

The Third Wave

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We were once asked by an erstwhile BPM guru how we would prevent the IT industry distorting our ideas and using our terminology to sell what they already had. Oh we said, that's easy, we'll just communicate clearly about what BPM really is. Despite 50 articles and two books, how naive we were. It's happened.

Journalist Cath Everett braved the vendor rhetoric stating, "Business process management (BPM) must be one of the most confusing terms the IT industry has managed to unleash on its long-suffering customers. BPM is touted as the latest must-have, all-singing, all-dancing cure-all for organisations desperate to boost productivity and efficiency. But what it actually comprises is nigh-on opaque to the average IT director. The situation isn't helped by the wealth of so-called BPM vendors merrily trying to put their own spin on the technology. So what is BPM? And why are so many suppliers gagging for a piece of the action?" Why indeed?

Long suffering customers may be an understatement. The current BPM haze and multiple definitions are all too common a pattern in an industry for which the term overcapacity is an understatement. There are as many definitions of BPM as there are vendors, and solutions vary wildly. Analysts add to the confusion by neatly placing them on the same charts. The vendors use the term BPM, and then scurry about getting added to the charts. Hundreds on the chart? No problem; prune them against revenue. Some interesting companies appear on the chart but are not yet generating revenue? No matter, call them visionaries and encourage them to do better next time around. It seems that according to some analysts, the most appropriate BPM vendor is the one that has the most revenue and uses the name BPM. Forget the fact they don't offer the true BPM breakthrough; that's just a spurious detail. No need to worry customers about that, they are not analysts and wouldn't be expected to understand. It almost seems that it's better to keep customers buying from the same vendors with whom an analyst firm has a long-standing relationship.

This is how it goes. Someone invents something truly innovative, the Business Process Management System (BPMS), and everyone wants a piece of the mind share, with little regard for the fundamental underpinnings of the innovation. The analogy in the car industry would be if the first 4WD vehicle was unveiled at a car show, and, almost overnight, all other cars were suddenly re-launched in "4WD" versions, whether or not they are fully designed for the off-road use that made 4WD unique. Using IT industry logic, this would presumably be justified on the basis that they had 4 wheels and that drivers had so far failed to notice that a sedan is still a sedan, designed for city streets, even with the 4WD label attached. Caveat emptor. Painting lipstick on a pig, however useful the pig was for different purposes in the past, won't win today's beauty contests. Far too many IT vendors are contorting the meaning of the BPMS. A variety of techniques are used, sometimes in combination. It's an age-old lipstick trick in the IT industry:

1. Claim you have the new new thing right away.
2. Re-define the new new thing to be closer to what you already have.
3. Paint lipstick on your existing product to look like the new new thing.
4. Spread muck so as to stifle the real new new thing (especially effective is a shift in technical standards).



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5. Hope that the real new new thing will take time to spread to your customers, giving you time to catch up.
6. When the time comes to compete head on, re-define *your* new new thing to be the *next* new new thing, cutting the legs off your opponents (this is especially effective if you are an incumbent).

Let's be clear. Everyone is free to innovate. Everyone is free to imitate. Free speech exists. No one company owes any other company anything. And many companies that jump on bandwagons are well-intentioned and do so entirely in the interests of their shareholders and customers. Yet perhaps unique among industrial sectors, the IT industry appears, to many companies that buy IT products and services, to be a master at opaque marketing, misrepresentation and near-false claims. As an industry, spurred on by analysts, it is also burdened with an obsession over the invention and use of acronyms. Any sexy new acronym that starts to attract customer interest quickly becomes a honey-trap for vendors of all types. In their desperation, they chase new value and elicit, from customers old and new, dollars to invest in new features coincident with the features implied by the acronym. The acronym is a proxy for real, imagined, old and new features.

Reflecting on the way another sector of the IT industry developed, Thomas Davenport points out in *What's the Big Idea?* that, "Knowledge management did have problems as a new business idea, however. One issue was that too many people—particularly IT vendors—conflated the of knowledge technologies with the successful management of knowledge. Sometimes this was done in rather obvious ways. One of us, for example, remembers speaking at a KM conference in Florida. At the beginning of the conference, each attendee's seat was graced with a new publication, *KM World*. How nice, we thought—KM now has its own little newspaper. On examination, however, we discovered that the paper was chock-full of press releases from imaging and document management technology vendors, with only a thin veneer of KM articles on the front page. Only the previous week it had been known as *Imaging World*."

Three parties suffer in this new new thing game: the genuine innovator whose ideas are distorted and obscured; the customer who misses out on new value; and the IT industry itself, whose reputation suffers (once again) and whose entrenched incumbents continue to milk or bilk customers using, in some cases, with little more than marketing slogans. And the guardians of the customer interest, the IT industry analysts that produce expensive reports, what do they do? To an industry outsider, could it appear that it's in IT analysts' interest to maintain confusion about where the *real* new new thing lies, and what precisely the new new thing is? You betcha. As analyst firms mix analysis with consulting, and consulting for the vendor with consulting for the customer of the vendor's offering, it is not always clear where the customer's interests lie. (Didn't we just have that problem with big accounting firms that also offered auditing and IT consulting services? Many of the big accounting firms have spun off and renamed their auditing and IT consulting practices—to avoid scandals and even jail.)

Fortunately, previously burned CIOs are now starting to treat analyst reports with more rigor. To these vigilant CIOs, the reports serve as a starting point for due diligence, but little else. As a result, some companies are discovering the



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actual innovation in BPM, the BPMS. Will they be enough to preserve this innovation for all companies, or will the IT industry's immune system rise up to kill it out? Only time will tell. What is sure is that unless the new new BPMS is understood in depth and with clarity, marketing-savvy IT incumbents will continue to shape the BPM moniker in their interests. If companies want BPM to be more than a marketing slogan, with a hundred vested-interest definitions, they too have to stand up and be counted, instead of blindly yielding to incumbents and abdicating due diligence to analysts.

