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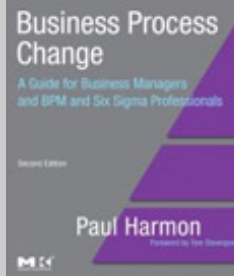
## Exploring BPMS with Free or Open Source Products

Recently, I've been approached by people who are interested in Business Process Management Systems and want to know if there is an inexpensive way to begin to explore BPMS techniques. In most cases, the individuals I've been talking with aren't ready to build a real BPMS application, but want to explore how one might go about it. In a similar way, there must be university students that hear about BPMS and would like to build a simple system just to see what BPMS is all about.

The first thing to understand is that no one agrees on exactly what a Business Process Management Suite should do. Some analyst firms break up BPMS products into groups - like workflow-centric, application-integration-centric, and decision-centric - to emphasize that some tools are best for managing processes that involve employees, while other tools are better for managing processes that involve the integration of ERP applications or for managing processes that are organized around business rules and complex decisions. Some tools focus primarily on dealing with processes that are confined to a specific company while others are better at managing or choreographing multiple processes that occur among different companies. Some tools provide very limited monitoring capabilities while others integrate Data Warehouse and Business Intelligence capabilities to support real-time executive dashboards. Some tools run in a limited environment while others are built to be integrated into a company's evolving SOA architecture. Similarly, some tools run in a Java or WebSphere environment while others work with SAP's NetWeaver or Microsoft's BizTalk environment. And then, there are the evolving standards. Some tools support BPMN or BPEL while others don't.

In essence, BPMS is a vague and rapidly evolving concept. In a few years, when companies have explored BPMS in more detail, they will evolve a minimum definition of what they expect in a BPMS product. Today, however, there is no consensus on the minimum set of features any BPMS product should have. Thus, any individual who decides he or she wants to acquire a BPMS product to explore BPMS needs to understand that the tools differ and that some tools will suggest that BPMS is integration-centric and based on SOA while others will suggest that BPMS is rather like workflow or depends heavily on Microsoft's BizTalk environment. In effect, the developer will need to think about what specific aspect of BPMS he or she wants to explore and look for a tool with features that support that particular function. As a starting point, we recommend developers read the BPTrends BPMS Report (Introduction and Detailed Overview) posted on [www.bptrends.com](http://www.bptrends.com) to get a good feeling for the range of features that a BPMS product could include.

Figure 1 provides an overview of what might be included in a BPMS product. Most commercial products include everything in the two middle rows. Some have an integrated BPM engine, while most have independent rules, workflow and EAI engines. Similarly, most commercial products offer modeling and process monitoring environments and interfaces for developers and managers who want to examine a process at runtime.



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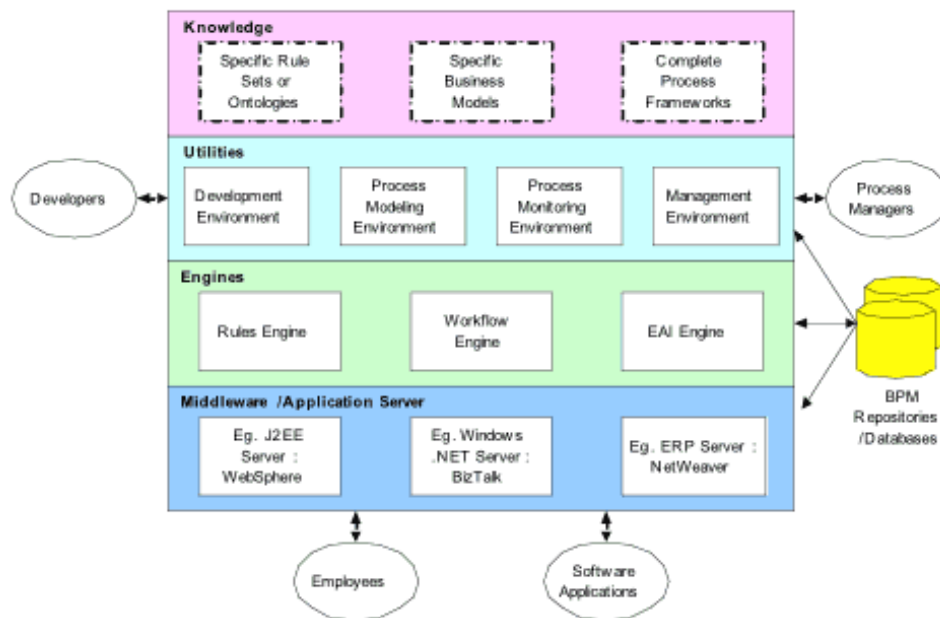


Figure 1. Generic Architecture of a BPMS Product.

Some BPMS products sit on a proprietary platform or run in a language environment like Java - which is represented in the bottom level of Figure 1. Most sit on top of a process server offered by a major systems vendor.

