A Strategist's Perspective

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Managing the Migration of Work for Profit

An important skill in BPM will revolve around recognizing how work can be mapped to process patterns and migrated to more economical forms of process activity over time. I believe there are three common patterns of process/workflow that thrive under the banner of BPM. Each of these patterns delivers productivity in different ways, consequently their particular methodologies, tools and techniques differ. The secret to continued BPM success revolves around implementing processes in the proper initial process pattern and learning how to migrate work to a more structured environment over time. Some processes may never migrate, but learning how to migrate work to its most economic process pattern is essential to maximizing the money-making potential of the process.

While these patterns may be used in combination with each other in trying to enable a certain type of business process, they can easily be identified and managed uniquely. The process professional that understands that these patterns are handled differently will likely succeed in achieving results faster than those who don't understand the differences. I have seen each of the patterns in their pure forms and have had the challenge of enabling and transforming them to something better. I will be referring to Figure 1 throughout this column.

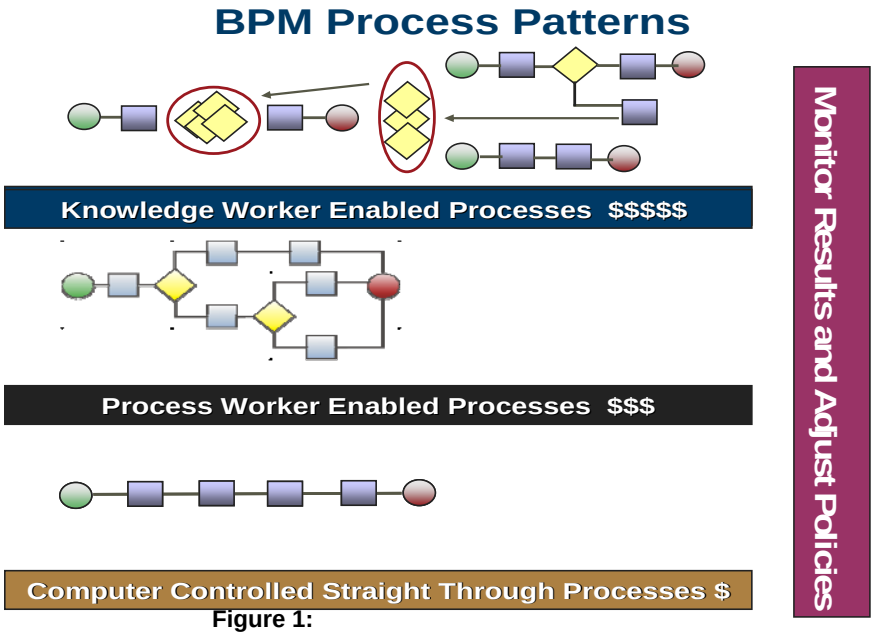

Figure 1:

Straight-Through Processes: (Program Controlled):

This workflow pattern has been highly sought out and highly enabled by hand crafted and/or purchased applications. Through the linking of transactions, sub-applications, services, composite applications and application integrations via BPM technologies, significant economies can be gained by leveraging automation. These straight-through processes have all the rules baked into them and do not require humans to guide them in any way, except to change the embedded rules when and where necessary.

This scenario assumes that the processes perform flawlessly and do not hang up in any way. Examples of this kind of process would be "jet underwriting" and "automatic claim processing". I view this as the robotics of the white collar manufacturing line where the business process is accomplished in fractions of a second and the rules are automated. Refer to the bottom band on Figure 1.

The problem with this approach occurs when the exceptions swamp the automatic process, at which point process workers are usually introduced. In general, though,these processes are fairly inexpensive to run, so there is an economic benefit to automating them. This pattern is the domain of the power vendors and IT folks. An organization is considered highly successful, if 70% of the cases are handled in a straight through fashion. Usually rates are initially around 50% and they migrate over time to higher rates.

Process Worker Processes: (Process Worker Enabled):

This workflow pattern organizes human capital and flow of work that require knowledge, cases, content and skills. While this pattern may leverage application transactions and composite applications, the work surrounding these kinds of processes involves the human touch. Quite often the work is passed from one job specialty to another, and polices, constraints and rules are partially enforced by humans (see the middle band on Figure 1).

If the control is application based, then humans perform "heads-down" activities in order to feed an application transaction need and generally achieve completion in minutes (sometimes less where highly specialized exceptions are involved). An example of this kind of process would be a customer service center where address changes would be preformed. The customer service representative would select an address change from a menu of capabilities, complete this process and potentially go on to another short and sharp online process. These are relatively inexpensive processes, but certainly not as inexpensive as straight through processes.

The prevalent use is around cases, and the work is not considered complete until certain unknowns have been resolved. These kinds of processes can remain "open" until certain completed activities occur. While they can be completed in minutes, they can remain unresolved for months, requiring that a definite time frame be set for completion. An example would be a life underwriting process where a doctor's exam has to be completed before the policy can be issued because of the age of the insured and the size of the policy.

The policy will not be issued as a contract until the results of the exam are known and interpreted. Quite often you will see content/image processing accompanying the case folder needed to organize the legal audit trail of activities and their results. Often you will see forms of patterned correspondence automatically generated out of these processes, and they are likely to be involved with a value chain of sorts.

Knowledge Worker Processes: (Professional Knowledge Worker Guided)

At the top of the process food chain are processes that require a high level of skill that might not be available in one person. In other words, the process may require the collaboration of multiple individuals who may or may not be employees of your organization. These kinds of processes are resolved in hours at best and sometimes can go unresolved for longer periods of time (see the top band on figure 1).

These processes are indeterminate by nature in that they may be undefined in terms of goals and outcomes. Quite often the activity starts as a "one off" situation, yet after months of experience

ends up as a set of best practices that can be baked into the process worker level. An example might be to determine if a condition such as "double vision" is a potential deal stopper or possibly something that an insurance company might charge more for over the life of an insurance policy.

To resolve this issue could require consultations with paramedics, advanced underwriters, doctors and "double vision" experts outside the company. These indeterminate processes might involve voting and leveraging process snippets once the decision is made. These are very expensive processes that BPM can help manage by potentially discovering patterns of completion that can be made into knowledge maps and process snippets. These processes are new and evolving along with Web 2.0, knowledge sources and collaboration across value chains. The Knowledge Worker Process pattern is the frontier of BPM today where the policies and rules are being defined on the fly.

Bottom Line: Knowing the Nature of Work Determines the Ultimate Process Pattern and How Work Migrates.

The reason that BPM is moving out of the IT domain and increasingly into the business domain revolves around the nature of the process, new levels of human interaction, the need for speed, the need for cost effectiveness and the level of repeatability. As the rules around a process move to a more solid state, the movement towards more repeatable processes is certain to continue for the foreseeable future. An understanding of the migration of workflow from the top knowledge worker processes down through process workers to pure automation will be a key survival skill for organizations in order to compete effectively. Look for new BPM applications focused around knowledge and collaboration going forward, as we BPM professionals learn how to assist the knowledge worker. To do so effectively will require borrowing techniques from knowledge acquisition methods.