



2007 BPM and Workflow Handbook

Edited by Layna Fischer

Future Strategies Inc., 2007

\$95.00 319 pages

Reviewed by Paul Harmon

Workflow, as originally conceived, involved the automation of document processing activities. In essence, you would scan the paper coming into the organization and, thereafter, let a software system send the data to whichever employee needed to see it or work with it. Hammer, Champy and Davenport provided several examples of early document processing applications in their reengineering books that were published in 1993. Soon after that many companies began to explore workflow in earnest. The Workflow Management Coalition (WfMC) was formed in 1993 as an association of vendors and a few users who were interested in using document processing system and defining standards for workflow systems.

As with most technologies, as time passed practitioners, found new uses for the techniques and workflow systems were extended to support a variety of different types of processes.

The crisis for the workflow vendors arrived in 2003 when the Business Process Management Initiative (BPMI) was formed. BPMI was established to promote the idea that software systems could be built that would use the Internet and Web protocols (e.g. XML, SOAP, WSDL), workflow techniques and Enterprise Application Integration techniques to support comprehensive business processes. These new Business Process Management Software (BPMS) systems would combine the best of human and software automation techniques to manage the runtime execution of very comprehensive processes. To facilitate this, BPMI set off to develop a high level process management language (BPML) and a notation to support analysis and design (BPMN). BPMI constituted a direct challenge to the WfMC, and the organization shifted uneasily from support to competition. By 2005, BPMI had disappeared, absorbed into the OMG, which took over the work on BPMN. BPML disappeared, supplanted by BPEL, an approach championed by IBM, Microsoft and BEA and eventually turned over to OASIS for standardization. BPEL didn't constitute the threat for WfMC that BPML had, since BPEL doesn't deal well with the human or workflow aspects of process management. (Eventually, OASIS will probably create a version of BPEL that does provide comprehensive support, but it hasn't yet.)

In the meantime, WfMC has generated its own process "language" XPD. XPD is not a language, like BPEL, designed to generate code for a business process execution application. Instead, it's a standard that allows workflow vendors to pass models (workflow applications) from one workflow tool to another. It has an advantage over BPMN, today, since it captures the actual graphical layout of diagrams and because it has a rigorous metamodel. Presumably the OMG will add both features to BPMN in the future, but, at the moment, we have three popular BPM standards: BPEL, XPD and BPMN, all of which have characteristics that distinguish one from the other.

All of this background is to provide a context for a discussion of the contents and tone of the 2007 WfMC Handbook. The WfMC Handbook is an annual publication that is made up of some 20 articles by technical specialists and practitioners. It has an argumentative and technical tone. It discusses standards and the history of standards in detail and makes much of small differences

that are temporary, in any case. In his Foreword, Jon Pyke suggests that the arguments and discussions about the differences and roles of BPM and workflow are over. I don't believe they are. At best, they are in abeyance while standards groups work on BPM standards. All of the issues Pyke dismisses will reappear in the next several years as the completed versions of the various standards emerge and are explored in practice. As an example, we recently worked with leading BPM vendors and couldn't help notice that almost all of the applications they showed us were EAI applications that could have been done in 2003. Similarly, most of the applications that former workflow vendors have recently shown us are workflow applications that emphasize supporting employees and studiously avoid the complex software integration issues that the former EAI vendors specialize in.

SOA has not helped clarify the BPMS market. SOA is a valuable and important technology that all BPMS vendors will eventually embrace, but it is also a complex software integration architecture, and it plays to the strengths of the former EAI vendors and doesn't do as much to improve the approach of the workflow vendors. The current emphasis on SOA has had the effect of promoting the prominence of the EAI and platform vendors and deemphasizing the importance of the human side of complex business processes. Expect to start reading articles about how unbalanced the new BPM-EAI emphasis is in 6-12 months.

As an aside, some workflow authorities tend to link workflow with groupware and focus on how workflow/groupware techniques can be used to support processes that involve lots of communication among employees. This is an aspect of workflow that isn't in evidence as much in this year's Handbook, but I still think it has a lot to contribute to a broader understanding of the automation of business processes.

Forrester continues to divide their BPMS evaluations into two categories: Integration-Centric and Human-Centric and that reflect the applications being developed in the market. There have been a number of acquisitions, and there are now EAI vendors that own good workflow tools and Workflow vendors who have acquired strong EAI capabilities. However, there are not yet tools that integrate the two aspects of process and improve it by generating impressive applications that combine the two in equal measure.

Practical BPM groups considering exploring a BPMS product are still well advised to ask themselves whether the process they wish to automate will involve people or systems. If you want to work on a process to better integrate your ERP applications, use a tool that emphasizes EAI. If you want to work on a process that involves people and human decisions, use a tool from one of the workflow vendors.

The 2007 BPM and Workflow Handbook focuses primarily on the human or workflow aspects of business process management software applications. It focuses more on standards and arguments about standards than it might, but the best of the technical papers are very good, and if you are interested in standards issues – as they exist today -- then this is a book you will need.

The overall organization of the handbook divides the articles into three major sections, one on the business value of workflow and BPM, another on BPM in Healthcare, and the third on Standards and Technology. There are thoughtful, excellent and detailed articles in each section. My preferences obviously reflect my concerns; someone else might select other articles for special praise. My short list, however, would include:

Nathaniel Palmer's "Introduction: Workflow and BPM in 2007: Business Process Standards See a New Global Imperative." (Palmer has just replaced long time WfMC executive director Layna Fischer as the WfMC's professional leader.)

"BPM and Service-Oriented Architecture Team Together: A Pathway to Success for an Agile Government" by Linus Chow and Charles Medley from BEA and Clay Richardson from Project Performance Corp.

“Analyzing and Improving Core Telecom Business Processes: A Case Study by Kyeong Eon Lee of KTF and Robert Cain of Handysoft.

“BPM Center of Excellence Manifesto” by Setrag Khoshafian’s of Pegasystems.

“Applying MDA Concepts to Business Process Management” by Alexander Petzmann, Michael Pncochar, Christian Kuplich and David Orenzanz, all from BOC.

Ray Hess’s article on improving bed cleaning processes in “The Chester County Hospital.” (Who would have thought that BPM could be used so effectively to analyze and improve such a mundane but important process?)

“Quality Metrics for Business Process Models” by Irene Vanderfeesten, Hajo A. Reijers, Wil van der Aalst, Jorge Cardoso and Jan Mendling.

“Defining Easy Business Rules for Accomplishing the Basel II Risk Handling in Banks” by Juan J. Trilles of AuraPortal BPMS.

As I suggested earlier, there are many other articles, and some will be of more interest to others. They key here, however, is the quality and the range of articles. If you are like I am, you have read several of the workflow Handbooks over the years. They constitute a benchmark to the research and the practice of workflow systems development, and to the integration of workflow technology into the larger technology that we now know as BPM.

The 2007 BPM and Workflow Handbook isn’t inexpensive, but it’s printed in small type with small margins and packs a great deal of information into 300 pages. I recommend it to anyone who wants to develop a good understanding of how workflow and BPM are evolving, and especially to anyone who wants some good case studies demonstrating how workflow can be used to automate the management of the human side of business processing.

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