The top level represents specific knowledge that the vendor might provide. Some vendors who work with companies in specific industries or specialize in specific types of process problems (e.g. supply chain) offer knowledge in the form of business frameworks, process models, or specific business rules that can help a company get a head start.

The second thing to understand is that there are reasons why companies agree to pay a significant amount of money to a vendor for a proprietary product. As we have already suggested, BPMS requires a complex set of functions, and the functions and their integration with standards and with other functions is evolving rapidly. It costs money to create a product with a highly integrated set of functions, and then to modify it two or three times a year to incorporate the latest developments. Leading vendors are currently buying other vendors to acquire the needed functionality. Thus, a vendor with a good workflow environment will acquire a vendor specializing in integration. At the same time, companies starting on a new project often expect support, consulting, training, or even rapid changes in the product itself to accommodate their particular requirements. We have heard several stories about companies that undertook a trial project, were satisfied with the initial application, then encountered significant difficulties when they attempted to scale up the application for implementation. Large companies have complex computing environments which have evolved over time, and it will be awhile before most of the new BPMS vendors can support the wide variety of integration problems they face in such environments.

### Free or Open Source Products

We asked several people about their experiences with open source or free BPMS products. The ones that get mentioned the most include:

**jBPM by JBOSS.** jBPM is maintained by Red Hat and is designed to run on top of the JBOSS Java environment. jBPM is probably the most extensive true open source BPMS offering, but we are still talking about a product that requires an extensive knowledge of Java and lacks many of the features found in leading BPMS products. For more information, check [www.jboss.com/products/jbpm](http://www.jboss.com/products/jbpm).

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**Open Workflow Engine (Open WFERu)** combines the open source ruby workflow engine with a BPM engine. Less mature than jBPM, it requires an extensive knowledge of Ruby. For more information, check <http://openwferu.rubyforge.org>.

**Enhydra Shark** is an open source Java XPD L workflow server. Similar to the Open Workflow Engine, it requires an extensive knowledge of Java. For more information, check [www.enhydra.org/workflow/shark/index.html](http://www.enhydra.org/workflow/shark/index.html).

### **Free Use of a Proprietary Product**

The engines described above are probably OK for students that are learning Java and want to explore workflow and BPMS concepts, but we don't recommend them for serious corporate developers who want to explore BPMS. The better alternative, in our opinion, is to use a free or inexpensive offering from one of the commercial BPMS vendors. This will provide you with a more comprehensive environment and give you a much better idea of the problems you would face if you built a system and then considered using it in a business environment.

To really take advantage of this approach, however, you will need some discipline. The commercial vendors offer free or inexpensive starter versions to get you wedded to their product. The initial environment is free, but extending the environment or scaling up usually results in charges. Similarly, although the initial documentation is usually free, support or consulting will usually come with a fee. Thus, we recommend that you begin by thinking about the kind of process problem you might want to solve, and then considering which commercial vendors offer products that specialize in that kind of problem. We recommend you read the individual BPMS vendor reports in the BPTrends BPMS Reports to get a good idea of what many of the leading BPMS vendors offer. See [www.bptrends.com](http://www.bptrends.com).

Once you have identified two or three interesting products, contact the vendor to see if they offer trial or free versions. Limit your exploration to the constraints of the free or trial versions to assure you don't start incurring charges. You are probably better off - if you just want to learn about BPMS - to build two simple systems with two different products rather than trying to scale up an initial simple system in a single product and begin to incur charges. Once you have gained some experience, and once your company has decided to invest in BPMS, then step back and begin a new review of all the BPMS products on the market. This is where the real discipline comes in; Don't simply buy whatever you used to explore BPMS just because you are now familiar with the product. Keep in mind that the market is evolving very quickly. Two BPMS vendors are being acquired and two new vendors are entering the market each 3-6 months. Established vendors are releasing new products every 6-9 months. So, take advantage of the free offers to explore and then, when you are ready to invest, take a step back and reconsider the offerings based on your requirements before you make a purchase.

We haven't undertaken an extensive survey of the commercial BPMS vendors to see which ones offer free or very inexpensive starter kits. We know that TIBCO, webMethods, Global 360, and Metastorm all offer free modules. Similarly, Intalio offers a free product. And Appian recently announced that companies could access the complete version of its product, online, for a fee starting at \$15 a month. We expect that most of the leading vendors will move toward offering some kind of free or inexpensive means of allowing individuals a way to explore the technology.

Most BPMS products are expensive, ranging from \$200,000 up. But there's no reason that an individual needs to make a major investment in order to explore what BPMS is all about. If you are a Java programmer you can use one of the open source products like jBPM. If you want a better idea of what a commercial tool can do, however, you should probably identify the vendors offering tools with the features you are most interested in, and then

inquire about whether or not they offer a free or inexpensive starter version. One of them probably will and that will provide you with an opportunity to build a simple system and begin to get an idea of the nature of BPMS and the features you will need when you move to a large scale implementation.

Till next time,

Paul Harmon

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