



BPM and the New Enterprise

Rashid N. Khan

CEO & Cofounder

Chatty Solutions

rashid@ChattySolutions.com

www.ChattySolutions.com

Latest book:

Business Process Management:

A Practical Guide

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The Case for Mobile BPM

In my last Column, [Smartphones: The Ultimate IT Platform for the New Enterprise](#), I argued why I believe that smartphones will become the ideal platform for running Web and SaaS applications. If one accepts that premise, the next obvious question is about the feasibility of “mobile BPM” allowing smartphone users to participate in business processes orchestrated by a BPM system. This is not a new idea. Other enterprise applications such as CRM (Salesforce.com), ERP (SAP), and accounting/financials (NetSuite) already support smartphones to varying degrees. The real question is why is BPM lagging in the support of smartphones, and what types of BPM tasks are suitable for smartphones?

I think the answer to the first question is that CRM, ERP, and accounting/financials are departmental solutions whose users mostly have similar needs. The tasks performed by users of such applications are relatively standardized. This makes it more practical to offer smartphone interfaces for these applications on one or two mobile platforms. Few companies are able to support all the major mobile platforms, which include the Apple iPhone, Google Android, RIM Blackberry, Windows Mobile, and Symbian. On the other hand, BPM cuts across departments, roles, and even organizational boundaries. A BPM participant could be in any department, and could even be someone outside the company, such as a supplier or a customer. There is simply too much diversity in the type of tasks that could be performed using a BPM system. Supporting this diversity on one smartphone platform is difficult, let alone supporting it on multiple platforms. This is why BPM has lagged with respect to support for mobile devices.

Having said that, I believe it is time for BPM vendors to take the first steps towards mobile BPM. There are many opportunities and challenges for leading vendors. Smartphone usage is growing rapidly, and Gartner forecasts that in 2013 the number of smartphone users will exceed the number of PC users. The first users of smartphone in an organization are generally the senior managers who can more easily afford their higher prices. These senior managers are the same individuals who make purchasing decisions regarding BPM, and in most cases they tend to be more mobile. Giving managers the ability to use their smartphones to participate in a business process is a sure way to gain their support. Lastly, there is so much buzz in the mobile app space that BPM vendors who lead the way in offering mobile access to their applications are sure to get a boost and a competitive advantage.

Many people make the mistake of assuming that smartphone-enabling their applications means that all the functionality of the applications must be accessible from mobile devices. This is neither practical nor necessary, especially not for the success of mobile BPM. One can make mobile BPM successful by carefully considering the types of tasks that are suitable for smartphones and even the types of business processes that can benefit from mobile access. By reasonably narrowing the scope of mobile BPM, vendors can come up with cost-effective and functionally useful offerings. As smartphone technology improves, the scope can be enlarged as more and more types of tasks become practical.

It seems to me that the processes that make sense for mobile BPM are administrative and HR processes. These processes generally do not have a lot of documents associated with them,

which are hard to work with in a smartphone. Within these processes, one can further narrow the scope by focusing initially on approval steps that are most frequently performed by managers. These tasks involve the review of a limited amount of data that can be more readily handled by mobile users. On the other hand, the following types of processes and tasks are unsuitable for mobile BPM:

- i. Collaborative processes that are document intensive. It is hard to read, digest, and collaborate on documents using a mobile device.
- ii. High volume processes where speed is of the essence. These processes are best suited for dedicated workstations. Perhaps only those steps that are designed to handle exceptions should be considered for mobile BPM as long as the volume of exceptions is within reason.

Even within these constraints, there are a large number of processes and tasks that are suitable for smartphones. It makes sense for vendors to invest in mobile BPM.

When thinking of mobile BPM, one must keep in mind that smartphones are going through rapid technological change that will transform the way people work. One only has to look at the phenomenal success of the Apple iPad, with over three million sold in the first two months alone, to grasp the fact that the limitations of today's devices will be addressed in ways that were not conceivable just a few years ago. I can envision the day when my smartphone is the only computing device that I have to use. I use it, as is, as a smartphone when I am out and about. When I am in my office I plug it in to a docking station that transforms it into a full-fledged workstation with large keyboard and display. At bedtime I can attach a lightweight display to my smartphone and read my newspaper online. I will not need any other computing device, and I will take my smartphone with me, along with all my data and applications. This vision is not that far away. Therefore I am convinced that BPM vendors must start addressing the need for mobile BPM and get ready for this sea change in the way people work.

While this is well and good, the question on the minds of BPM vendors is how to support the five or so major smartphone platforms. Some may decide to support only one smartphone, such as the Apple iPhone because of its tremendous popularity and momentum in the market today. However, only about 20% of the smartphone users out there use an iPhone. Furthermore, there is so much flux in the market that the vendors who have momentum today may not be so attractive two years from now. The best strategy for vendors is not to pick one horse and develop a native application for one smartphone such as the iPhone, which is the rage today. Instead, vendors will be better off in the long term by developing Web apps that are cross-platform. Allowing vendors to develop Web-applications that have the functionality and appeal of native apps is the big challenge today, and that is what I am focused on.

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