



Human Processes

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The Business Process Spectrum

Last month BP Trends published a case management article critical of Human Interaction Management (or at least of my 2005 book). This month they asked if I wished to respond in my column - or even start a public debate.

I've been round such loops a few times in the past. For example, long-time readers of BP Trends may remember the extended debate between its illustrious editor and myself a few years ago, on the universal applicability of BPMN. Such debates can be a useful way of driving out issues, and entertaining to boot. Dialogue has been an important form of exposition since the time of Plato, and the success of modern books like "Gödel Escher Bach"¹ and "Sophie's World"² attests to its continued popularity.

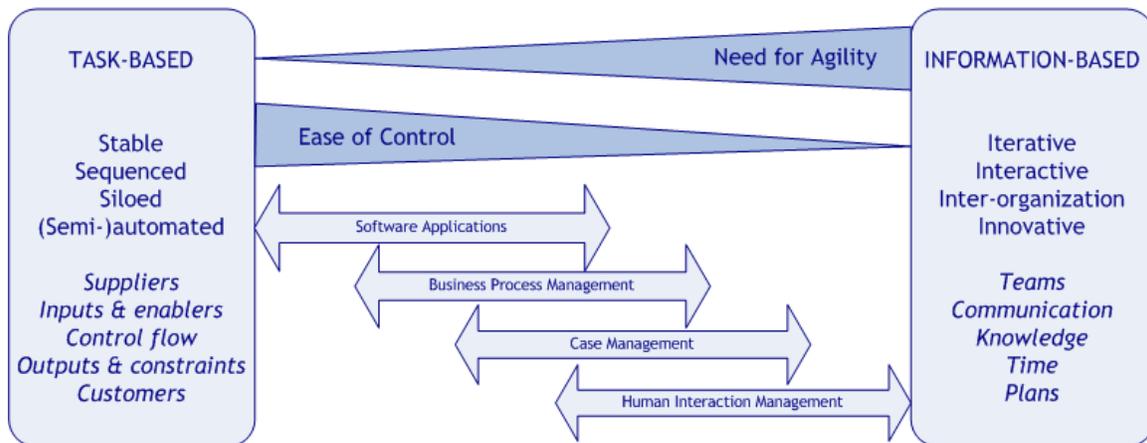
However, I have come to believe that the best way to explain ideas that people have misunderstood, or overlooked, is face to face rather than via public written debate. Many seeming differences in opinion are more imagined than real, so it's better not to make mountains out of molehills. Further, divergence often comes down to perspective. Writers tend to assume that their audience understands the problem they are trying to address, and omit to state the context fully.

For example, with respect to BPMN, Paul Harmon and I abandoned the Web-based debate after a while, when it became clear that we were going round in circles. The different contexts from which we were arguing only became clear later on, when we discussed the matter in person - after which I understood that Paul never intended to use the notation for the kind of processes I was interested in. I don't wish to speak for Paul, but now think it likely that our views on the limitations of BPMN are actually broadly similar - if you are interested, you can find a summary of my position in my BP Trends column from December 2008.³

With respect to case management, consider the diagram shown below.

The Business Process Spectrum

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The diagram shows how there are different types of process, ranging from **Task-Based** (stable, sequenced, siloed and often at least semi-automated) to **Information-Based** (iterative, interactive, inter-organization and innovative). At each extreme, there are different priorities, shown in italics – the priorities for purely Task-Based processes are essentially the SIPOC aspects identified by Six Sigma with a bit of IDEF0 thrown in, while the priorities for more Information-Based processes are the 5 principles of HIM.

The more Information-Based a process is, the broader and deeper are the demands on the management techniques and software technologies required to support it. It would be easy to criticize a case management approach, whether mainstream or innovative, for failing to support team building, purposeful communication, collaborative evolution of running processes, support for ad-hoc processes, distributed management of knowledge, effective management of time, partial agent automation, and so on. However, this would be missing the point. Case management addresses a part of the landscape in which these features are not of primary importance - there is no need for such advanced process support if all you need to do is handle an insurance claim, or search for lost baggage.

