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The BPTrends Hype Matrix

At any point in the development of a new field there are a number of new and exciting concepts and terms being discussed. Some are refined and become best practices. Others are a distraction and fade away without making much impact. The latter are usually promoted by those who want to create a new brand or distinguish themselves or their product as new and different. In most cases, they are synonymous with existing concepts and terms, with a slight spin. And, in some cases, they are vague and ill defined, even by those who are using them.

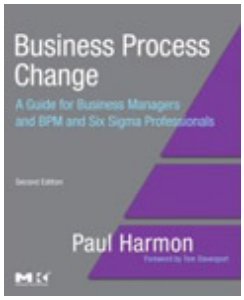
I remember the problems that Edgar Codd had in the 1980s. Codd was the father of the Relational Database. He wrote the seminal articles that defined the approach in the 1970s.[1] By the 1980s, all of the large software vendors were offering their own versions of a Relational Database, each claiming that their RDB was a true implementation of Codd's ideas. In a brilliant and devastating article published in the early 1980s, Codd re-explained the logic underlying the idea of a Relational Database, offered 12 rules that could be used to determine if a given database actually implemented the relational calculus he had defined, and went on to critique the leading products on the market. The critique found most leading products wanting. At the time, Codd was employed at IBM which had its own implementations that didn't fully meet Codd's standards. Codd left IBM and founded his own consulting company where he continued to try to move vendors toward relational standards that would allow for interoperability. The vendors continued to hype proprietary versions that didn't live up to Codd's proposal, each vendor trying to lock-in its own customer base. Since Codd had defined Relational Database in precise terms, he was able to say, "This is what I mean by a Relational Database and these various offering are not really Relational Databases. It made for an interesting study in how the vendors and the market analysts, like Gartner and Forester, jumped on a popular term and hyped it like crazy, without being clear about what the term actually meant.

This happens all the time, of course, but there is usually no one like Codd who is in a position to define precisely what the term actually means.

At the recent BPM conference in London, as I went from presentation to presentation, I began creating a matrix to track some of these concepts and terms. In the spirit of the Gartner and Forrester Product Matrices, I figured BPTrends could do a Hype Matrix. On the horizontal axis I provided an estimate of how vigorously a concept or term is being hyped - how many speakers used the term? How often did the speaker seem enthusiastic but failed to define the concept or term in any useful manner? Obviously, this is very subjective, but I've encountered a lot of hype over the years and trust my instincts. One certain sign that a given term is being hyped is when you find more and more people using the term in more and more different contexts, each using it in a different way, and each assuming that everyone already knows what it means. In such a situation, the term becomes a kind of meaningless embellishment that speakers throw into the titles of their talks to make them sound up-to-date.

On the vertical axis I provided a strictly personal estimate of how much value I thought the concept or term had. This can, of course, be tricky to estimate, and I'll discuss some of the more problematic examples below. The point is, however, that some of these hyped concepts and terms are very valuable, while others are close to meaningless. Obviously, those who initially define a term, like Codd, can't be held responsible for the fact that lots of people jump on the band wagon and begin to use the term in a variety of ways.

Figure 1 provides the introduction of what I shall, henceforth, refer to as the BPTrends Hype Index. The size of the circles does not mean anything – it is only the placement of the center of the circle that is important.



