Processes in Practice

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Process for the People or Just for Experts?

A few years ago I coined the phrase **"Processes are not just something the business does – processes are the business**" in an attempt to convey the importance of process to all businesses and organizations. Everyone is aware that businesses need good processes, but it is rare for senior executives to take a real interest in process or take responsibility for them. At best, many managers see processes, and process design, as a distraction from moving the business forward; at worst they think process is constraining business.

Given this view of process, it is a struggle to make the case that process design and analysis should be a professional discipline undertaken by skilled and qualified people using professional tools. Instead most organizations prefer to let untrained staff or interns "draw" processes using Microsoft Visio and similar drawing tools. A common view is that processes are about businesses and people so processes should be designed by business people. This makes sense, but does it mean that processes can de designed by anybody, or does it require special skills?

The Professionalization of IT

In order to shed some light on this question it is interesting to make comparisons with the development of the IT industry. Back in the 1980's most corporate computing was done using mainframe computers that were carefully controlled and guarded by the Data Processing (DP) Department. Access to these computers was very limited and turnaround times to get new functionality into the software could be months or even years. In the early 1990's all this changed. Desktop computers started to become more reliable and powerful and applications such as Microsoft Access, Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Visual Basic came onto the scene. Suddenly, people in the business could buy their own computers and create their own business applications, free from the control of the DP department. Of course these new local applications still needed information from the mainframes so a whole generation of "screen scraping" applications grew up that extracted data from, and entered data into, the mainframes by emulating users typing on the keyboard and reading screens.

This liberated computing era of the 1990's saw rapid progress in the use of computers to support all aspect of the business, but it was to all end in tears. The computing infrastructure that was once carefully controlled by the DP department was now distributed across hundreds and even thousands of small applications spread throughout the business. These applications had often been created by amateur programmers; in fact anybody who fancied playing with the new technology. Worse still, corporate data was now completely fragmented and it was impossible to create an integrated view of the data. Managing change became almost impossible and it was difficult to estimate costs, let alone control them. Even today, most organizations still suffer from the fragmentation of computing created in the 1990s.

To recover from this situation, most organizations established central IT departments led by a CIO. They started to use Enterprise Architecture techniques to create reference architectures and

IT transformation roadmaps. They put in place demand management to control development costs and they started large scale system rationalization programs to remove the thousands of small applications. Most important, they put in place training and certification programs to ensure that they only used skilled staff to develop software. They bought professional development tools and started to invest in reuse and in techniques such as service oriented architecture (SOA). As a result, IT and software developments today are much more cost effective, better controlled and 'professional'.

Process Design Today

So what has this got to do with process? Well, in many ways process design today is back where IT was in the late 1990's. There are many professional process design tools available, but there still prevails a view that these are complex, difficult to use and fail to provide the agility that businesses need. Instead processes often tend to be "designed" using drawing tools such as PowerPoint and Visio. As a result, corporate knowledge about process is distributed across hundreds, if not thousands, of drawings. There is no central repository and it is not possible to analyze the drawings. This means few organizations have up-to-date end-to-end views of their key business processes. Furthermore this means that most organizations cannot:

- realistically claim to know how they operate,
- identify opportunities for automation,
- control business and process costs,
- easily identify and manage their risks,
- effectively manage change.

Just as the IT Community had to, the process community needs to take control and create a professional managed design and development environment. But is process the same as IT? Having a central repository of processes would be a big step forward for most organizations, but does that mean that it needs professional designers to create them using common tools or could anybody create processes provided they follow some basic common guidelines? Many people in the business community would claim the latter is all that is necessary. They would also site the need for a collaborative approach and start to talk about networking, the cloud, crowd sourcing and similar approaches.

Why Process Should be Professional

First of all let's think about what a process designer needs to consider [1]. A process design describes:

- The process flow – the sequence of tasks necessary to achieve a business objective,
- The resources needed to implement the process (e.g., people, IT, data, etc.),
- The business environment in which the process operates (e.g. objectives, measures, risks, etc.).

But before starting to model these elements, there are some even more basic questions that need to be asked:

- What are the objectives for modeling the process – why bother?
- Who will be the "customers" for the process design – who will use it?
- What information and how much detail is need - what will they do with it?

In my experience few of the so called process designs created in drawing tools adequately describe the processes, the infrastructure and the environment to the correct level of detail. Many people start drawing the processes because they think it's a good idea, but without any clear idea of what there drawings will be used for. Frequently they languish on the individual's computer or in a document management system and don't really form part of a corporate asset.

