Reflections on an RFP

Those involved in business process work use their terms in very different ways. It's unfortunate because it means everyone spends more time than they should trying to figure out what others are talking about.
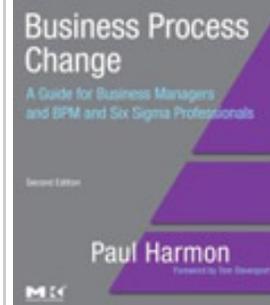
For example, vendors continue to call their products "BPM products." By failing to distinguish between BPM as a management discipline, or at least as a process redesign practice, and BPM software (BPMS) as a software product, they create endless confusion.

How is one to interpret the sentence: "BPM increasingly requires the use of SOA to achieve the best results." If you understand the term BPM, properly (at least as I define "properly"), then this isn't a true statement. Many people working in process management are concerned with employee performance issues, or business process architectures, or Lean Six Sigma, or SCOR, and have little or no concern with IT issues, let alone the implementation of processes by means of a specific type of infrastructure. On the other hand, if you really meant to say: "BPMS increasingly requires the use of SOA…" then you are quite right. Increasingly, the BPM software vendors are incorporating SOA into their offerings and IT groups developing BPMS applications are using SOA in their designs.

Anyone who is interested in business process management issues has a wide range of information resources available -one of them being BPTrends - and depending on what and who you read, you may or may not use the terms BPM and BPMS interchangeably. The confusion over the use of the two terms was driven home recently when I received a Request for a Proposal (RFP) from a leading business concern. I read it a couple of times, and concluded that companies were becoming more sophisticated in terms of their process work.

Here's what the RFP said:

- We want to improve how our business performs. To do this we want a consultant to help us develop a Business Process Management system.
- We want a business process architecture that will allow us to identify the processes that make up the organization.
- We want to develop metrics for each process so we can determine how each process is currently performing.
- We want to identify which processes are suboptimal and develop proposals to improve those processes.

Wow, I thought! Here is someone who really understands how an organization ought to use process methodologiea and technologies. It will take time and involve lots of people within the organization, but using the latest techniques, like business frameworks and balanced scorecard, I could help them put a process plan in place that would let them manage their processes in a very systematic way. They would find that many processes need to be redesigned. They would probably find that most of their serious process problems derive from human problems, from poor management practices or from employees whose jobs are structured incorrectly. And, of course, they would find they can use some automation to improve some of their processes - some ERP and probably some BPMS.

I called the company up to talk with the individual who put the proposal together. I wasn't too surprised to find that the group that generated the proposal was located within the IT department - some of the best real process work is being done by process teams located in IT. I was very disappointed, however, when I actually began to talk with the head of the team. It only took a few minutes to determine that he wanted to buy BPMS software and take on one of 3 or 4 different process automation projects that he had already identified as likely to benefit from implementing a BPMS.

"Why did you say you wanted an architecture?" I asked. "Why did you say you wanted to do measurement? Why did you say you wanted help determining the nature of the process problems your organization is having? Did you really expect that if you had an objective outside group that they were going to find that all your problems could be solved with a BPMS application?"

I wasn't so much upset - although I was upset - as I was confused. If you want to choose which of four different processes would be best served by a BPMS application, why not simply say that. It's a legitimate goal, and it would make a perfectly reasonable RFP in its own right.

"Well," the team leader explained, "I started out and read several articles on BPM, and I concluded that this was all part of BPM (he meant BPMS) - that this was what you did to get a BPM (BPMS) project going. I expect that the successful bidder will come up with some kind of overview, and some metrics that will help us choose which process will yield the best BPMS demonstration." (Obviously I'm editing these dialogs to try to keep the distinction between BPM and BPMS straight. Obviously, he wasn't clear about the distinctions at all, and that was precisely how he had gotten so confused in the first place.)

