

Sieves, Mechanical Processes, and Pragmatics: A Response to Harrison-Broninski's Response to My November 15th BPTrends Email Advisor.

Paul Harmon

I like colorful metaphors as much as the next guy, so I don't mind Keith Harrison-Broninski's suggestion that BPMN is a "sieve" that will sink once it sets sail. I think the metaphor is mistaken, but it's a colorful way to indicate that you disagree.

I'm a bit more disturbed, however, by the use of the dichotomy that seeks to classify processes as either mechanical or human processes. I spent most of my time in the Eighties studying Artificial Intelligence and Expert Systems and know just how hard it is to specify exactly what distinguishes a computer system from a human reasoning system. I know that most of the processes humans undertake can be modeled as states and transitions. I also know that computers can use rules and inferencing, or neural networks, to handle problems that are dynamic and innovative. In any case, since I know that the people promoting this distinction plan on automating the processes that they refer to as "human," I suspect that this dichotomy isn't really very useful.

The real issue, as I see it, isn't the "nature" of the process; it's the ability of the notation to help business managers understand processes. Harrison-Broninski and others who argue for RAD are computer scientists. They grew up using workflow diagrams in computing and apparently associate them with computers. I come from a very different tradition. My graduate work is in psychology. I first encountered "workflow diagrams" when I went to work for Geary Rummler in the late Sixties. We used simple workflow diagrams to help business people describe what they did. We didn't focus on processes as candidates for automation. We weren't interested in automation and neither were our clients. We were focused on describing how people worked together to accomplish company goals. We would use a few boxes and arrows to describe the steps bank officers would go through to assemble a complex loan package, or how sales people would organize their sales effort. In particular, we used diagrams that had "swimlanes" -- an innovation that I associate with Geary Rummler -- which indicated which department, individual or role that was responsible for which activities in the process. Rummler always situated the customer on the top lane in any diagram to constantly remind everyone why they were doing the process and focus everyone on the dynamic, human interactions with the customer. (Years later, in the early Nineties, I personally provided Grady Booch with documentation about the Rummler-Brache swimlane notation when the UML task force was considering adding swimlanes to UML activity diagrams, thus introducing this "human process documentation" technique into UML activity diagrams.) I say all this to say that I do not necessarily associate workflow diagrams with software diagramming or with machines. Much more important, Rummler-Brache, I, and many others have used Rummler-Brache diagrams for 35 years to teach business managers to analyze, model, and improve their processes.

I don't think the notational elements make much difference. I think the key is the rigor with which you attempt to define the processes. Business people normally seek to define processes in a more general, generic way. They don't focus on exceptions. They assume that a box that says "Complete Application" describes human activities and that the people involved with conduct whatever dialogues they need to undertake to complete the application. Thus a high level workflow diagram without decision points or exception handling pathways is usually sufficient to define how a high-level process works and to suggest ways in which it might be improved. Software developers invariably need to refine these diagrams and add more paths and specifics before the more generic business level models can be used for software development. (For a good example of this, check the book review on *Learning to See*, which describes the high-level

Value-Stream Mapping notation used by many Lean practitioners.)

As further proof of this, consider that the Supply Chain Council (SCC), a group made up almost entirely of senior supply chain managers, use simple workflow notation to describe how the major steps in a supply chain are related together. These business managers have no trouble thinking of their processes as sets of boxes and arrows. Moreover, they find swimlanes useful as they drill down to their “level 3 diagrams” to indicate who does what. One suspects that there are human processes taking place in most major supply chains, and that these supply chain executives have no trouble thinking of those processes taking place within the context of their “workflow” diagrams.

A case study developed by Harrison-Broninski has been posted on BPTrends this month. It contains a RAD diagram of a Business System-Support Process. To my eye, that diagram is just a complex version of a Rummler-Brache swimlane diagram, turned on end. If you reduced it to swimlanes, boxes, and arrows, I think it would make it easier for most business people to understand. Obviously there a lot of subjectivity about what looks simple to whom. All I can tell you is that I’ve worked with lots of business people. Most weren’t interested in automation, and workflow diagrams have always worked just fine.

Now let’s get back to the main point I made in the BPTrends Advisor I wrote on November 15th. If we want to get business managers to rely on process modeling and to create diagrams as readily as they create spreadsheets, we need a simple, standard notation. It doesn’t make much difference about the specifics, but we need to settle on one notation and stick with it to avoid confusing people. BPMN, with its rectangles, arrows, diamond decision points, and swimlanes is about as simple and straight forward as you can get. It’s now an open standard and it has momentum behind it. Thus, it is by far the best candidate on the scene today. RAD diagrams, as far as I’m concerned, are just one more idiosyncratic variation on the basic concepts that’s being pushed by a small group. I’m sure RAD advocates believe their diagrams add something. Similarly, everyone promoting a special notation thinks their diagrams add something. But if we are to arrive at a common notation, we’ve got to decide if the little differences really amount to an important difference. This is what standardization is all about.

I am NOT concerned with the fact that more elaborate versions of BPMN can be used as designs for software systems. That’s nice, but irrelevant as far as I’m concerned, since most of my work is with business managers who are just trying to figure out how the current sales process works and what can be done to improve it. I’ve used Rummler-Brache diagrams for years and have never had any trouble explaining them to business people who don’t otherwise know about modeling. The high-level BPMN diagrams are simply the latest version of the popular Rummler-Brache diagrams that a generation of business managers has used with success. It’s my belief that they provide an excellent and sufficient basis for high-level modeling.

Paul Harmon is the Executive Editor of Business Process Trends, the author of Business Process Change, and a consultant who works with executives to help them incorporate process approaches into their organizations.