So it's my contention that because processes are so important there must be professional process people involved in their design. But that doesn't mean the professionals should be the only people involved. Running a business requires collaboration between a wide range of people (Figure 1) with many different skills, and hence process design should be the same.
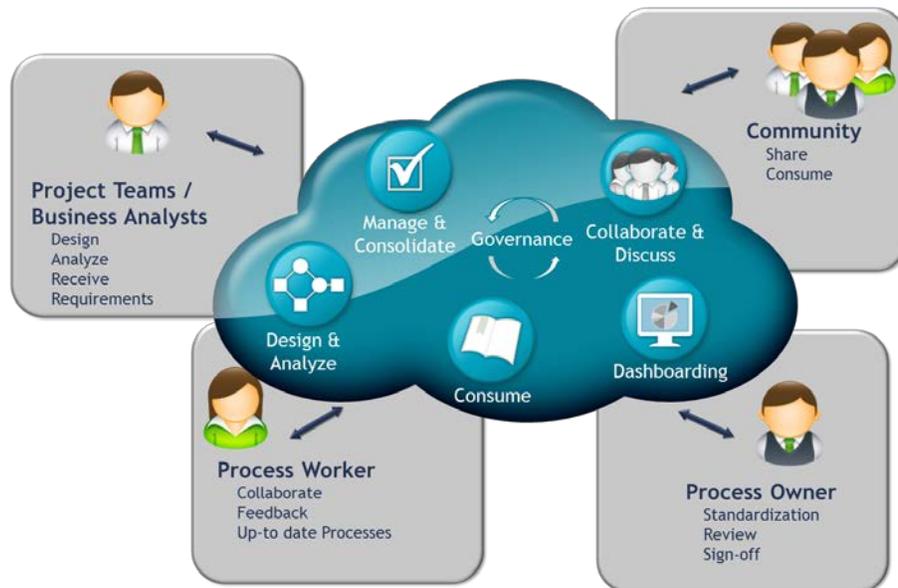

Figure 1. Social BPM

Social BPM

This is where a new generation of collaborative process design environments will come into their own. We don't want hundreds or thousands of people in the business designing processes, but we want everyone in the business involved in the design of processes. Getting everyone involved in process design not only improves the processes but also increases awareness and acceptance of process.

To support this approach, collaborative design environments (such as Software AG's ARIS Connect, Figure 2.) typically need the following capabilities:

- User friendly interface that anyone can use with limited or no training,
- Repository-based to provide a single source of the truth,
- Easy to use design environment for those people actually doing designs,
- Underpinned by recognized process design notations and methodologies to ensure processes are fit for purpose,
- Process views available in many different formats to suit the needs of different users,
- Facility to annotate diagrams and initiate change requests,
- Simple analysis capabilities so people can ask "what if",
- Built-in governance processes to manage process change, sign-off and release,
- Built in dashboards so people can see actual information about real processes as well as the process designs,
- Collaborative social networking so people can exchange ideas and comments about process,
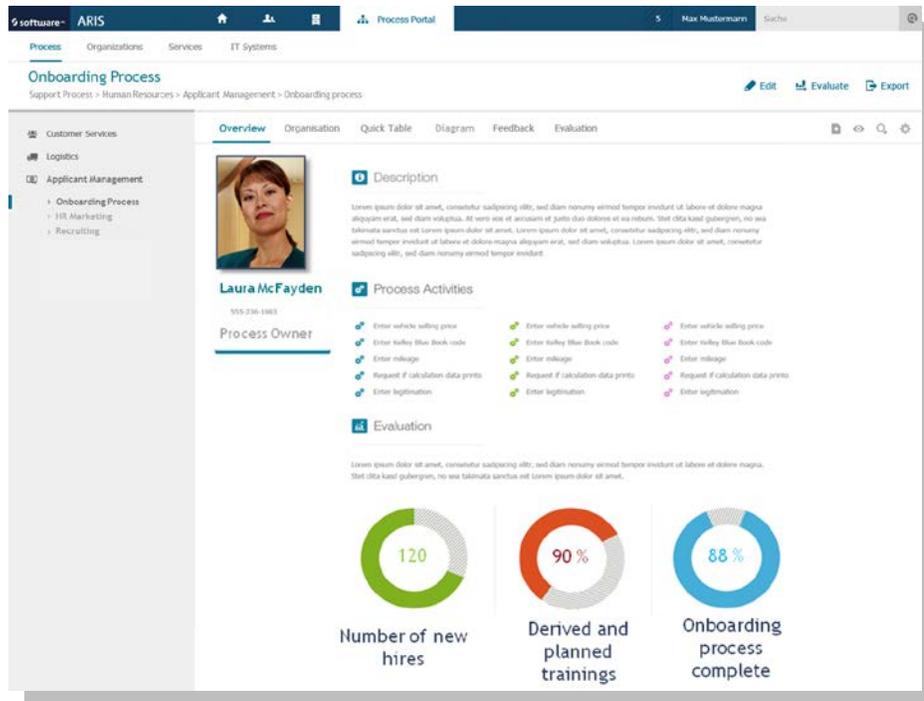- Support for multiple mobile platforms (view your process on your iPad).

Figure 2. Collaborative Design Environment

Processes by Experts, But for the People

By implementing such a collaborative process design environment businesses can ensure processes are for the people, involve the people, but are still designed by professionals using professional tools. In that way they will become a valuable business asset.

References

[1] Rob Davis. "What makes a good process" BPTrends, November 2009

Author

Rob is Principal ARIS BPM consultant with Software AG which merged with IDS Scheer in 2011. He is an internationally recognized expert in Business Process Management (BPM) and the practical use of the ARIS Design Platform. Previously, Rob worked for British Telecom (BT) where he was responsible for selecting and implementing ARIS in a large scale implementation. Rob has built extensive experience of all aspects of BPM and specializes in providing consultancy on BPM, process modelling and design, architecture and frameworks, process governance, and integrating process and IT design. Rob has written three definitive books on the practical use of ARIS Design Platform for BPM.

For more information see **http://www.rob-davis.co.uk**.

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