



## BPM: A Global View

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## BPM and Web 2.0

Recently I have come across a number of posts in the blogosphere and articles in the press about BPM and Web 2.0. Some argue that workflow automation, which is an essential component of BPM, is a Web 2.0 application because it engenders collaboration among the participants of a process. Others strongly argue that, because of its perceived structured nature, BPM is the antithesis of Web 2.0 which thrives on unstructured collaboration and freeform sharing of information. Given these diametrically opposed views, what is the reality of BPM as a Web 2.0 solution?

To answer this question one must first understand what is Web 2.0, which by itself defies a simple definition. I have read numerous articles that try to define Web 2.0 from various perspectives. The ordinary business reader is likely to be confused by all these technical descriptions, especially given the marketing hype of vendors seeking competitive advantage. However, if one distills through all the various definitions, it is reasonable to conclude that Web 2.0 has three salient characteristics:

- i. Strong emphasis on collaboration, or sharing information and ideas.
- ii. "Mashups" or the ability to pull together information from various sources that is relevant to collaboration.
- iii. Rich Internet Application (RIA) to provide excellent user experience on the Internet.

An application that combines these characteristics is a legitimate Web 2.0 application.

Where does this definition of Web 2.0 leave BPM? First, is BPM a RIA? The answer is that this is a question of technology adoption and evolution. RIAs are developed using new technologies such as Asynchronous Java Script (AJAX), Adobe Flex or Microsoft SilverLight. Every BPM product in the market today does not use these technologies. Only a few do. However, there is no doubt in my mind that BPM vendors, like other software vendors, will all rollout new versions of their products that use these technologies. I can safely predict that in the next 2 years or so, most vendors will have their user interfaces as RIAs, some moving faster than others. This is really not a BPM question but a question of how fast BPM vendors can adopt the new technologies. Indeed, the sheer benefits of an RIA from a usability and customer satisfaction perspective will make it a competitive advantage, compelling BPM vendors to accelerate their development efforts so as not to be left behind. Check one for BPM.

Second with respect to mashups, I would strongly argue that BPM is one of the first application categories to offer mashups even before Web 2.0 was popularized. Think of the modern BPM "client", or the application that users use to participate in a business process and do their work. The BPM client is a classical example of a mashup. It pulls information from a number of sources such as databases, Web Services, EDMS (for document attachments), the BPM server (for status information), and often from integrations with other enterprise applications such as ERP and CRM. This information is collected in real-time and then presented to the user in a manner that is conducive to quick decision making and getting the job done. Of course, the ease and flexibility

with which BPM applications allow these mashups to be created depends on the capabilities of the underlying BPM software that is used. However, the point is that the BPM client is a mashup that is used by all the participants in a process. Check two for BPM.

Finally, with respect to collaboration, I think it is clear to everyone that BPM for system-centric processes, also called straight-through processes, is optimized for speed and has little human involvement. By their very nature, these system-centric solutions are not collaborative and they do not need to be. They are automated production lines which are fully robotized. Then there is another class of BPM solutions, called “production workflow” in the 1990’s, that do involve humans but are for high volume, fairly rigid processes for claims processing and call centers, etc. Again there is not much need for collaboration in such applications, and the focus is on structure, compliance and speed. So neither of these two types of BPM solution can be classified as Web 2.0, and there is no need.

On the other hand, there are a large number of business processes that involve humans, and especially knowledge workers. In the early days of BPM/workflow, these processes were classified as “administrative/ad hoc”. The word “ad hoc” tried to capture the collaborative nature of these processes, even though technology at that time did not provide much opportunity for collaboration and ad hoc flow of processes. These human centric processes is where BPM truly has the potential for becoming a stellar Web 2.0 application for the simple reason that humans work in extremely complex ways, and the way they interact can often not be anticipated and programmed in advance. Here are some uniquely human things that people do when they work together:

- i. **Confer:** Knowledge workers often want to discuss an issue with others before they make a decision
- ii. **Inform:** Knowledge workers want to let others know why they made a specific decision.
- iii. **Assign:** A knowledge worker often wants to assigns tasks to others in the case of work overload or absence.
- iv. **Reject:** Knowledge workers often reject a task they are assigned because it has incorrect or incomplete information.
- v. **Validate:** Knowledge workers want to review other information in order to validate and support the decision they are making.
- vi. **Share and Assimilate:** Knowledge workers want to share the decisions they are making or the information they have gathered, not only with the participants of the process but with a larger community or co-workers. This sharing and assimilation fosters organizational learning.

All these actions are ad hoc and collaborative in nature. Many BPM clients offer some of these capabilities. However if BPM is to truly address the needs of knowledge workers, the BPM client will have to offer all these capabilities in the future. The growing popularity of Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, wikis, instant messaging, forums, Internet document sharing etc., means that BPM solutions can leverage these technologies to provide similar capabilities to BPM users. Therefore BPM is evolving in to a rich platform which enforces structure and compliance when needed, but also supports real-time and ad hoc collaboration as and when needed. Check three for BPM.

So the bottom line is that while today every BPM solution is not a Web 2.0 application, sooner or later all human-centric BPM solutions will have to become one. By the very nature of its core purpose of enabling people to work together, human-centric BPM solutions are an ideal examples of an applications that supports collaboration, mashups and RIA technologies. Vendors who are

nimble and deliver BPM as a Web 2.0 solution will have a significant competitive advantage, and will have the best opportunity for transforming their end customers and creating sustainable value.