However, for most people, the concept of "business process" breaks down after this point. The concept I have found hardest to communicate via writing, speaking and consulting is that the part of the landscape addressed by Human Interaction Management even exists. Having grown so used to identifying "process" with "flowchart", many people feel any work that does not behave like what computer scientists call an "automaton" (or "state machine") cannot really be a process at all. Rather, such work is so unpredictable and complicated that it is just not susceptible to process-based management.

To me this is exactly the wrong way around. Most organizations make a reasonable fist of handling routine processes, and even "cases", without any need for specialized process techniques or tools. By and large, traditional managers understand such work, and mainstream ERP/CRM systems can support it (more cheaply than ever, these days, with the rise of software-as-a-service). While the application of process techniques and tools can often reduce time and cost, once you take the big picture into account, you see that the gain to the bottom line is minor. The real waste, the real inefficiency, and the real advantages lie in high-value work - work where humans collaborate to deliver innovative products and services. Streamlining your expenses handling, staff induction or plant maintenance may well reduce monthly overheads, but such initiatives are not going to deliver market leadership to your organization (or fast-track promotion to you). On the other hand, improve the way your organization does Research & Development, Complex Sales, or Mergers & Acquisitions, and it will be a different story.

Surely it would make sense for process experts to focus their attention not on routine work but on high-value work - on the domain of Human Interaction Management (HIM). However, to the mainstream process world, this is way out of scope - too tricky by half. So if there is one core message I am trying to get across, it is this: improving human interactions is not as hard as it may seem. The theory of HIM defines "what work is" in plain terms that anyone can understand, and offers simple techniques and tools for improving it.

TAKE AWAY

It has now been nearly 4 years since publication of my book, and HIM is taught at Universities and Management Schools worldwide. The number of emails I get from doctoral students doing a thesis on HIM increases every year. The number of countries in which I have done keynotes at national conferences is growing! However, for many people, it is still hard to find out what HIM is all about.

In particular, software vendors have been quick to adopt the terminology, but as with BPM a few years ago (and some would say, still), the term HIM is bolted on freely to anything that moves, in the hope of increasing sales. This only increases confusion.

However, HIM and the supporting HIMS software tools have very precise definitions, available to all. In particular, the HIM Web site⁴ has many resources freely available for download: a Quick Reference Card, various forms of pictorial summary, articles from many people, and so on. If you have heard of HIM, but don't really know what it is, or whether to trust its evangelists (or detractors), why not find out for yourself?

Then feel free to contact me⁵ - I am always interested in feedback of any kind, and will be pleased to help your organization resolve any issues encountered on its road to more efficient, and more effective, human interactions.

Author

Keith Harrison-Broninski has been regarded as an IT and business thought leader since publication in 2005 of his book "Human Interactions - the Heart and Soul of Business Process Management".⁶ Building on 20 years of research and insights from varied disciplines, his theory of Human Interaction Management (HIM) provides a new way to describe and support collaborative human work. HIM has been described as:

- "the next logical step in process-based technology" (Chair of the Workflow Management Coalition)⁷

- "set to produce the first fundamental advances in personal productivity since the arrival of the spreadsheet" (Information Age)⁸
- "the breakthrough that changes the rules of business" (Peter Fingar, author of "Business Process Management: The Third Wave", "Extreme Competition", etc)⁹
- "the overarching framework for 21st century business technology" (bptrends.com).¹⁰

Keith Harrison-Broninski is CTO of Role Modellers, whose mission is to develop understanding and support of human-driven processes across industry – the field that Keith pioneered. Their product, HumanEdj, is the reference implementation of a Human Interaction Management System and leads the industry in computerized support for innovative, collaborative human work.

More information about Keith and his work is available online.¹¹

References

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⁴ human-interaction-management.info

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⁶ "Human Interactions: The Heart And Soul Of Business Process Management", Keith Harrison-Broninski, Meghan-Kiffer Press, 2005, www.mkpress.com/hi

⁷ http://www.ebizq.net/hot_topics/bpm/features/7462.html

⁸ http://www.information-age.com/report/2007/eit_2007/riding_the_fourth_wave

⁹ Foreword to "Human Interactions"

¹⁰ <http://tinyurl.com/dbv4j>

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