

The Best Applications Are The Ones That Get Used

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Effective business process management suites (BPMS) let people participate in a process using software they already have and already know how to use.

I doubt anyone would disagree that Microsoft Excel is the “go to” application when people need to get things done. Executives would be surprised just how dependent their organizations are on such a common desktop tool. This must seem especially puzzling given the fact that most companies have heavily invested in enterprise applications that supposedly have all of the modules employees need to do their jobs. So, why don't employees comply and use the CRM, ERP, Supply Chain and home grown systems that they have been asked to use?

1. The system lacks a specific capability
2. The system has the capability, but its cumbersome to use
3. An employee doesn't have access to the system or module they need

Enter BPMS technology. Companies regain control & visibility. Employees interact with the software using common desktop tools (Microsoft Office, Email, Internet Explorer, etc.) with which they are already familiar. The process management infrastructure ties it all together and IT's underlying infrastructure is undisturbed. Problem solved, right? Not exactly. While business executives immediately see BPMS's ease of use and ability to quickly solve meaningful business issues, it often fails to pass the “we have something like that already” test due to being evaluated on a functionality basis, not on its ability to deliver a sustainable business outcome. Common objections include:

- “Our ERP system comes with a module for solving that problem.”
- “Our CRM package can handle our Workflow needs.”
- “It sounds like we have 80% of the functionality you are describing.”

Too often and too early in the evaluation process, BPMS technologies get inappropriately caught up in the “functionality game. When business logic drives the evaluation criteria, BPMS technology passes with flying colors because it is being measured on what it can do from a capabilities standpoint, not what it has from a functionality standpoint.

I was recently in a meeting with a Fortune 500 Manufacturing company that has a “pain point” associated with submitting and approving employee expenses. Their ERP package comes with an interface that people can submit their expenses through, but you have to be online and inside the firewall in order to use it. This presents a problem for the sales folks who are constantly traveling. As a result, sales personnel schedule “office time” to get their expenses done; time that could be spent in front of the customer (5 - 10% of their work week). It was proposed that BPMS technology could solve this problem quickly, letting employees submit their expenses using Excel and Email. BPMS would manage the approval process, grab the data out of Excel and populate it automatically into the ERP package. This would allow sales representatives to submit expenses at their leisure (on an airplane, in front of the TV, etc.). While the sales people we spoke with loved the idea, the decision maker said no because the company's existing ERP package technically does provide employees with the ability to submit their expenses; just not in the way they would like to be able to submit them. It was believed that an incremental spend on BPMS technology to solve the expenses issue would be a waste because the ERP package they have already invested in should be able to handle the job.

Managing the complex sales cycle in Telecommunications and Financial Services is another example where BPMS technology drives incremental value to an enterprise application.” Yes,

most CRM packages come with an embedded Workflow capability but it does not extend outside of the CRM application to include people who do not have CRM on their desktop and it does not facilitate interoperability with disparate systems that may need to be tapped into as a part of the customer acquisition process.

“Frequently, these processes extend beyond the scope of traditional CRM users into areas like finance, legal, or order fulfillment, and they are often too complex to automate through linear workflow and alerting. Firms are beginning to see the value of linking a business process management (BPM) tool to their sales applications to automate and improve more complex processes such as order to cash or quote approvals.”

- Forrester Research, December 2005

BPMS technology can quickly knock out dozens of organizational “pain points” like the two examples described above, typically in less than 60 days. In most cases, the company will already own technology believed to have the necessary functionality (partially or whole) to get the job done. This brings me to my point at the center of this article. If people don’t use the functionality in the tools you have given them, you have a functionality gap. If your applications aren’t agile and can’t easily facilitate imminent changes as they occur, the systems will be rendered obsolete and people will circumvent them. Pre-existing technologies may have parts and pieces of what BPMS technology brings to the table, but at the end of the day, an unused application is a useless application. You are not realizing the promised benefit and you remain exposed to risk & inefficiencies. Besides, in the time it typically takes to scope out the problem, determine whether or not existing IT infrastructure can handle it and establish the policies, rules & procedures to police its use, a BPMS could have already been up and running having solved the problem. The “sweet spot” for BPMS technology is any process that spans more than one system and includes a heavy dose of manual activity.

So let people use their “go to” applications to get the job done and task BPMS technology with the hard work of interfacing with all of the disparate systems for them. You’ll be a better business for it.

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