

Drawing Tools and Process Modeling: The Benefits and Limitations

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Business process modeling is an increasingly common technique for gaining greater efficiency in business. Many resources exist to help companies employ business process modeling (BPM) as a means to gain a greater understanding of the day-to-day operations of the business and determine ways to improve them. As more and more businesses choose to incorporate BPM into their planning, it becomes more important for businesses of all sizes and types to consider it in order to remain competitive.

Once a business has made the decision to embrace business process modeling, the next step is determining which BPM tool is the best fit for the company. There are a wide variety of tools available on the market with varying features, degrees of complexity and pricing levels. For someone new to business process modeling, it can be a bit overwhelming determining which resource to go with.

The first questions you'll want to ask yourself when considering your options are:

1. What are my specific BPM goals?
2. How much time and money am I ready to devote to it?
3. How familiar is the staff with BPM concepts and techniques?
4. What features and functionality do I need to get the most out of performing business process modeling?

By developing a clearer picture of how business process modeling will be implemented at your company and what your desired end results are, you can knowledgeably begin the process of choosing the best BPM tool for your business.

The Benefits

Drawing tools, such as Visio and SmartDraw, are the most basic options to get started designing business processes. For someone easing into business process modeling, these products offer a simple starting point and require minimal relative financial investment. Although not designed specifically for BPM, they are made to be intuitive to all users. Most people can pretty easily figure out how to create a process map in a drawing tool without outside help.

In comparison to most higher-level BPM tools like enterprise architecture and, especially, BPM Execution Suites, drawing tools offer a refreshing solution that allows the user to get started with no training or previous BPM experience. Most small businesses are well aware of how easily a new product can go entirely unused if busy employees don't want to bother to take the time to learn it. A simple, intuitive solution goes a long way towards alleviating that concern.

Any BPM exercise requires a thorough process map. This is required to help users better understand their current processes and begin analysis and discussions of how those processes work and can be made better. Both drawing tools offer tutorials and basic templates to make the initial creation of a process map especially easy on new users. The tools enable web publishing to share a completed process map within the company to raise everybody's knowledge level of how the day-to-day business is run.

These tools run about \$200-\$1000 depending on the type and version you choose to go with. It's worth noting, neither of these is designed explicitly for business process modeling, rather they

both offer it as one of several values the products can provide to a business. Therefore, it's likely that a company that chooses to purchase a drawing tool for BPM will find other uses for it as well.

The Limitations

For some companies, the features and affordability of these tools will be enough to adequately satisfy the needs established in the answers to the four questions posed early in our process. For others, the process mapping and analysis enabled by drawing tools will seem like the first step in the larger process needed to perform the level of BPM desired.

For more comprehensive business process modeling, a business should seek to perform each of the following:

1. Design a process model
2. Document the steps of each process
3. Analyze the results to identify areas for improvement
4. Determine the best changes to implement to realize process improvement

Drawing tools can easily and effectively get you through the first step, but only provide a partial solution for steps 2-4.

With drawing tools, you do have the ability to link your process model to external documentation, but aren't able to include it within the same screen as the process model itself. To view all the relevant information, you must regularly move between multiple programs. The process map can aid in high-level process analysis and help inform discussions of where weaknesses in the current processes may lie, but the identification of inefficiencies and development of ideas to improve them still rely on a considerable amount of speculation.

Additional Features to Look For

If your business has decided that it is committed to realizing this full approach, then it becomes useful to consider tools designed more specifically for BPM that will include all of the features necessary for full analysis. Below are some of the more advanced features for performing business process modeling and the value they provide.

Process Documentation

Advanced process documentation features enable more thorough descriptions of the particulars of a process in a format that makes it easy to view all relevant information in one place.

To be as comprehensive as possible in examining and communicating a process, it's important to be able to easily include a variety of types of important information in your process model, including:

- Process triggers
- Business rules
- Thorough details about each step in the process
- A record of the resources used in each step of the process
- A clear record of who performs which part of the process

- The time that is spent by each team member on each step
- Any other notes team members may consider valuable to include for a fuller view of the process.

All of this information is invaluable to gaining a better understanding of the larger process and performing a deeper analysis of what works well and what could be better.

You should also look for features that allow different workers to share the process information with each other. Either a web publishing capability, or the ability to export the process data into an easy to read format, like PDF or Word, offers users a simple way to share and discuss the information gained from the process model.

Process Simulation

Process simulation is an important tool for the 4th step of process modeling, as described above. All the steps that come before are designed to better help a business understand how things work now, and where they may not be working as well as they could.

Naturally, once that knowledge is gained and discussed, it's time to figure out how to make the processes better. Process simulation helps you to predict the likely results of any changes to the process.

Little is accomplished if you identify inefficiencies and make a change hoping for improvement, but find the time and resources required to complete the new process remain about the same as the old. By running anticipated changes through a process simulation, you can figure this out before taking the time to re-train staff and try out the updated process. You can better predict and plan the amount of time and resources that will be needed to complete the new version of the process, leading to better preparation and less waste.

These additional features enable better, more comprehensive process analysis and improvement. Drawing tools have a lot to offer to someone beginning their experience with business process modeling, but at a certain point, their value ends and it's worthwhile to seek out a more enhanced BPM product to perform a higher level of analysis and improvement.

Author

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