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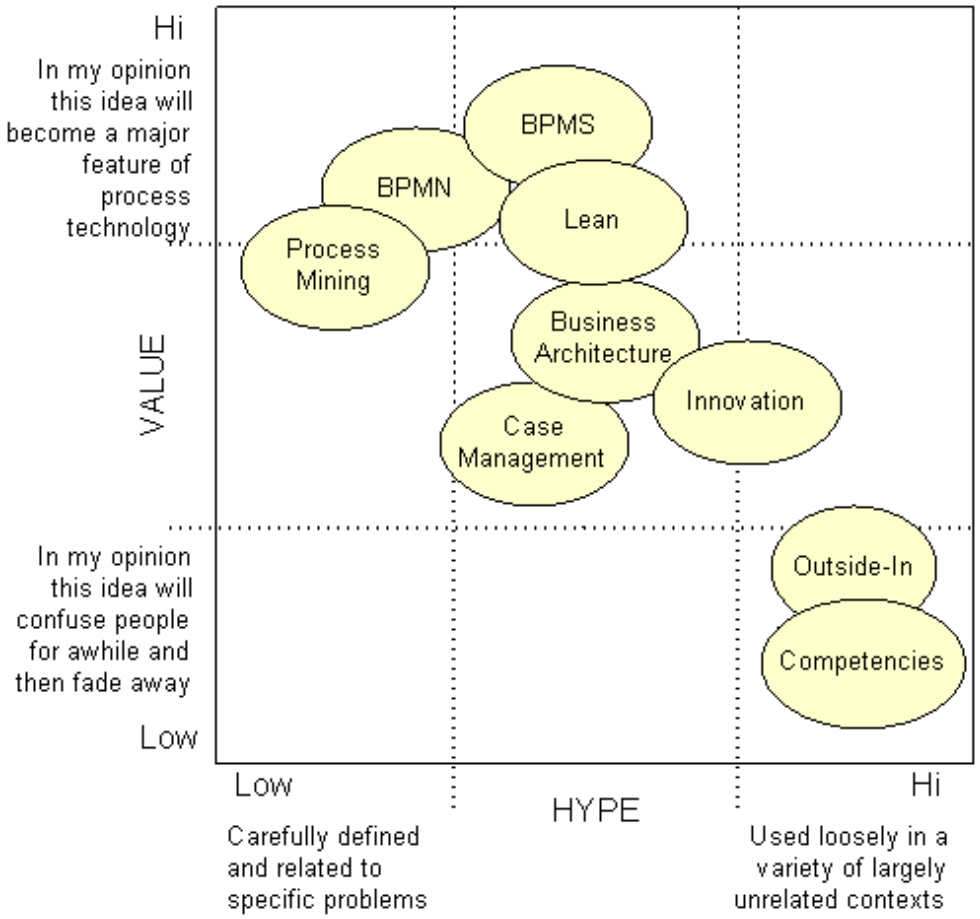

The BPTrends Hype Matrix – July 2011

Let me consider some of the specific items on the matrix.

BPMN

The Business Process Modeling Notation has certainly gotten its share of hype. If you read some of BPMN's over-enthusiastic supporters, it's the best possible modeling language for business people, software developers, and anyone else you can think of. The hype for BPMN, as a modeling language, is second only to the hype that certain software developers formerly reserved for UML (The Unified Modeling Language).

In fact, BPMN comes in two flavors – a core notation that is very similar to the Rummler-Brache notation and quite adequate for business modeling, and the complete notation that is useful only for software developers. (I am only going to focus on the use of BPMN as a notation for business modelers.) There are other business modeling notations that work as well as BPMN, and some have features that BPMN currently lacks. Lean's Value Stream models, for example, are very good for picturing high level views of core processes. IDEF0 is better at showing how rules and policies work in the decomposition of a process. Still, BPMN is maintained via an open process by the OMG (Object Management Group), and it can be easily extended as the community decides what is needed. The largest thing going against its widespread adoption is the tendency of the OMG to make the language more and more software-oriented, and ultimately too technical for business use. But, hopefully, that can be avoided if it is understood that the core notation should be the primary concern of the business people and not the software developers.

The fact that BPMN provides a standard way for both business people and software people to describe processes is a powerful and, potentially, very useful idea. I'm convinced that as everyone focuses more on process, BPMN has the potential to serve as a bridge between business and software models and that BPMN will become the notation that everyone will increasingly choose, for just that reason.

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Process Mining

Process Mining is a variation on Data Mining – a technique for examining stored data to reconstruct the activities that an organization is relying on. It's focused on low level processes and, like simulation, requires an individual with considerable technical sophistication to make use of it. The IEEE has set up a committee to promote it (and, honest disclosure, I am on that committee). The committee's idea of hype seems to be writing books and papers for technical journals to promote the approach, so the "hype" is rather modest. I suspect that, eventually, Process Mining capabilities will become incorporated in most BPMS products and that, in the future, managers will become accustomed to using this technology to examine certain types of processes when they look for bottlenecks. The only real sense in which Process Mining is being hyped is that most process people don't need to know about the technology. We simply need to get the technology installed in BPM tools, and then make it available via a user friendly interface.

So, let's take Process Mining as a good example of a narrow but important new technology that is being very modestly hyped.

