



Workflow Modeling: Tools for Process Improvement and Application Development

**Alec Sharp and Patrick McDermott
Second Edition by Alec Sharp**

Artech House, Inc., 2009
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Reviewed by Roger Burlton

I should acknowledge at the outset of this review that Alec Sharp is a colleague and friend. We share many of the same principles and concepts and occupy much the same space in the process improvement field.

What is apparent from the very first pages of this book is that its contents spring from the authors, especially Alec's, experiences and his passionate commitment to process improvement. The book itself is well-organized and is intended to serve as a practical reference for BPM practitioners. The style is easy to understand, devoid of unnecessary theory and full of descriptions derived from real world applications of methods that have evolved over the years.

There are some important changes to the second edition, which was written by Alec. (The first edition was published in 2001.) The second edition updates the approach in several places and enhances many techniques, reflecting a broader perspective and a growing knowledge base.

While acknowledging the value of enterprise level concerns such as the development of strategic intent, process architectures, the balanced scorecard, day to day process performance management, process governance, enterprise architecture and similar management concerns, the authors do not devote many pages to coverage of these topics.

There are references to project management, risk management and human change management, but not an exhaustive treatment of these related topics. Rather, the book focuses on the process improvement project level where much can go wrong and often does. It assumes that there is a good architecture or process area structure in place but does not make their existence a prerequisite.

As the title suggests, this book is about the flow of work from the stakeholder through the organization and back to the stakeholder. There is little on breakthrough innovation. The emphasis is on incremental improvement.

Technologists should be cautioned that the book is about handing work from role to role and NOT about workflow technologies. It does not assume anything about technology implementation, although it nicely shows how to define and specify the requirements for implementation in an enabling technology. As the authors state, "It is about 'who does what, when.'"

Analysts dealing with transactional processes involving many alternatives and rules and multiple performers will find the contents most useful. Those who are designing solutions featuring single actors in knowledge intensive, creative or unstructured activities will not find as much benefit.

The book is divided into five parts with several sections within each part.

Part I covers the Background, Principles and Overview with the classic historical retrospective, definitions of terms and principles and a summary of the overall approach. This is a useful overview for readers associated with process work and also serves as a good primer for all of us as a summary of the baseline fundamentals we sometimes forget.

Part II deals with the initial stage of the process improvement initiative, with a particular focus on the critical aspects of context, scope, and goals that we sometimes shortcut, much to our regret later in the project. It provides guidelines for making certain that we solve the right problem and are able to recognize an effective solution downstream.

Part III provides guidance to understanding and modeling the process as it actually performs - not the way we wish it would work, nor the way management thinks it works and not the way it is currently documented in procedure manuals that no one follows.

Part IV describes how to evolve the outputs from Phase III into a process design and workflow (remember flow of work).

Part V closes the book with critical discussions of how to move from a design to identify solution requirements and includes related techniques to deal with data modeling, use cases and services. This coverage will be of great value to those who will move on to automation based on the workflow.

This book primarily provides a set of aligned tools presented in the order that the authors have found most helpful; i.e. a workflow for workflow. It blends the techniques with the methodology and presents them as they are used. If you are a practitioner with real work to do, this will be very useful in showing you how to eat the elephant. If you are an academic you may find the practical focus frustrating. If you are simply generally interested in the topic, then you will not need to read the book from page to page. You can simply skim the contents and read the material of greatest interest to you.

The book's strength resides in the down to earth nature of its advice. While often not appearing earth shattering at first glance, anyone who has messed up a project and does not want to do so again will find that the authors' recommendations make a great deal of sense. The book focuses on the right issues to get right.

Alec and I both view processes as synchronizers of other capabilities or enablers that may have to change, and so we have similar lists of cautions to be aware of during a process improvement initiative. While these cautions sound straight forward, no one else has given the same degree of attention to these critical issues. There is not just a lot of do's and don'ts but also why's and why not's. Some of the advice appears counter intuitive at first blush, but once you think about it, it makes sense. There is also a lot of guidance on techniques to assure participation and on making participants comfortable in owning the solution. This is important.

The techniques and the visualizations used are mostly swim lane oriented but are not strict BPMN for good reasons that are well-explained. A simpler and more business oriented way to present the flows are done using only boxes and lines and starts and stops, thus avoiding a set of complex graphics that would confuse most readers. This is not a book about comprehensive BPMN and IT specification but rather about analyzing the work itself.

It avoids an over dependence on external references to the myriad techniques that have become almost dogmatic, sticking to common sense and simple communication techniques whenever possible. You will find no Lean or Six Sigma per se here, although the content is not inconsistent with these and other quality oriented approaches. It is more about determining the right flow of work and the enabling supports needed to make it perform as required.

The authors go further than most of the current literature in the final chapters which deal with moving into IT requirements from process design. The book is unique in this regard and offers some excellent templates to support this transformation.

There are numerous useful checklists in the earlier workflow modeling chapters, as well. The questions to ask yourself are revealed as you go through the process helping you to avoid “analysis paralysis.” The ideas presented prevent you from going too deep too soon, or at all, by focusing on ‘what’ before ‘how’; advice I hear myself repeating to my clients all the time.

Other words we share in common, I discovered, are ‘trust the method’ as the number one lesson to be learned. Let me explain why I feel that you can do this, using this book as a guide.

- It reflects the strategic intent concepts of vision, goals, objectives, etc. as vehicles of process traceability and a means of always keeping why we do what we do present in our work.
- It deals with all stakeholders and the need to constantly connect to their needs in order to optimize a network of potentially conflicted relationships, therefore putting process analysis in the proper context.
- It scopes the process early and firmly, avoiding creep later.
- It is based on a precise definition of process modeling terms, semantics and constructs. For example; the ‘verb-noun’ process naming construct that reflects the result of the process in its name is strongly advocated along with other key principles in the Chapter – ‘Business Processes – What are They, Anyway?’ This chapter alone is worth the price of the book – since so many process projects fail due to the violation of what seems like common sense but is not often found in common practice.

Alec has put a great deal of time, energy and effort into this revision, and it shows in the outcome. Although some descriptions are lengthy and could be overwhelming for a process novice, the book deals with critical issues in a realistic way. There are lots of books on notations and the structure and sequence of drawing diagrams, but few on how to incorporate reality. This book does.

The passionate style and the detailed organization and flow of the book provide practical assistance in helping the reader to think through the real issues of tricky process analysis and improvement involving multiple players.

In my opinion, the book is best used as a reference text as you navigate a real process project. If you try to read in straight through, you may find yourself drinking from a fire hose. At over 300 pages it is certainly not a quick read. I recommend a quick scan of the main points at the beginning of each chapter to grasp the book’s context, and then a detailed read of the early sections that nail the concepts, terms and big issues. This approach will give you a foundation that will enable you to make the best use of the information when doing your projects.