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The OMG's Business Process Metamodel RFP

The Object Management Group (OMG) is a consortium of several hundred companies that focuses on object and component standards. The OMG is probably best known among those involved in business process modeling for its Unified Modeling Language (UML), and for its XML-based language, XMI. (XMI can pass information about UML models from one UML modeling tool to another, or to a database.)

The OMG is also active in business modeling in a number of other ways. For example, the OMG has a standard for Business Objects - EDOC - that specifies how standard business components can be used in assembling applications. A number of the OMG's industry specific committees have developed business component frameworks that are used by software developers in specific industries, like health care and telecommunications.

Recently, the OMG began to develop its Model Driven Architecture (MDA). MDA is based on UML and is designed to make it easier for companies to create platform independent object architectures to describe their software resources, and to generate code from the high-level models. In essence, the same platform independent model can serve to generate code for Java or NET, providing the company with a more stable high-level architecture and the ability to maintain an application, and to switch its implementation as needs change.

Most of the recent work the OMG has undertaken has been based on the idea that all of the various models it supports should be compatible with each other. The OMG currently supports middleware models, the UML software notation model, repository and database models, and various business frameworks. They are all compatible because they all use elements defined in a higher-level modeling framework known as the Meta Object Facility or MOF. MOF is an elegant, high-level model that can be used to specify other models. If model developers use MOF, they are guaranteed that models they develop can be translated accurately to any other MOF-compliant model.

In essence, the reason the OMG's XMI is so popular is that it translates any MOF-compliant model into XML code which can be read by any other MOF-compliant tool or repository. Although MOF isn't widely talked about outside the tool vendors' development centers, it forms the basis of many repositories, data warehousing applications, UML and business automation tools.

All this can get very technical. The important thing, at the moment, as far as business process managers are concerned, is that the OMG has decided to undertake the development of a MOF metamodel for all possible business process notations.

At the moment, as everyone working in the business process field knows, there are many ways of representing business processes and no agreed upon standards. Each workflow vendor uses a slightly different notation. Similarly, every business modeling tool uses a slightly different notation. Some represent processes as arrows and others as rectangles. UML represents processes and activities as rectangles with rounded corners. To make matters more complex, there are now a number of groups working on XML languages to describe processes. IBM, Microsoft and BEA have announced a language inelegantly termed BPEL4WS (Business Process Execution Language for Web Services). The Workflow Coalition has developed an XML language, XPD (XML Process Definition Language), a language that can be used to pass descriptions from one workflow system to another. The Business Process Management Initiative (BPMI) has developed its own XML language, BPML (Business Process Management Language) and, in addition, a notation, BPMN. Microsoft and IBM may create their own notations for BPEL in the near future.

In essence, there are lots of different notations for representing business processes, and the number is likely to grow. The OMG's Business Enterprise Integration Domain Task Force began discussions last Fall regarding the development of a metamodel that would describe any specific business process notation. In essence, the OMG Task Force proposes to create a specialized MOF model, or profile, designed to represent business process modeling concepts. The resulting metamodel - which the OMG will probably call the Business Process Definition Metamodel (BPDM) - will not be a notation, but a formal semantic description of the basic business process modeling concepts, like process, activity, event, and output. Specific vendor notations can then be mapped to the OMG's business process metamodel.

Once any two of the business process notation groups have done this, a developer or a computer will be able to translate any given notation to any other, translating from notation A into the profile, and then from the profile into notation B. This sounds a bit complex, but it would be a major advance over the situation that exists now. In the long run, it would mean that a company would be able to describe a business process in any given workflow tool, in an XML BP language or as a component model, and then move from one tool to another when they wanted to change tools or representations.

The OMG process requires that the Task Force issue a Request for Proposals (RFP). This is followed by submission from member companies. Usually, groups of large companies, like IBM, Unisys and BEA, get together and submit common proposals. If there are two or three strong proposals, the Task Force usually encourages those submitting the proposals to combine the best features of each to reach a common proposal that the OMG membership can vote on. The resulting standard will be published by the OMG and made available to all. The process, which was officially initiated at the January 2003 meeting of the OMG Technical Committee, and it will likely be a year or more before the standard is agreed upon and published. The news at the moment is that it has begun. Hopefully, in 2004 there will be a Business Process Metamodel available. It won't

make all the various business processes notations go away, but it will assure that you will be able to easily translate among most notations.

To examine the OMG's draft BP Metamodel RFP, check:
<http://cgi.omg.org/cgi-bin/doc?bei/03-01-03>

Till next time,

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