Most companies are Level 2+ on the CMM scale - they are still trying to figure out how their departmental processes work or only beginning to think about how all the processes in their organization fit together. They aren't ready to develop an enterprise-wide business process model or to develop a systematic approach to enterprise-wide process measurement. That's something companies do as they move from level 3 to level 4 on the CMM scale. Unfortunately, IT usually operates in a different dimension (See Figure 1). A department within an organization is just as likely to ask for help with the automation of a process as a value chain manager.
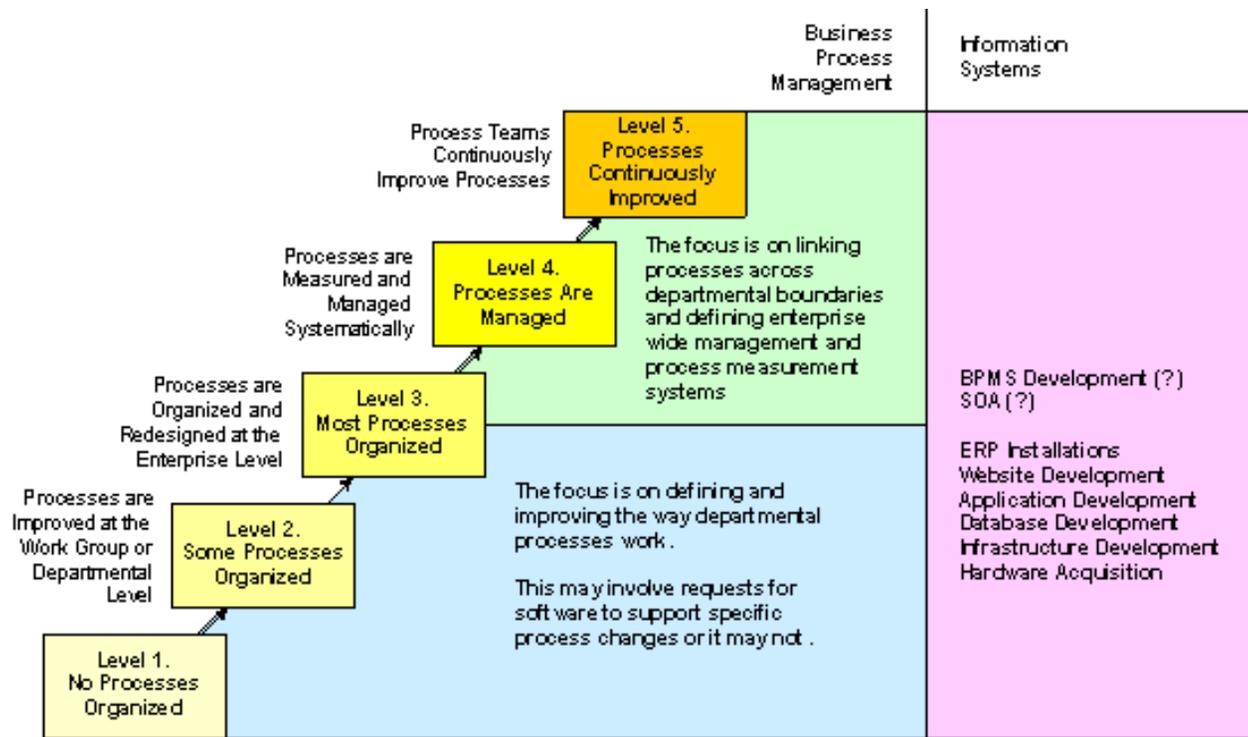
Figure 1. Process Maturity and Process Automation

Some people have high hopes for BPMS. I personally expect that in a few years, sophisticated companies will use BPMS to manage enterprise-wide processes. I expect that supply chain managers will be able to study dashboards and have a near-real time picture of the flow of goods and services with developing problems highlighted. The best of these BPMS systems will even highlight suggestions for changes the manager could take to help alleviate the problems that are developing. The type of BPMS application I am describing would sit on top of, and monitor, dozens of other software applications, while simultaneously drawing data about events associated with human performers and middle level managerial decisions at various points along the supply chain.

But that's the future. For most IT developers today, BPMS software is just another name for workflow software or for Enterprise Application Integration (EAI) software. They are tools that IT has used to automate specific types of sub-subprocesses. For most, BPMS is just the latest, web based way to quickly create certain specific types of applications. Thus, without regard for the efficiency or the effectiveness of a specific value chain, an IT team can use a BPMS package to create a software application that will help a departmental manager who wants to make a particular process more efficient.

The team leader who issued the RFP simply wanted someone to help him figure out how to choose the best process for a test of a BPMS software package. It's a completely reasonable goal. But because he was unable to make the distinction between BPM and BPMS he was confused about what was involved and he wrote an RFP that suggested that he wanted to do

serious Level 3-4 process work. Moreover, the RFP suggested that he was willing to approach his process problems with an open mind, using whatever techniques were most appropriate to improve his organization's performance, when, in fact, he only wanted to identify a problem that would fit a particular software approach.

Communication will be clearer and there will be less confusion if everyone takes the trouble to discriminate between a broad approach to improving and managing processes - BPM - and the use of software tools to automate specific types of processes.-BPMS.

Till next time,

Paul Harmon

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