Innovation

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Accelerating Business Innovation: Five Unique Traits of Business Process Management that Facilitate Agile Development

Introduction

 "We need to be able to develop and deploy new processes within one or two weeks." This jarring request came from one of our customers in the banking sector that is planning for rapid growth and changes in the banking industry. This customer is seeking to introduce innovative services and products to better support its growing customer base.

From antiquity, innovation has served as the catalyst for economic growth. Do it faster, do it with less, do it better. Over the latter half of the 20th century, information technology stepped up to the plate to solve two parts of the innovation equation: Do it faster, and do it with less. Through the 80s and 90s, information technology (IT) budgets mushroomed to accommodate the demand to deliver innovation. In many ways this emphasis on "IT-driven innovation" fostered an increasing divide between IT departments and the business units they support.

Now, in the early years of the 21st century, organizations are waking up to the notion that IT is not always the silver bullet for driving business innovation.   While IT departments might have been ideal for solving the "do it faster" and "do it better" parts of the innovation equation, IT has not always been able to deliver on the latter portion of the equation. Only true collaboration between business and IT has resulted in "doing it better" and driving real innovation to the marketplace.

Over the last five years business process management (BPM) has emerged as a platform and a discipline that supports the needs of business and IT for driving innovation and business value. In its first incarnation, BPM was positioned as a technology platform for modeling and automating basic workflows. However, as a tool it was primarily geared towards IT teams; although it was pitched as being "easy for business analysts to use."

In its latest incarnation, BPM technology has merged with agile development methodologies and business optimization principles to provide a framework that accelerates business innovation. Instead of taking 6 to 9 months to introduce new innovation to the marketplace, organizations are using BPM to deliver innovation in 14 to 90 days. As a discipline and a technology platform, BPM has five unique traits that allow organizations to accelerate business innovation:

1. Shared development between business and technical teams;
2. Flexibility to accommodate changes to requirements and customer demands;
3. Reuse of existing business services;
4. Rapid prototyping and stakeholder buy-in;
5. Streamlined testing and deployment.

Within many visionary organizations, these five traits have positioned BPM as the de facto

standard for reducing time-to-market for delivering innovative services and products.

Shared Development between Business and Technical Teams

Analysts such as Forrester and Gartner assess market position based on how well an organization is able to execute on its vision. It's great to come up with good ideas and have a powerful and compelling vision. However, if you are unable to execute on this vision it will mean little in terms of driving business value to the organization.

In many cases this "failure to execute" is the result of a disconnect between those that come up with the vision and those that carry out the vision. When designing a new service or customer experience it is critical that business and technical teams see "eye-to-eye" on how the new offering will function. Traditionally, new service or product offerings are documented in the bowels of thick requirements documents developed by the business. These requirements are usually tossed over the wall to the

In contrast to the traditional "toss it over the wall" approach, BPM provides a platform for business and technical teams to collaborate throughout all phases of product and service development. BPM's process design and modeling capabilities allow business and technical teams to share design responsibilities and to define a clear vision of how the new service or product offering will function. In many cases, process models can be developed and agreed to within days instead of months.

Flexibility to Accommodate Change

Business stakeholders have become accustomed to hearing "it's too late to change the requirements." With most traditional approaches to implementing new services, requirements are typically locked once the implementation begins. However, BPM provides a flexible framework that accommodates changes and enhancements to requirements throughout implementation. As the business develops a clearer vision of the service, new features and changes can be prioritized and incorporated into the design. This capability is a key characteristic of agile development.

The reality of today's business environment is that processes and requirements are likely to change before a new service or product is released to the market place. If designed properly, new service offerings can even anticipate potential changes and streamline the process for making those changes. For example, if a new service must adhere to regulatory requirements that are subject to frequent changes, then you could codify these regulations as external business rules that can be updated on the fly by the business. This eliminates the need to capture new requirements, implement updates, and re-deploy the solution.

Reuse of Business Services

In order to accelerate business innovation and reduce time-to-market, organizations must leverage existing business and technical assets. This means identifying processes and services that have already been defined and implemented, and reusing these services whenever and wherever possible. While this is the manifesto of Service-Oriented Architecture (SOA), it does not always mean going through a major enterprise architecture exercise to reap the benefits.

BPM simplifies incorporating existing assets, whether those assets are web services, Java applications, databases, or legacy systems. For most organizations, BPM offers a cost-effective approach to exploring the possibilities of SOA without making the long-term commitment that is typically required by SOA.

As business and technical teams define business processes, they are able to easily identify possible services that can be reused and incorporated into the solution. Additionally, these teams can identify where new services might need to be created and published to be used by other processes and applications throughout the organization.

The Government of Bermuda embarked on an enterprise-wide initiative to automate key Government to Business (G2B) and Government to Consumer (G2C) processes. As part of this initiative, the island's Department of e-Government has been conducting process discovery sessions with different ministries and departments. "Each one of our process discovery sessions has uncovered a business service that could be shared across different Departments and Ministries," reports David Atwood, Director of e-Government for the Government of Bermuda. "We anticipate as these new business services are deployed, development time will be dramatically reduced as a result of service reuse."

Rapid Prototyping

Throughout the cycle of defining and developing a new service or product, business and technical teams must gain buy-in and acceptance from stakeholders. In most cases this means demonstrating key functionality of the service or product before it is fully developed. Prototyping how features and functionality will work can consume many precious cycles.

Most BPM platforms provide built-in functionality for prototyping the user experience to be provided by a new service or product offering. This prototyping capability allows teams to accelerate buy-in from stakeholders and to move quickly on the most valuable features identified by stakeholders.

"We have dramatically increased the velocity of solution development using the prototyping tools provided by BPM," says Chris Bissert, President of Bissert Consulting. Bissert works with companies deploying emerging technologies such as BPM.

Additionally, BPM provides capabilities to simulate proposed process improvements in order to assess potential return on investment and organizational impacts. This capability is critical to fast tracking innovation, as it validates and confirms that the anticipated results are attainable.

Streamlined Testing and Deployment

Agile development emphasizes short "time-boxed" iterations for building and releasing features and functionality for a solution. Most agile projects involve anywhere from three to five iterations with each iteration requiring the full complement of design, build, and test.

In order to successfully implement agile projects, teams must put a deployment infrastructure in place to support quick deployment and user testing over very short cycles. Typically, the development team will only have one or two days to migrate features from the development environment to the test environment.

Most BPM platforms already have key infrastructure components required for deploying solutions to the enterprise. This includes single sign-on, portal integration, version control, and many other administrative components. The infrastructure provided out of the box by BPM is arguably one of the most critical factors in speeding solution development. Instead of trying to recreate role-based access and security features, teams can focus the bulk of their time on building out features that are valuable to stakeholders.

Using the infrastructure and deployment tools provided by BPM, the typical build and deployment to test or production takes hours instead of days.. This rapid deployment capability becomes more critical with agile development given the fact that user testing is conducted between iterations. As users uncover defects, these issues must be fixed and re-deployed within tight timeframes between testing cycles.

Conclusion

Time-to-market is a key aspect in determining whether a new service or product is perceived as "innovative." If your new service is introduced to the market three months after your competitor has introduced the same service, then your offering will be viewed as a "laggard" and will not be considered innovative. In order to accelerate innovation, business and technical teams must

collaborate effectively throughout analysis, design, and development. BPM has matured as a technology and a discipline to support driving business innovation to market. Combined with agile development methodologies and business optimization principles, BPM provides a framework for quickly defining and deploying innovative solutions.

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