BPMS

Business Process Management Software tools or platforms have been extensively hyped since 2003. It all started with the book by Smith and Fingar, *Business Process Management*, that suggested that BPMS was the next wave in process, and would usher in an era of business managers programming their own processes. (The idea of getting rid of IT programmers has been perennially popular with those who want to hype new techniques to business people.) To be fair to Smith and Fingar, however, they define BPMS rather rigorously – based on Pi Calculus – and few if any of the vendors who have rushed to offer products have offered anything like the package Smith and Fingar defined. Today, for better or worse, BPMS is just a general term for a suite of software tools that organizations can use when they undertake process work. Some packages are extensive, some are minimal, and hardly any are designed to be used by business managers as opposed to IT developers.

BPMS – which is to say software tools to help define and manage the execution of processes at runtime – will be more and more commonly used in the years ahead. This is an example of a technology that has been over-hyped for some time, is still not as powerful or as extensively used as its most enthusiastic promoters claim, but is sure to play a major role in the future of process work.

Lean

Lean is very like BPMS – a very powerful set of techniques that have been grossly over hyped in the last few years. The concepts were introduced by Womack, Jones and Roos in their 1991 book, *The Machine that Changed the World*. In essence, the book reported on what Toyota had achieved with its Toyota Production System (TPS). The authors named a subset of the TPS practices Lean, and set up the Lean Enterprise Institute to promote those ideas in a reasonably modest manner. In hindsight, their initial presentation of Lean was almost entirely confined to eliminating waste, but they have been adding other concepts, like Value Steam Modeling and A3 management summaries, to gradually expand the meaning of Lean to make it more like a synonym for the TPS.

The hype really began around 2005 when the large training companies that had been selling Six Sigma training began to run out of customers. These organizations were set up to sell training, and they needed a product to push through their pipelines. When it looked like they had sold about as many units of Six Sigma as their customers could take, they "discovered" Lean and suddenly there was a whole new flock of books and courses on Lean Six Sigma. For awhile, in the course of the last couple of years, one could be forgiven if one thought that Lean was the greatest process technology ever and could be used to solve any and every problem.

Lean is a set of techniques. Lots of process problems lie well outside the range of Lean techniques. That said, any comprehensive process methodology or program ought to include Lean elements. Lean has been grossly over hyped, but it will eventually settle down and become an important tool set that every process practitioner will use.

Innovation

Innovation is an example of the curse of a commonly used word that is suddenly used in technical discourse. Of course, Innovation is important. Of course, everyone should seek to innovate. That said – what exactly do we propose that everyone should do? Popular books on Innovation tend to provide lists of 5-12 things that companies should do – and they are all just common sense.

Innovation, to be effective, must result in either changes in a business model or changes in a business process. Good descriptions of what it takes to change business models or major business processes will suggest it isn't easy, but given the way the world is changing, every organization has to keep changing with it. Maybe books that suggest that companies ought to be open to change have some role to play, but beyond encouraging flexibility, the real work lies in talking about how to identify and make specific changes – and that usually involves more work and technology than the people hyping Innovation are prepared to help with.

So, a harder call: In the abstract, Innovation is good and should be supported, but in reality there is so little content there that it is best to focus on more specific techniques. In effect, Innovation is this decade's Excellence, something we will talk about for awhile, and then move on.

Case Management

Case Management is a hard one. In essence, it refers to the analysis and redesign of complex processes that are dynamic in nature. Using conventional modeling techniques, it is hard to capture these processes. Historically, it has usually been easier to hire people with experience than to define and train people to do the types of jobs involved in Case Management. We are learning new things – check www.bptrends.com for an article on cognitive task analysis, for example – but much of this is still more in the area of art than technology.

Case Management is hyped by people who have discovered the problem – there are important processes that we can model or redesign very well – and keep talking about it, as if identifying the problem is sufficient. The problem is that we really don't know how to deal with many of these processes. It's certainly important to recognize that such processes exist, but most companies have so many other processes they could be working on that obsessing on one class of difficult process can become counterproductive.

The value of Case Management, at the moment, is hard to see. It's important to keep working on techniques to deal with very complex and dynamic processes. I expect that this is an area where software vendors will introduce exciting and useful ideas in the near future. But until there are good techniques, spending too much time on them is a distraction rather than a benefit. I'm confident that as time goes on we will find good solutions to lots of Case Management problems. In the meantime, as I say, hyping a problem without a solution, is a distraction.

