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**BPMS at IBM**

Every so often one sees something that one realizes, immediately, is an inflection point. I just attended IBM's annual BPM review for analysts—and what I saw convinced me that BPMS, at IBM, has reached a new level of sophistication.

I freely admit that I don't pay as much attention to the BPMS segment of the BPM market as some other analysts. I haven't really focused on new BPMS offerings over the last several months and there may well be other vendors who have reached this point as well. I have, however, followed IBM, attending their yearly briefings, and this year's briefing was a major breakthrough.

**A Little History**

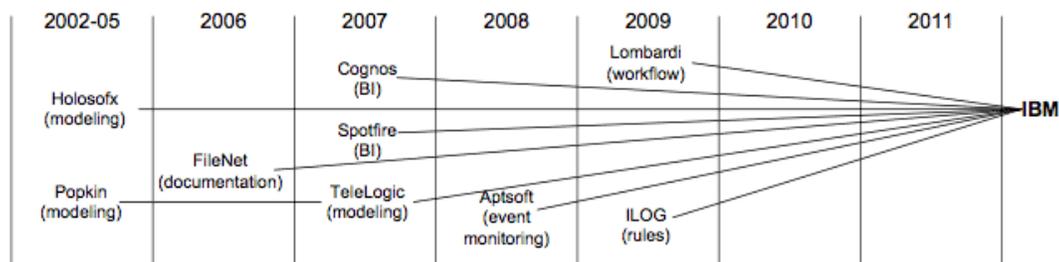
The BPMS market started getting a lot of attention in 2003, with the publication of Smith and Fingar's book, *Business Process Management: The Third Wave*. At the same time, efforts to create a process execution language—which turned out to be BPEL—were coming to fruition and a number of software vendors were rushing to offer BPMS tools.

Initially, BPMS was thought to involve either (1) workflow processes that included people or (2) Enterprise Application Integration (EAI) processes that involved linking diverse software applications together. Workflow vendors set out to acquire EAI vendors and EAI vendors proceeded to acquire workflow products in an effort to offer a comprehensive product. The idea of a BPMS software package evolved rapidly, and vendors quickly decided that they also needed a business rules capability, an easy to use flow diagramming environment, and business Intelligence elements. Thus, the acquisitions continued with the larger BPMS vendors acquiring rules vendors, popular process modeling tools and BI companies.

The result is that these large vendors have acquired or developed a variety of technologies and have been struggling to figure out how to integrate the technologies into a package appropriate for the business process market. Some of the smaller vendors have maintained a clear focus, often by limiting the technologies they include in their packages. The larger vendors, however, until recently, have seemed to be moving toward more complex products that were less well integrated.

**BPMS at IBM**

Figure 1 shows some of the process related acquisitions that IBM has made over the past few years.



**Figure 1. IBM's process related acquisitions**

Of course, the problem with all these acquisitions is that the elements and scope of the IBM BPMS offering kept changing. At times, it seemed as if IBM had multiple products doing the same thing and customers were left trying to figure out what product might work best for them. Worse, IBM seemingly struggled to understand how best to define BPM. Each year, for the past several years, IBM has briefed me on their current BPM package, and it seemed as if, each year, it got more complex and more technical. When asked, I usually told others that IBM, like most of the other large BPMS vendors, had acquired too much, too fast, and would be several years digesting it all.

This year, however, it was very different. IBM has eliminated many tangential elements and focused on what BPMS really means. Moreover, they have eliminated duplication and combined products to create stronger, simpler offerings, all united by a common interface. The diagram that IBM presented at this year's analyst briefing is pictured in Figure 2.

