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The OMG and BPM

In the past several years we have read lots of articles on Business Process Management Systems (BPMS) and quite a few on Service-Oriented Architectures (SOA). Depending on who you read, you might think BPMS and SOA are two quite different things, or you might suppose they are somehow related. As a generalization, SOA articles are written by IT professionals and tend to focus on Internet protocols and middleware problems. To many of these writers, SOA is all about middleware and interfaces. Similarly, several BPMS writers seem to suggest that BPMS will free managers from IT concerns and allow them to design and change their own business processes. To these individuals, BPMS is the new business process reengineering.

2006 will clearly be remembered as the year in which everyone recognized that BPMS and SOA are two sides of the same coin. Services don't make any sense without the context that business processes provide. Similarly, the runtime automation of business process assumes an underlying layer of services, middleware and, ultimately, software components. (Even human-focused BPMS systems, designed to automate the work of teams of employees, still assume the existence of the middleware and software needed to send information to employee desktop PCs and to store the results in appropriate databases.)

The Business Process Management Initiative (BPMI.org) certainly recognized this and assumed, from their earliest meetings, that they were creating an XML-based language that would sit on top of a stack of SOA protocols. Similarly, the OMG has had this comprehensive vision for several years, and has worked slowly but surely to create a set of standards that support the integration of components, middleware, services and process descriptions. Ultimately, this common vision led to the merger of the two organizations and it guides their efforts, today, to complete and expand the standards both organizations have been working to develop.

Figure 1 provides an overview of one possible way of representing the layers that make up a Service Oriented Architecture. (This figure is modified from a figure the OMG recently published on SOA and BPMS.) Broadly, there are four layers - a software and data layer, a layer of components/interfaces, a layer of business services and their interfaces, and, on top, a business process. In essence, specific processes are associated with services. The services, in turn, access components, and they, in turn, provide access to software applications or data.

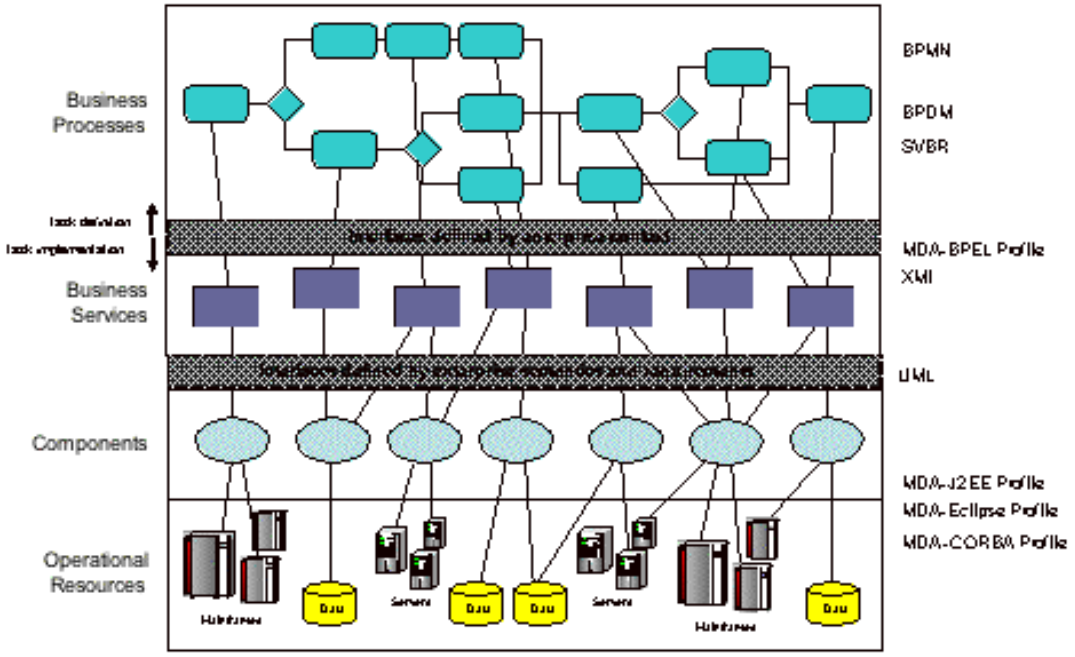

Figure 1. Layers in an SOA architecture. OMG standards on the right side.

The hope is that, eventually, business people will be able to focus on the business process layer and make changes there that will more-or-less automatically rearrange activities on underlying layers. The reality, today, however, is that most companies are working to create systems that integrate all these layers and that both BPMS developers and SOA developers need to worry about all aspects of the architecture. Thus, most BPMS efforts involve teams of business and IT people, working together.

We have highlighted some of the BPMI and OMG standards on the right side of the diagram. Some, like BPMN and UML, are involved with notation. Others are involved in defining interfaces, in defining the semantics of rules, and in defining how software design models will generate J2EE or CORBA code. Although we haven't shown them, the OMG is also at work on a variety of industry-specific standards that also support this approach. From the OMG's perspective, all of the various models and standards are held together by their Model Driven Architecture (MDA), but viewed more broadly, MDA is simply a technology that supports the development of BPMS/SOA systems.

Since BPMI has been incorporated into the OMG, two things have happened. First, standards that the BPMI was working on, like BPMN, were turned over to OMG committees and have begun to move through the OMG standardization process. Second, the OMG has established the BPMI Steering Committee. The BPMI Steering Committee is charged with promoting a broader understanding of Business Process Management, in general, and of BPM standards, in particular. One of the first things the BPMI Steering Committee did was to schedule the second BPM Think Tank.

The first BPM Think Tank took place in Miami in the spring of 2005 and brought together organizations and practitioners from around the world to discuss the variety of BPMS and SOA standards and to try to sort out what different groups might do to further the overall advancement of BPM.

The second BPM Think Tank is scheduled for May 23-25, 2006 in Arlington, VA. and will be one of the most important standards meetings this year. This meeting, like the earlier one, will draw technical people from around the world

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who are interested in the development of BPM standards. There will also be executive sessions focused on the broader issues facing business people engaged in using BPM standards, and workshops led by the authors of the various standards. If you are interested in the interface of BPMS and SOA or in the creation or adoption of BPM standards, this conference will provide a great opportunity to learn and network with many of the people who are making it happen. For more information on BPM Think Tank, 2006 visit: http://www.omg.org/news/meetings/ThinkTank/index.htm.

Till next time,
Paul Harmon