Business Architecture

BPM practitioners have been working with business managers to help them understand their organizations for years. When Michael Hammer or Geary Rummler showed up and met with corporate executives, they were, in essence, talking about the current Business Architecture of the organization, and how it could be improved. During this same period, IT folks were focused on Enterprise Architecture. In some cases, this included processes and strategic concerns, but in most cases it consisted of cataloging IT resources. Today, there is a movement to emphasize the importance of a Business Architecture. In most cases, this effort is being led by former enterprise architects, who want to focus on strategy and business processes. This creates a problem when we find BPM practitioners struggling with former enterprise architects for control of how the company's business processes are defined and used.

I suspect that the use of the term Business Architecture will grow. As a BPM practitioner, I will argue that it's a good term for senior business people who take a broad view of their organization and I will be happy to work with them. If, however, it emerges that the new "business architects" of the organization are former IT people who want to extend IT concepts into the business area, without understanding the role of process, or the importance of getting business managers to define their own processes, then I think there will be endless confusion.

I expect confusion for several years, and then I expect Business Architecture to emerge as a modest description for what business people do as they develop strategy and define business processes, process metrics and process governance systems. Meanwhile, I expect the term to by hyped by various groups trying to establish new consulting niches.

Outside-In

Every organization should be responsive to its customers. They are important stakeholders in the organization and, in many cases, the main one. There has been a lot of work done on how to model customer's concerns – everything from models of customer value propositions to swimlane diagrams that show exactly how a process interacts with a customer process. Womack and Jones have written a great book on how one goes about modeling customer processes as a first step to redesigning one's business processes.

"Outside-In" is said to refer to the importance of starting with the customer in mind, but, in fact, it is just a bit of jargon, or, perhaps, more to the point, a proprietary name for an approach to process redesign. At best, it reminds us that we should begin by defining the voice of the customer. At the worst, it is just a proprietary bit of jargon promoted by consultants who want to be able to say that their methodology is based on Outside-In.

The importance of the customer, and the customer's interests and processes, is not in question. The value of the term "outside-in" to describe that importance, or to suggest concrete ways of approaching the problem, is the question. Outside-In is right up there with Lean as a term hyped by a group of true believers. The difference is that Lean is backed by real content and that content will have a continuing influence on our practice. Outside-In, on the other hand, is an expression of a perspective, but sans any practical content and, as such, has been a source of much confusion in the marketplace. If no one ever used this term again, no one would notice any difference in our practices.

Competencies

Last, but hardly least, we come to the term that is highest on today's hype list. Suddenly, lots of people are talking about Competencies as if they were the "Rosetta Stone of business-IT communication." I've been asking for definitions for three months now and have yet to find anything that's likely to add anything to our practice. Are Competencies another name for the skills maintained by functional units, another name for the high level processes, or components one can assemble into processes? It seems that each of these might be the definition. Unlike Outside-In, which seems like a good idea, but has no content, Competencies seem like a good idea but are associated with too much content.

I have come to believe that Competencies are primarily being used as a synonym for the names of high-level processes. As such, they are a synonym for something we already have and the term doesn't add anything but confusion. Organizations that try to develop competency hierarchies will, in my opinion, waste time that would be better used developing a clear understanding of their business processes.

Meanwhile, however, the term is being hyped by a wide variety of people, many earnest and sincere, and we will undoubtedly hear a lot more about Competencies before the term gradually disappears.

So, that's the BPM hype list for July, 2011. This is the first release of the BPTrends Hype Matrix. I'll plan to issue it again in about 6 months, and will keep track of the predictions I made this time. I'll keep score and let you know where I correctly predicted that a term would go the way of all fads, where I suggested it would survive in spite of being hyped, and where I simply got it completely wrong.

Meantime, I invite readers to join me on the BPTrends Discussion site on LinkedIn to give me your own ideas about hyped terms, or simply to tell me how you think I got it wrong this time.

Till next time,

Paul Harmon

Notes

[1] Codd, Edgar. “A Relational Model for Large Shared Data Banks.” *Communications of the ACM*. Vol. 13, No. 6. June 1970.

BPTrends Linkedin Discussion Group

We recently created a BPTrends Discussion Group on Linkedin to allow our members, readers and friends to freely exchange ideas on a wide variety of BPM related topics. We encourage you to initiate a new discussion on this publication or on other BPM related topics of interest to you, or to contribute to existing discussions. Go to Linkedin and join the BPTrends Discussion Group.

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