloguing activities.

Lesson:

There's a good chance the reference process models you downloaded from the Internet aren't going to make process identification easier, faster, or better. They might not even be "true" process models.

Available Resources and Artifacts

In order to develop the process architecture with minimal disruption to the work of the organization, we needed to find a way to gather raw material about the organization's core activities without conducting a great many interviews and sessions (or wading though too many reference models.) Luckily, some excellent resources and artifacts were at hand.

The Human Element

Time and again, we find that business analysts (or equivalent roles) aren't given credit for their knowledge of the organization and its processes. Even if they haven't explicitly worked on the identification of cross-functional processes, the BA (or other IT resource) is often fully aware of those processes because so much of their work involves "stitching together" the functional contributions that make up complete business processes. Presented with a significant activity that is carried out in one area, the BA is often able to link that with the preceding and with subsequent activities from other areas. Certainly that was the case at this organization: The business process analysts, from their extensive experience, had an excellent grasp of how things hung together.

Finding Activities to Link Together – Previous Work

Even with analysts who could link activities into complete processes, going through the hundreds or thousands of activities in generic reference models wasn't an ideal starting point. We needed something more specific to the client organization. Luckily, materials were at hand.

First, during a previous initiative, one of the analysts I was working with had developed a "service model" for each division of the agency. Each service model identified the core services that a division provided for internal and external customers. Essentially, each service represented a set of activities that collectively provided value. Some were close to being complete processes, but most would eventually be combined with services offered by the same or other divisions to form end-to-end processes. For instance, in one operating area, some of the 20 services that had been identified included (in no particular order)

- Approve Product
- Investigate Incident
- Conduct Inspection
- Issue Commercial/Residential Installation Permit
- Issue Commercial/Residential Operating Permit
- Conduct Site Inspection
- Issue Contractor License
- Conduct Disciplinary Event
- Resolve Inquiry
- Provide Technical Expertise
- Publish Safety Directives / Bulletins
- Grant Qualification
- and several others

Although we didn't do it on this project, with one of these as a sample it is possible to go to a group from another area and ask, essentially, "Alright, what about you?" A new service model can then be developed in a surprisingly short time.

Finding Activities to Link Together – HR Materials

A real gold mine turned out to be available from work that the Human Resources department had carried out. The responsibilities of each job title ("role") in the organization had been documented in a "Role Profile" that identified between 5 and 20 activities that comprised its core responsibilities. There were scores of these to go through, but they saved countless hours of interviews.

That isn't to say it was effortless! We went through these profiles and ultimately extracted several hundred statements of "what" that role did, in "action verb + noun" format. For instance, we wanted to get to activities such as "Schedule Site Inspection" or "Assign Fleet Vehicle." The starting point, however, was likely to contain a lot of "who, how, and why" information, with a liberal dose of embellishment to make the position sound more vital than it perhaps was. In fact, we noticed that roles that were at the core of the agency's operations tended to have very matter-of-fact descriptions that were easy to work with. The more "esoteric" the role, the harder it was to decipher the verbiage and figure out what was actually being done.

For instance, a phrase such as this hypothetical (but plausible!) example might be encountered: "…in partnership with internal and external stakeholders, using the full range of traditional and new media along with an integrative framework, disseminates relevant content that will enable self-sufficiency among business and residential constituencies."
Translation: "Publish procedures."

As with other resources, these activities were linked in a bottom-up fashion to identify many of the organization's business processes. The subtle value in this approach is that a suggested

business process becomes "provable" because you can point to the "real" activities (from the role profiles) that comprise it. A friend refers to this half-jokingly as "part marks for showing your work."

Lesson:

Roles, such as Business Analysts, and divisions, such as IT or HR, have a lot of knowledge that you should tap into.

Lesson:

Investigate whether previous projects have left artifacts that you can use.

Lesson:

Your Human Resources or Organization Development organization likely has a wealth of information on "who does what" – Seek it out and use it.

Issues with "Enabling" and "Governance and External Relations" Processes

As described in the last column, we started by scoping out four broad (and familiar) categories of business processes, with two of them excluded from our scope – Governance and External Relations, and Organization / Workforce / Project Management. For convenience, I've reproduced the overview diagram from the last column:
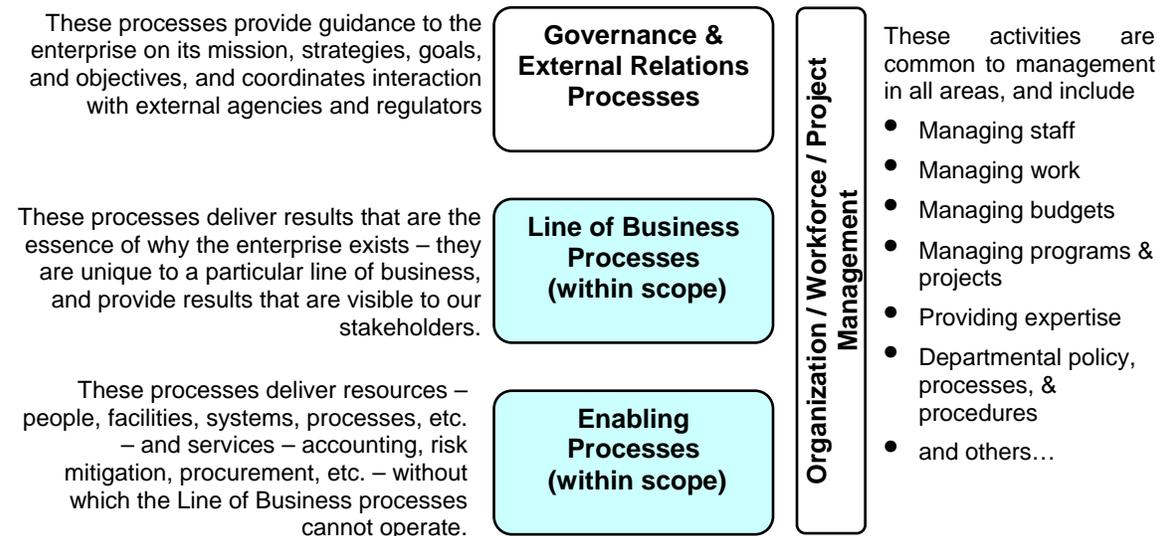

