

A Postcard From Europe

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To simply talk of improving quality, managing process thinking, changing organizations, or automating existing processes is to miss the real motivation behind BPM. In discussing such topics, we can gain understanding as to why (despite increasing sales) BPM is not truly embedded in our management thinking and our boardrooms. Such topics act like painkillers for a headache and appeal to our sense of reason.

Would it not be better to take a more holistic approach? To try and eliminate the cause of the headache as in holistic medicine? Or, in this case, to appeal to the intuition or desire of people and companies?

To understand what I mean, consider the works of two of our accepted experts in the area of human, corporate, and societal change, Alvin Toffler and Charles Handy.

Of those that have read them, few would argue that Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* and Charles Handy's *Age of Unreason* give a pretty good account of the changes going on in our lives, our companies, and our societies. But, of course, while many of the changes they predicted are proving all too accurate, they both got one thing seriously wrong – They both underestimated terribly the pace of change, the levels of confusion, and the amount of disruption caused by such change. But for many people these books are considered old hat or esoteric management thinking with no real relevance to today's society.

So consider instead, Kjell Nordstrom and Jonas Ridderstrale, two Swedish experts who have written a more up to date book describing similar issues but using modern references and using readily accessible analogies. Before rushing off to the bookshop however, you need to be aware that the book is somewhat unconventional in style, content, and the language used! The book *Funky Business* pulls no punches when dealing with the challenges we face as societies and as people.

Like others before them, Nordstrom and Ridderstrale assert that conventional approaches to business are dead. Further, they also assert that companies as we know them are dead; they put forward some very strong arguments for a new corporate order (or in their case disorder) and detail how this may look moving forward.

It may not seem it at first glance, but having just read their work and having pondered the earlier work of Toffler and Handy, I think that both of them have captured the essence of the real motivation behind BPM. It is not about the cheaper, faster, better paradigm that so many companies are still chasing. It is not about finding new ways to manage staff and monitor activity – such techniques still belong to old style corporate monoliths.

It is about bringing together all the assets of a company in a logical catalogued fashion such that they can be broken apart and reassembled in new ways, innovative ways such that our companies can create new products or services and address markets that our competitors have not even thought about yet. Look at Levi's and their ability now to sell custom fit jeans designed especially



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to fit you – you being a customer of one. Would this be possible in your industry? Maybe someone is already contemplating it. People talk about Processes or Business Processes as constants; they suggest that the procedure (the “how”) might change, but that the Process itself will remain for longer. But what if that were not the case? What if the key process was changing every year, month, or day? What if the only constants were people, knowledge, and customers?

It is about recognizing that knowledge is the key asset in the organization, along with ensuring that the company has the structure and flexibility to bring that knowledge to bear in a quick and focused way to capitalize on an opportunity—and to then be able to dismantle that structure and reassign people and assets when the steam runs out, all the while changing and adapting. *Funky Business* suggests that this is all about creating “temporary monopolies” or “niches” and then moving on to other more profitable markets when the competition catches up.

When looked at like this, it is perhaps easy to see why Howard Smith, et al., have trouble convincing us to use a BPMS. The technology is fine, the problem they solve exists, but within companies we still do not have sufficient intuition to recognize how fast things are changing, and we do not really have the desire to change fast enough. We are still living in a state of complacency and denial. Smith and others in the BPM space still rely on appealing to our reasoning, which, of course, is difficult if people are in denial. What if people, instead, appealed to our intuition and desire, and talked more about what we want or what we feel.

Further study would be required, but this might explain much of the continuing issue surrounding the business/IT divide. Is it that technology is being sold and marketed to our “reasoning,” whereas business people work far more with “intuition” or “desire”? How often do you do something because it just feels right or because you just want to?

Something else, perhaps more interesting when talking about desire, came through in *Funky Business*. They talked about how other initiatives, such as BPR, TQM, JIT, etc., have all failed in the past, but only for those companies that chose to wait until they were well established before getting involved—by which time the early adopters had already milked the gains and moved on.

In closing, I would suggest that there are two key lessons: Firstly, for colleagues in the boardroom to ask whether they truly desire to be successful—for, if they do, then they had better get involved quickly before the true leaders move the goalposts again. Secondly, for those wanting to promote technology inside or outside their company, ask yourself, does what I am proposing appeal to the feelings and desires of those I am looking to sell to?

