



BPM: A Global View

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Social Networking and BPM of the Future

A couple of months ago, I saw an online video by Google about their upcoming [Google Wave](#) platform for social networking. As I watched it, my mind raced back to the early 1990s when Lotus was the rising star and was introducing Lotus Notes as a revolutionary new groupware platform. Lotus was a pioneer and coined the term “groupware” to define Lotus Notes as it was a new paradigm in those days and could not be defined using the IT lingo of the day. Lotus defined “groupware” as a solution that empowers teams of people to work together by giving them three capabilities in a unified package, namely communications, collaboration, and coordination. Lotus called these “the 3 Cs of groupware.” In those days, the hot technologies were primarily email for communication, document management for collaboration, and workflow for coordination. Notes provided a single platform for all three of these capabilities, which was its key strategic differentiator.

As I watched the Google Wave introduction, I was intrigued by Google’s definition of Google Wave as a platform for real-time communication and collaboration. The fact that Google Wave offers very impressive communication and collaboration capabilities in real-time over the Internet was impressive enough. However, what was even more impressive and intriguing to me was the fact that Google Wave is offering two of the “3 Cs of groupware.” What is missing from Google Wave is “coordination,” or workflow. If one could add coordination, it could become a true and rich groupware platform. Indeed the vision of the early pioneers of workflow/BPM, such as Ultimus, which I was starting at that time, was to provide this third capability for coordination, and complete the groupware offering. Digging deeper into the technical details of Google Wave, I found that it has an interesting feature called “Robots,” which are essentially “automation agents” that participate like individuals in Google Wave. Again, I was intrigued by the similarity in name and functionality to the Ultimus feature called “Flobots,” or workflow robots, which we developed in the early 90s and introduced with the Ultimus version 1 in 1995. Google Robots, like Ultimus Flobots, can do many automated things without human involvement. Certainly one of the things a Robot could be developed to provide would be “coordination,” or workflow capabilities. Google is not doing this, but there is nothing stopping someone else from doing it by using the capabilities provided by Google Wave. This will result in a workflow/BPM solution built on Google Wave that leverages the full power of Google Wave.

Social networking has become one of the most dynamic phenomena and technology in recent years, and the Internet provides a cost-effective and far-reaching network to facilitate it. While it started as a consumer phenomenon, social networking is now making inroads into the business world as corporations recognize its power for sharing information and enabling people to work together. Working in a modern organization is also “social” in nature, especially for knowledge workers who have to share information and ideas, and build value in a collaborative and iterative way. The increasing sophistication of social networking tools, as exemplified by applications such as Google Wave, certainly makes this even more attractive as a business solution.

Participation in a business process, too, is “social” in nature. The participants of the process are members of a team who often want to discuss and collaborate with each other and want to know

what other participants are thinking. In many case they want the ability to use the thoughts and feedback of others to change and improve their own actions in a process. Today, most BPM solutions provide a structured way of doing work, using a factory automation metaphor. But knowledge workers who participate in processes are not automatons working on a factory floor. Instead they are humans with the need to learn and to satisfy emotional needs. They find too much structure imposed by rigid BPM solutions to be an impediment rather than a facilitator. When the process becomes an impediment, these knowledge workers will find ways to bypass the rigidity of structured BPM and work around it. This defeats the whole purpose of BPM.

It is for this reason that we find more and more social networking type capabilities creeping into BPM offerings of different vendors. This includes the integration of instant messaging, Wikis, discussion forums, and collaboration. However, these are all patchwork; at their core most BPM offerings are highly structured in nature. These ad hoc collaborative capabilities are added on top of a structured solution to leverage some of the benefits. At the core, they remain rigid solutions that are difficult to change.

I believe that in the near future we will see a new generation of BPM solutions that are built on top of social networking platforms such as Google Wave. These solutions will have some unique characteristics:

- Rich, real-time communication and collaboration among participants will be a given, instead of something that is added on as an afterthought.
- The solutions will be dynamic in nature in the sense that the process will define itself as it is being used. It will adjust and adapt to changing needs. Since the process will define itself, it will be continuously tested in real-life situations.
- The solutions will use integrated BI capabilities to express the flow or map of the process and extract key performance indicators. The structure and the key performance indicators can be used to model and optimize the process, thus providing the ingredients necessary for BPM.
- Since Google Wave and other similar products are cloud-based, these BPM solutions will be cloud-based.

I am convinced that such solutions will be the predominant paradigm for BPM of the future.