



**BPMN Method & Style:**  
**A levels-based methodology for BPM process modeling and improvement using BPMN 2.0**

**Bruce Silver**

Cody-Cassidy, 2009

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**Reviewed by Roger Tregear**

Lurking on disc drives and memory sticks and hanging on the walls of organizations around the world are way too many BPMN diagrams that are either not compliant with the formal specification or not easy to read and understand, or both. No matter how many times you read the 500+ pages of the OMG specification for BPMN, it will not tell you how to create a useful process model.

In *BPMN Method & Style*, Bruce Silver has written a very practical book that bridges the gap between the formal notation description of the OMG standard and the realities involved in consistently creating useful diagrams. Silver has spent years teaching BPMN classes to business and IT practitioners. At the same time he has served on the OMG BPMN committee that is revising the current specification. Thus, Silver's familiarity with the standard and his experience in using it combine to provide sensible guidance for modelers of all types. The distinction he makes between the modeling rules described in the standard and the methods and styles required to create meaningful diagrams that are compliant with those rules, distinguishes this book from others that often do little more than repeat the contents of the OMG specification.

The (in)famous business/IT divide is also to be found at the heart of the definition and use of BPMN. It is used mainly for non-executable process description by business users but is specified, sometimes in excruciating detail, by IT developers to define the minutiae required to facilitate process execution.

There is a great diversity in process modelers and what they are trying to achieve. Any notation that is to be useful to everyone involved in modeling must necessarily include lots of details that one or another group won't find useful. BPMN was designed to be useful for both IT and business people, and both groups are using it in a wide variety of circumstances. BPMN is often used by non-technical people who are primarily concerned with understanding how a business process works and how they might rearrange the activities to make the process more efficient. They aren't considering that the models will be executed. Indeed they might be horrified to think that their models would be executed directly or even relied on to give the level of detail required for execution. Often, when business people model, they simply seek a general overview of a sequence of activities, and, having understood the sequence, the diagrams are left for the cleaners with the empty coffee cups. A lot of good work has been achieved in this mode. There are, however, some current issues and some future challenges.

Even in the same organization, perhaps even on the same project team, it is common to have modelers producing diagrams that, while equally compliant with the standards, do not have the same look and feel and therefore do not communicate in the same way. Process diagrams are the language of organizational understanding and systems development. We need a common

language.

Looking further ahead, and perhaps it's not really so far at all, what happens when the business folk hand over process diagrams to their IT colleagues who then arrange for the models to be executed directly? Will near enough be good enough then? Will we be quite so relaxed about giving business modelers license to have a flexible interpretation of the notation specification? How will we cross the chasm between the rough diagrams on the whiteboard and the precise technical instructions required by a BPM System? How do we reconcile the very different objectives of wanting to describe versus needing to control?

This is the area in which this book can make a major contribution. Silver offers a coherent approach to "going from a blank sheet to a complete BPMN model." He suggests a way of layering the complexity and achieving the "goals of clarity, expressiveness, and consistency with BPMN's precise technical meaning."

Three levels of BPMN use are described, each with its own methodology. The use of *Level 1*, *Level 2*, *Level 3* terminology is unfortunate. These terms are already used by many in describing process architecture hierarchies (process decomposition), and that will cause confusion. I prefer Silver's alternate terms, *descriptive BPMN*, *analytical BPMN*, and *executable BPMN*. (Reflecting this potential confusion, later reference is made in the book to "top level" and "second level" processes to indicate highest level end-to-end processes and their next level of decomposition.)

*Descriptive BPMN* uses the basic set of shapes and symbols that are adequate for the needs of business people seeking to document a process. A top down methodology is described that provides a consistent model development framework while allowing for some relaxation of "BPMN's more restrictive rules without sacrificing semantic clarity."

*Analytical BPMN* takes up where descriptive BPMN leaves off. Using the full set of shapes and symbols, the method at this level deals with events and exception handling showing the complexity and depth of the process. The resulting models more rigorously follow the details of the specification and bridge the business/IT gap.

*Executable BPMN* deals with the XML language underneath the shapes. This is the new bit in BPMN 2.0 and is no longer about the diagram but about what is beneath the diagram in terms of data, associations, services, messages, and human tasks. Since this level of implementation barely exists beyond the BPMN specification at the moment, this is not a key focus of the book. Nevertheless, it is usefully described to give a complete picture of the BPMN modeling spectrum. Supporting the methodological description and issues of style and approach is a reasonably complete survey of the meaning and use of the many objects in BPMN 2.0. These aspects of the book are done well with clear descriptions and good examples, and will provide a useful reference for modelers. One of the real successes of this book is its ability to describe both the "what" and the "how" of BPMN modeling.

BPMN in all of its glory is complex. Arguably, the complexity is necessary if you are ultimately looking for execution of the models. Not all of us are, however, at least not yet. This book helps us to deal with the complexity. Without being overly restrictive, Bruce Silver shows a cumulative progression from early models by business folks to the specification of working BPM systems by their technical colleagues. The suggested approach shows how to start with simple but compliant diagrams and add complexity as you need to, depending on the intent and the audience. Combined with a decent modeling tool that allows you to show or hide complexity as appropriate, the approach described in this book will force greater clarity and usefulness in the resulting models.

The modeling activities in many organizations are, unintentionally, teaching bad habits. A consequence of this is illustrated by the author's comment that modelers "often capture the working of as-is processes in flat models stretching out over 30 feet of wall space." An exaggeration no doubt, but the point is well made. Where there is a lot of modeling going on, particularly if that involves multiple teams of modelers, organizations need to establish and enforce modeling conventions. *BPMN Method and Style* would be a good starting point.

Bruce Silver says that his goal is to "explain how to create BPMN that is easily understood, that expresses the exception paths as clearly as the happy path, and that can be shared effectively by business and IT." Anyone who shares that aspiration (and isn't that everyone doing BPMN modeling?) should read this book.

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