

The Power of Mobile-Enabled BPM

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Remember when everyone had to be sitting in front of a computer to use the internet? It was a given: the only way to use email or check stock quotes or sports scores on the web was to be chained to a desktop, or maybe a laptop that was within 50 feet of a wifi hotspot. Nowadays, it is commonplace to do all of those things and more on a phone while otherwise engaged in meetings, stopped at a traffic light, or in the airport; some people don't even use their computers anymore. But while many of us have changed our access patterns to be much more portable and real-time, many enterprise systems have not kept up with the times. Are your company's BPM systems stuck in the last decade?

Traditional BPM systems still make many of last decade's technology assumptions. Process participants and observers are always at their desks, in front of a computer. If a participant does not respond fast enough, an escalation occurs, which usually just routes a task to another participant, hoping that person is at a desk. Rarely does anyone ask whether it is a valid assumption that all workers should be at their desks completing tasks. Additionally, the navigation patterns of traditional BPM systems assume that users have a lot of screen real estate to drill through pages of reports down to dashboards and view process data in large volumes. New BPM processes or cases are only started when someone can drill through a portal to the start page, because after all, who would ever need to start a case when not seated at a desk?

A particularly acute case in which the desktop-as-a-ball-and-chain assumption is often proven false is the case of executive involvement in enterprise systems. Anyone who has ever worked with a group of stakeholders to gather requirements for one of these systems is familiar with the situation: the big boss isn't going to log in. No matter how important we say it is for him or her to complete approval tasks and be involved in the process, the reality is that executive is on the road visiting customers, in meetings ten hours a day, or out in the field checking on operations. The last place to find him or her is sitting at a desk using a web browser. Worst of all, the executive's role in the process is typically fairly minor, just stamping out the last in a series of approvals, but it is a key bottleneck to process completion. Some project teams choose to work around this situation by letting an executive assistant approve decisions "on behalf of" the executive, which can create a multitude of problems, not the least of which is that the system is no longer delivering the high-level visibility that it promised.

In the second decade of the millennium, people expect systems to be real-time and multi-platform. People communicate in 140-character twitter posts en-masse. Photos are snapped with phones and uploaded to Facebook in real time. Teenagers follow the status of their 500 closest friends, all at once, with the flick of a thumb. So why doesn't business move at the same tempo? Why can't a sales manager see a real-time view of a pipeline on a phone? Why can't he or she follow a stream of the leads, proposal deliveries, and wins and losses with the same flick of a thumb? Why can't a retail worker who is walking the aisles and notices inventory doesn't match up snap a picture and start a reconciliation process? The answer is that while the technology to provide this level of visibility and flexibility exists, IT departments are still designing business systems like it is 2005. I say we should welcome corporate, and even government IT into the new decade, and mobile-enabled BPM is the first step.

At the worker level, mobile-enabled BPM allows the people who are in the field, executing on the business's priorities to start a new process in real-time when an incident occurs, just like uploading pictures to Facebook from a phone. The applications of this approach in retail, construction, and any other industry that features non-desk job descriptions are nearly endless. Workers back at the office can start analyzing the data that is coming in from the front lines and respond much more quickly than in the old paradigm, where issues encountered in the field were often batched up and submitted for processing later. Service level agreements can be improved and lived up to more often. The customer experience can benefit from real-time information and problem resolution. Data accuracy in the systems for network-oriented activities like sales leads, recruiting events, and marketing conferences can improve as those leads are entered, processed, and even followed up on in real time. Managers and executives can follow a feed of the key events of their businesses and take action to improve results, all with the tempo they expect from this decade's technology, not last decade's.

At the executive level, mobile-enabled processes provide the visibility that BPM has always promised, but on terms that the executive can use to derive value. Now, the executive has the opportunity to log into the system from anywhere. He or she can approve key business decisions with the swipe of a thumb, in an airport. The business feed for the executive can include higher-level events such as KPIs that were just pushed out-of-range by an event or data point, rollup reports that appear in the feed on a schedule, up-to-date customer satisfaction numbers, and individual events like big deals closing that meet a threshold of importance and warrant a post to the feed. Again, the executive follows his or her business as it streams by and can pause or drill into any event or metric of interest to increase the granularity.

The technology of the new decade is driven by consumers who want flexibility over geography, platforms, and data exposure, but corporate and government IT systems have not kept pace with the tempo their users could and should be working at. Outside of work, people check email, follow targeted information feeds, and interact with each other on their phones. After years of technologies like Facebook and Twitter showing consumers what technology can do, it is time BPM systems start taking advantage of the new paradigm and exposing data, events, and tasks to their users with greater flexibility.

Author

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