

A Postcard From Europe

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It is now a year since I first started to share my thoughts and ideas through this column. The title this month (for our international readers and those in the UK too young to remember) is a play on an old UK news show, "That was the week that was," in which news of the week was reviewed. It only seemed right that we should start the year by taking a look back to see whether earlier predictions came true or were so off the mark that they sank without trace. But the first thing I should do is to thank our hosts Paul and Celia and wish them and BPTrends a very happy first birthday! I am sure that all will agree that they have done a terrific job, and we are grateful.

In no particular order, subjects covered through last year included Six Sigma, Language Barriers, BP Standards, Mergers and Acquisitions, Putting Business First, and the fact that Europe plays too. One thing that I and other commentators could not have foreseen was just how big Six Sigma was going to be. It seems that there is an ever-increasing following for this particular approach to business process improvement. I stand by many of my earlier comments here in that I think that many of its techniques aid BP projects, but, on the down side, it is still being used to sub-optimize processes in many organizations. Perhaps 2004 will be the year that sees a more pragmatic approach. Of course, the risk is that, now that IT departments are taking it on board, it could be marketed to death.

The area of standards moved on at quite a pace in 2003 with the new BPMN standard from the BPMI, and it seems, for now at least, that we are settling on BPEL as the language for exchanging BP information. From a very personal point of view, I still have issues with BPMN, not so much in what it does but more from what it lacks and how it is being over marketed. I look forward to this disappearing into the OMG and being put together with the BP meta-model work going on there, and we may even see the diagram interchange issues addressed too! Staying with standards for just a moment, 2003 was the year that the BPMI achieved many of its key goals. I think it was also the year when the organization peaked, and I suspect that we will see it disappearing fairly early in 2004.

Of course, several of the topics I spoke of will continue to be issues well into 2004, and, I suspect, into the years beyond! Putting the business first always seems to be an issue when technology people get involved. Now I hear that if you don't believe in BPMS systems, you must be a technophobe! Can we really have exhausted all the arguments so that we are forced to stoop that low? I, for one, am skeptical about BPMS. On the other hand, most people who know me know that hardly a month goes by without my buying some new "gadget" – I love them – but that does not mean that I want to issue Wi-fi-enabled PDAs to all employees as a must-have device. So perhaps in 2004 the BPMS vendors will step forward with customer success stories and let us all hear what has been achieved and why BPMS was the best way of achieving the results.

Another area which is sure to grab our attention for quite some time relates to Converging on Business Process. We are still seeing almost daily announcements of products or services being branded to suit the BP mantle. But not just products and services; it applies to the conference scene too, so

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the next time you choose to attend a BP conference, check it out very carefully; it could well be a Six Sigma conference that has been re-branded.

A more recent issue discussed the area of Mergers and Acquisitions, something that is sure to be in the news during 2004. It just has to be. The market simply cannot support and will not tolerate the range of vendors, all providing conflicting messages on the same basic ground.

There is one area that I really mis-judged and that was in the area of "Content." I predicted that we would see an increasing number of industry models being supported by vendors and that this would be the new competitive advantage. It did not turn out that way, or at least not yet, but I still hope that we will see more moves in this area.

So, in addition to the above, what else might be in store for us in 2004? Well, we should start to see more in the area of methods. As I mentioned above, we could hopefully see the standards move forward and get nearer to being useable. But, most of all, I think that 2004 will be a year of mixed news.

We will have more news of end users who have successfully implemented change programs and allowed themselves to become more competitive. We will hear of users who have created virtual businesses as a result of having clearly defined business processes, objectives, and measures that help them to outsource much of their businesses. Conversely, I think we are going to hear a lot more bad news stories about Outsourcing, where people will be reporting that, along with the functions, they gave away the processes too! We will also hear people saying BPM does not work ("I tried it, and it failed"), due to the fact that they bought into some re-branded technical solution and never sat down to try and solve the underlying business problems.

Finally, have a great 2004, and remember: You can't change what you can't see; it is not about getting more information; it is about getting the right information on time, and that is a business issue, not a technical issue. So look at your people and your processes, invest in training and change programs first; everything else comes second.