These processes provide guidance to the enterprise on its mission, strategies, goals, and objectives, and coordinates interaction with external agencies and regulators

Governance & External Relations Processes

These processes deliver results that are the essence of why the enterprise exists – they are unique to a particular line of business, and provide results that are visible to our stakeholders.

Line of Business Processes (within scope)

These processes deliver resources – people, facilities, systems, processes, etc. – and services – accounting, risk mitigation, procurement, etc. – without which the Line of Business processes cannot operate.

Enabling Processes (within scope)

Organization / Workforce / Project Management

These activities are common to management in all areas, and include
- Managing staff
- Managing work
- Managing budgets
- Managing programs & projects
- Providing expertise
- Departmental policy, processes, & procedures
- and others…

Figure 1. Framework for types of processes

We did this to contain the effort, using a framework that has worked well in the past. It worked well again, but didn't contain the effort quite as much as we'd hoped. More on that shortly, but first an important note on terms.

Where's the "Core?"

We used the terms "Line of Business" and "Enabling" whereas many of you will be more familiar with the terms "Core" and "Supporting." In fact, years ago, we used the terms "Social Supporting" to refer to processes that provided human capabilities and "Technical Supporting" for processes that provided systems, physical plant, and other non-personnel resources.

There's nothing wrong with the term "Supporting" and we would have happily used it – We just preferred "Enabling" because it sounded a bit more up-market. "Core," on the other hand, has caused some heartburn in the past, and there were indications it would cause problems on this job. The issue is that as soon as one collection of processes is labeled Core, the others become Non-Core which can lead to sensitivity and even resentment.

Certainly we wanted to avoid that, but the terms might also be inaccurate. I prefer the view (I think from Geoffrey Moore) that Core includes any processes that provide sustainable advantage. For instance, one Fortune 50 client explained to me that Recruiting was Core for them because it was the source of much of their advantage, even though it would typically be classified as Enabling. Conversely, a similar company explained that they had outsourced some Line of Business processes that would traditionally be defined as Core, but clearly weren't.

Throughout the project, we stressed that the Line of Business processes represented why the organization existed, and the Enabling processes allowed it to operate. However, neither was more important than the other because the Line of Business processes can't ultimately perform better than the Enabling processes that support them.

Other Complications

Scoping our effort as we did was the right thing to do, but it didn't constrain the effort quite as much as we'd hoped. First, many activities and processes that dealt with other regulatory agencies would typically end up in the out-of-scope Governance and External Relations area. However, because this was a regulatory agency, they migrated to the in-scope Line of Business area, creating more work for us.

Worse, the Enabling area ended up being substantially more work than expected. In hindsight, it had been many years (decades, in fact) since I had developed a process architecture for the entire Enabling / Supporting area. I had done lots of work on individual process areas, such as Human Resources and Facilities Management, but not the whole. In the intervening years, the Enabling area has grown larger and more complex, reflecting perhaps the larger and more complex organizations they serve. Processes that might previously have been a small part of some other area are now complete process areas in their own right. Risk Mitigation, Environmental Stewardship, and even Business Process/Performance Management are examples of process areas that would barely have showed up in a process architecture 25 years ago.

This also meant that the available reference models we had were even less helpful than hoped. Even if we couldn't get too much from them in the Line of Business area, we hoped – naively – that they'd be useful in the more generic Enabling area. Not so. We were surprised at how idiosyncratic this organization's Enabling processes were, reflecting their needs and environment, and bearing only passing resemblance to the reference model. Once again, more work was involved to identify and describe them. Finally, we found that the Enabling processes were quite different in nature from the Line of Business processes. In the latter area, there were fewer processes but they were "longer," involving more subprocesses and more parts of the organization. In the Enabling area, we found that processes were much shorter, more self-contained, and more transactional, like "Complete Benefit Program Enrollment." You'd think this would make life easier, but the result was more processes to identify and describe.

Lesson:

Be careful with the term "Core Processes" – it might not be accurate, and it might stir up ill will.

Lesson:

Don't underestimate the work involved in identifying your Enabling Processes – they might be more complex and less generic than you think.

Over and Out

It's not quite as short as I'd hoped, and it's more of a collection of observations than a story, but I hope this provides some useful advice for developing your process architecture.

Enjoy the summer, which is just around the corner.

From the Trenches
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