There is a lot of interest in Business Process Management (BPM) systems. There is growing literature on the topic. Unfortunately, most of the authors either assume you know what a BPM system is, or they offer a vague definition that doesn’t help all that much.

Rashid Khan has written the first book I’ve read that provides a truly practical definition of what BPM is, and then proceeds to describe exactly how a BPM Suite works and goes on to talk about the problems involved in actually creating a BPM application using a BPM Suite. Mr. Khan is well positioned to write such a book; he’s the founder and CEO of Ultimus, one of the leading BPM Suite vendors, and he has computer science degrees from MIT and UC Berkeley (as well as an MBA from Harvard). As we all know, of course, many of the books written by people who work for vendors turn out to be marketing pieces. This is an exception. Ultimus is mentioned a few times in this book, mostly when he discusses a case study in which the Ultimus product was used, but, overall, he approaches the topic as an analyst would, defining and examining an ideal solution for BPM development. This book is so even-handed that I would even recommend Appendix A: A Framework for Evaluating BPM Products. If ever there was an opportunity to slant an evaluation, this was it, but Khan plays it completely straight.

The problem with BPM is that it became popular almost overnight as a result of some rather vague pronouncements. Nearly everyone thinks that the notion of processes is a good thing, so the idea of using software to automate the management of processes would have to be good too, right? Some have suggested new theoretical underpinnings for BPM, but they aren’t a reality. Instead, we have dozens of vendors who were previously active as workflow, EAI, BAM, or web service systems developers, rushing to reposition themselves as BPM Suite vendors. Broadly, that’s OK, because there are lots of kinds of processes, and some approaches work better with some types of processes and not others. The bottom line, however, is how we decide on the minimum set of features that we should include in any product that we decide to term a BPM Suite.

Everyone seems to agree that a BPM Suite must be able to model business processes. Similarly, everyone agrees that a BPM Suite must have an engine that can execute the process model at runtime. Everything else seems to be up for grabs. For example, almost all workflow products support modeling and have workflow engines, so they qualify, right? But what if the process in question is entirely or largely automated? Then you need Enterprise Application Integration (EAI) capabilities. In fact, it could be argued, as Khan does, that EAI products are, essentially, software process management engines, just as workflow products are employee process management engines. A good BPM Suite needs to combine Workflow and EAI. To be efficient, it needs a high-level BPM model that can use either a workflow or an EAI engine as occasion demands.

Increasingly, we are also going to have to figure out how BPM servers, like IBM’s WebSphere Business Integration Server and Microsoft’s BizTalk Server, fit into the BPM picture. Does a server, like BizTalk or WebSphere, serve as the BPM
engine, or does it supplement it, providing functionality for EAI and other infrastructure functions? And then there’s BAM. Should a BPM product just include the ability to report on process activities? Or, should it go beyond incorporate data warehouse capabilities or Business Intelligence analytics to enable senior management dashboards? Obviously, there’s no one correct answer; different BPM vendors and different users are going to opt for different solutions. At this point, however, what we need is a reasonably objective book that surveys the options and explains the pros and cons of the various choices, and that is just what *Business Process Management: A Practical Guide* does.

Khan approaches the topic systematically, building definitions and establishing the pros and cons of alternatives. A quick look at the table of contents provides a good idea of the flow of the book:

1. A Brief Introduction to BPM
2. Workflow Automation
3. Enterprise Application Integration
4. The Emergence of BPM
5. Inside Business Processes
6. Smart Ways of Routing Work
7. BPM Solution Architectures
8. Business Process Modeling and Analysis
9. BPM Server and Administration
10. BPM Process Development
11. Workflow Client: The End-User Experience
12. BPM Reporting and Monitoring
13. BPM and Application Integration
14. Web Services, BPM and the Internet
15. Case Studies in BPM

Appendix: A Framework for Evaluating BPM Products

The book is well written and easy to read. The illustrations are clear and support the points that Khan wants to make.

I do have some quibbles with this book. I wish he had spent a little more time on some of the standards work and how it will likely affect future products. For example, I would have liked a discussion of BPMN or the OMG’s process definition metamodel and XMI. More broadly, I would have liked a little more on how a company might organize several BPM applications into an enterprise BPM system.

In a sense, however, it is unfair of me to ask for this. Khan has succeeded by sticking with what actually exists and with what can be done with available technology. As I said earlier, this is a practical book. If you want to know what BPM is all about and want a clear, precise statement of what is possible and practical, today this is the book to read.

For the foreseeable future I will be recommending this book to everyone who wants to read one book in order to learn what BPM systems are and what would be involved in developing a BPM application. There is nothing else available today that compares.