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BPEL and BPM

If you talk to many BPM practitioners, you will find that most assume that BPEL is, or will soon function as, the language of choice for BPM work.

BPEL4WS was originally announced in August of 2003 by BEA, IBM, and Microsoft. Their announcement came just as the BPMI.org was about to release the first version of their own alternative BPM language specification, BPML, and the announcement effectively sidelined BPML. Soon after the initial announcement, the originators were joined by many others, including many of the folks that had been working on BPML, and the draft specification of BPEL4WS (now almost universally known as BPEL) was submitted to OASIS for completion. To learn more about the OASIS BPEL effort, visit: http://www.oasis-open.org/committees/tc_home.php?wg_abbrev=wsbpel.

In spite of the fact that there is no complete, official version of BPEL, many different BPM vendors claim to support BPEL. Each vendor has created its own implementation, filled in various gaps, and offers a proprietary version of BPEL. The best that can be hoped for is that when a final specification is released by OASIS, the various vendors currently supporting BPEL will revise their versions to conform with the official OASIS BPEL standard.

In fact, such future alterations won't do much to rescue BPEL, because the OASIS BPEL task force has decided to avoid making some key decisions. In effect, where vendors disagreed on how to handle certain issues, the committee has opted to leave "holes" in the standard which individual vendors will have to fill in. This guarantees that even complete official BPEL implementations will require some proprietary extensions in order to work and that it will be impossible to interchange one vendor's version of BPEL with another's.

In the immediate aftermath of the release of BPEL, the BPMI organization shifted its focus to its notation system, BPMN. Since then, BPMI has endorsed BPEL and extended their BPMN notation to support BPEL.

Meantime, as BPEL is being refined by the OASIS committee, a reaction has set in and many companies have become concerned that the current BPEL effort will not result in a

language that will serve all the needs of most BPM practitioners.

Most people assume that a BPM system should be able to manage a business process that includes employee activities, as well as wholly automated activities. The current version of BPEL can only manage automated activities! Thus, although BPEL can function as an EAI component in a BPM Suite, it cannot function as the primary BPM engine. In other words, no BPM Suite, today, can rely on BPEL as its primary language. This completely undermines the possibility of using BPEL as a way of passing process descriptions from one tool to another, or of passing a company's process description to its business partners.

Those involved in BPMI.org are now planning a new effort to create an extension of BPEL that can, in fact, serve the functions that many hoped the current version of BPEL would serve. At the same time, BPMI.org is working to assure that its efforts aren't preempted, as they were in 2003. To assure this, they have established relations with other groups involved in BPM standards, including the Workflow Management Coalition (WfMC), OASIS, W3C, and the OMG.

A key step in the BPMI's new initiative is a meeting planned for March 1-3 in Miami, Florida. This working session, entitled **BPM Think Tank '05**, is designed to bring BPMI members together with key players from other standards organizations to focus on what can be done to assure a strong foundation for future BPM efforts. In effect, the meeting will review current standards efforts and seek to map out how BPMI can contribute to future BPM standards. Companies with a serious interest in using BPM should consider participating in this meeting to assure that they understand exactly what exists today and what will be needed in the future. For more information on **BPM Think Tank '05** visit http://www.bpmi.org/events/BPMI_ThinkTank.htm.

The road to good standards is always difficult. The interests of vendors and end users are often at odds. Even standards organizations often find themselves competing and supporting different approaches. Moreover, in the case of BPM, most companies are still learning about what's involved in BPM and trying to decide how much emphasis they should put on this new approach. It's probably too early to expect polished BPM standards. It's not too early, however, for companies to think seriously about the BPM standards they will need and to determine how they can work together to generate those standards. That's the challenge for 2005.

'Til next time,

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