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Standardizing Business Process Notation

First, some basic numbers: About 65% of the process documentation undertaken in most companies is done by means of text outlines. One need only glance through some of the three ring binders full of ISO 9000 or Sarbanes-Oxley documentation to determine this. Second, most managers who do graphical process diagrams use either Visio or PowerPoint. In other words, they do diagrams, but they don't use tools that save their diagrams in a repository. They might as well be doing sketches on napkins.

Don't get me wrong. I use both Visio and PowerPoint and have been known to create text outlines to illustrate simple processes. I cite these facts, however, to suggest that most managers don't naturally think of business processes in terms of workflow notation. Moreover, when most managers do bother to create process diagrams, they use simple graphic tools.

>From this I deduce that those of us interested in business process management have our work cut out for us if we are to establish process diagrams as a common business language. And, that's exactly what I think we need to do. I don't believe most companies will be truly process oriented until the managers at those companies are able to use process diagrams.

When I think of corporate performance, I think it depends on two things: good financial models and good process models. Every business manager who is going anywhere in his or her career knows how to read financial statements. Indeed, most business managers feel free to fire up Excel and create a financial model of a project, a program, a division or a company. Financial accounting is the language of business.

If BPM is ever going to have the impact that many of us would like to see, those same managers are going to have to become familiar with workflow or process modeling. I don't know anyone who consults or teaches process improvement or business

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process redesign that doesn't rely on process diagrams to analyze existing processes and to design TO BE processes. Thus, the question arises: What do we do to make process modeling the second language of business?

To be negative for a moment, I can suggest two things we shouldn't do. We shouldn't promote process modeling diagrams that are overly complex. We certainly shouldn't promote diagramming techniques that are used by software developers, since they are designed to notate and model all manner of things that business managers don't need to be concerned with in order to manage the business. Second, we shouldn't promote a variety of different process notations - that will only confuse everyone. Imagine trying to establish financial accounting as a language without agreement on the meaning of key terms like Assets, Expenses, and Balance Sheet.

Three years ago, there was no candidate for a common business process diagramming notation. Every major process modeling tool supported several notations and most promoted their own particular notation. Today, as a result of the work of the Business Process Management Initiative's Notation Task Force, we have Business Process Modeling Notation (BPMN). The task force that created BPMN included most of the major process modeling tool vendors and a real effort was made to create a simple, basic notation for process modeling. Since the goal was also to create a notation that could be used to support BPEL, the language actually has two levels of complexity. One can create simple BPMN diagrams by using the basic symbols and omitting any adornments. Later, if technical people want to create diagrams to define how BPEL is to be generated, they can add adornments. I am advocating the use of the simple version of BPMN for most business process modeling work.

Since the 1.0 release of BPMN, about a dozen BPM suite and modeling tool vendors have adopted the notation. There is even a version available for Visio. I suggest that BPMN is about to do for those involved in process modeling, what UML did for software developers in the mid-Nineties - BPMN will provide a common notation that everyone can standardize upon.

Of course, lots of people don't agree with me on the importance of a common process notation, or they are so captivated by some historic or special purpose notation that they can't give it up. BPTrends gets several process books each month for review. Most have their own idiosyncratic notation. I say "idiosyncratic" because there's nothing special about the notation. It could as well be represented via BPMN. Instead, however, the authors have simply used a slightly different notation out of ignorance of

a common standard, or laziness. A few use a different notation to accommodate a special theory. These I study more carefully to see if there really is something important that business analysts might have to do that BPMN couldn't accommodate. I've yet to find it. Most of the special purpose notations are really IT notations, disguising themselves as notations for business people.

I suggest BPMN is our best option for a common business process notation for three reasons. First, it was recently designed by a committee that looked at all the current notations and developed a single notation that would represent everyone's concerns. They did a good job and the language really is elegant and straight forward. Second, the committee included most of the modeling tool vendors, so the notation already has momentum and is now implemented in the modeling tools most people use. Third, BPMN has now merged with the OMG and BPMN is now an open standard backed by one of the largest standards groups. OMG's processes are completely transparent. There is now a standard process for maintaining and changing BPMN. Any company or consultant can join and take part in the ongoing process of evolving the BPMN notation. No other business process notation meets these criteria.

It's time to move beyond petty differences, settle on a single business notation, and then use it consistently. It's a first step to making process modeling more acceptable in business circles. No notation will ever satisfy everyone and anyone can suggest improvements in any notation. BPMN is currently the best available notation for business managers and we ought to rally round it and put aside our favored idiosyncratic notations, for the common good. If our goal is to get business people to focus on processes and to learn to express ideas about processes in graphic form, we need a common process language. It will make everything easier. I suggest we all use BPMN.

'Til next time,

Paul Harmon

For those interested in seeing exactly what's involved in BPMN, I suggest going to <http://www.bptrends.com> and searching on BPMN. Then, read any of the articles by Steve White. White headed the BPMN task force and has written some exceptionally clear papers on BPMN notation.

