



BPM and the New Enterprise

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*Business Process Management:
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Processes in the New Enterprise

Eighteen months after leaving Ultimus (www.ultimus.com) and the world of BPM I am now in the thick of bootstrapping another new company in the mobile applications development space. Perhaps the fourteen years of intense encounter with workflow and BPM has made me more sensitive to the prevalence of processes around us. That is probably the reason why, even though my new company is still a very small company with less than 10 employees, I am already working with a number of important processes on which our success depends. I contrast this experience with the early days of Ultimus fifteen years ago when, even though we were developing a BPM product, we did not have the awareness, the technology or the means to automate our important processes.

Being involved in a software company it is not surprising that the processes important to us are related to the life cycle development and management of the product and the acquisition and retention of customers. The processes that we have adopted early on, even before we have finished the development of the product or have any customers, are:

- i. Definition and prioritization of product features
- ii. Structured discussions about the product and its architecture
- iii. Bug reporting, tracking and resolution
- iv. Customer relationship management
- v. Customer support
- vi. Customer feedback

A small start-up company has two activities that are vital for its success, namely the development of the product and the acquisition of customers. Therefore it is not surprising that half of the mission critical processes at this stage are related to the first activity and the other half to the second. With only a few employees there is not much need for HR processes, which will hopefully come later. Likewise there is not much money to manage so there is little need for financial/accounting processes.

So how does a small company with a very limited budget and no IT department to speak of manage to deploy the systems necessary to support six mission-critical processes? The answer is a four-letter word: SaaS. There are so many decent and affordable SaaS offerings out there that entrepreneurs and start-up companies can easily find one that meets their needs, unless of course they make the foolish mistake of looking for a solution that does everything they want. In my judgment, SaaS offerings typically do 70% of what you would like them to do, and in most cases that is good enough. The beauty of SaaS is that first, customers are not locked to a vendor simply because they have not invested so much in the vendor. Second, SaaS offerings keep improving at a fairly fast clip so that the 70% that you get may end up to be 85% in the not too distant future, but will most likely never be 100%. We are content with a 70% solution to begin with and have no vendor lock, the cost is very reasonable and within our means and we have the expectation that over time the solutions will improve.

To meet our immediate process needs in the startup we have used the following SaaS offerings:

- i. A hosted Microsoft SharePoint Server that costs us about \$20/month. While SharePoint is not the most exciting collaboration solution, it has a pretty decent feature set, is easy to set-up and comes with some pre-defined process templates. We use the SharePoint Bug Tracking solution for tracking and resolving bugs. In addition we use the discussion forums provided by SharePoint for all product and company related discussions.
- ii. A hosted private forum for user feedback provided by UserVoice. We use this for a number of forums for Product Suggestions by Customers, Product Suggestion by Employees and Customer Issue reporting. This service, which costs about \$15/month, also allows users to browse and search for topics started by others, and vote on these topics to show their level of interest or agreement.
- iii. A hosted CRM solution provided by ZoHo. This is a light version of Salesforce.com and provides very good capabilities including the ability to customize the views and terminology to our requirements. It is free for up to three users and then has a pretty modest monthly fee for each additional user.

So for a cost of less than \$40/month we are able to get six important processes and collaboration tools without needing the services of an IT department.

When I started Ultimus such tools were either not available, or the cost of acquisition and deployment was so high that startups and small companies could not afford them. The conclusion I draw from this experience is that there is no longer any excuse for any company not to automate their processes and deploy collaboration solutions. The solutions are out there and online. They are very affordable and do not require an army of IT personnel to deploy and support. And they will do most of what you want, which, at the outset, is good enough.