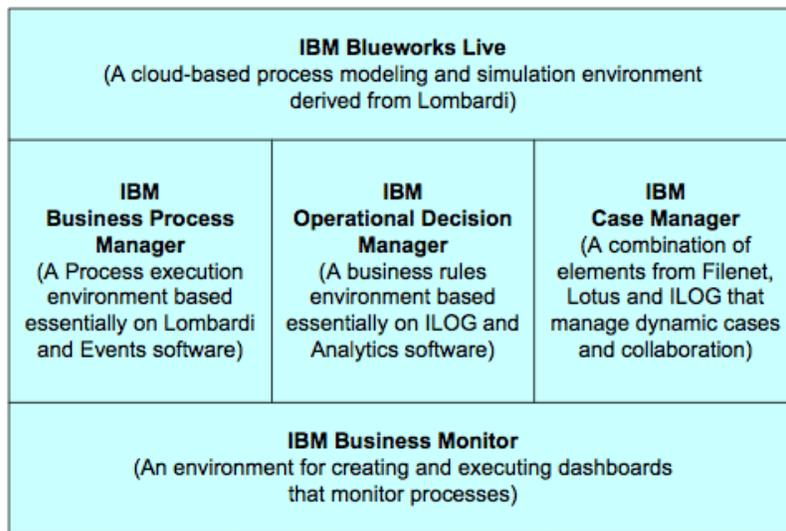
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**Figure 2. IBM's overview of its BPM offering**

Compared with earlier overviews of BPM, IBM's new overview is simplicity and clarity itself. This is a major advance—it shows they have zeroed-in on what's required for business process projects and worked hard to define the key elements in their offering. Moreover, the products represented in each of the boxes in the model are the best IBM has offered to date.

In essence, IBM has completed the initial work of integrating all of their products. The new BPM product has strong roots in Lombardi's BPM product and IBM's new Decision product has its roots in ILOG's rules product, both of which were acquired in 2009. It also leverages the document management capabilities of Filenet and the communication capabilities of Lotus.

I won't go into further detail here but IBM has clearly decided that process and business rules fit tightly together. Moreover, they have abandoned some narrower ideas about business rules and are now clearly conceptualizing them as operational decisions, very much in the spirit of David Taylor, Barbara von Halle, and Larry Goldberg.

Unlike earlier BPMS overviews that IBM has offered, this diagram is really focused on BPM. Earlier it often seemed as though IBM was moving away from a clear focus on process and had decided that BPM was just one element in a larger suite of technology. This year, it is as if IBM has rediscovered the central importance of processes and has committed to offering a real BPMS solution.

In his keynote, at the analyst's meeting, David Millen, the new head of IBM BPM and ODM group, emphasized that in *InformationWeek's* 2012 survey of Fortune 500 executives, the highest scoring priority of managers was to make business processes more efficient. (49%). He also noted that leading performers claimed that their strength was in managing change. He then talked about IBM initiatives to help organizations manage change, a new methodology that begins by helping organizations with process projects, moves on to help with the establishment of a process change program and continues by creating enterprise transformation. Millen spent most of his time, however, describing IBM's software products to support process improvement and process management.

### **A New Beginning for IBM BPMS**

This year's IBM analyst meeting represents a watershed in BPMS at IBM. It represents the first meeting I have attended at which I thought most of the IBM people really understood what they were trying to do in the BPM space and were offering a more or less integrated and consistent set of products. It makes me think the whole BPMS effort at IBM has reached a new stage of maturity.

Perhaps it was just a matter of time—of spending enough time working with customers and the various BPMS elements to figure out how they should work together. I suspect it was a matter of leadership—of IBM acquiring managers like Phil Gilbert and Pierre-Henri Clouin, who came from Lombardi and ILOG, respectively, who understood the market in the practical ways that those at smaller companies have to, to survive. I suspect that Gilbert, Millen's predecessor as head of the BPM group, was able to deliver the sharp focus that IBM's offering now displays. Whatever the cause, IBM is now positioned to move the BPMS market forward. Moreover, as IBM moves forward and provides a direction, I suspect some of the other BPMS players will be forced to focus their offerings in a similar way and, slowly but surely, we will see the whole

BPMS market reach a new level of maturity.

In a nutshell, IBM is more focused on BPM than it was a year ago, and is offering a better integrated BPMS product suite than it has in the past. At IBM, at least, the consolidation of the various products is complete—a new clarity and a superior interface has been achieved, and IBM is well positioned to lead the next round of BPM.

Till next time,

Paul Harmon

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