

### AUTHOR

**Paul Harmon**  
Executive Editor  
Business Process Trends

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## Hyping BPM

I spent a good part of the Eighties reporting on the Artificial Intelligence (AI) revolution, and on Expert Systems. There had been a surge of interest in AI in the Seventies, when it was hoped that AI would create applications that could easily translate human languages. After lots of money was spent, people gradually realized that effective productization of the technology was a long way off, and the funding for AI dried up. In the early Eighties, many AI people began to promote Expert Systems, software programs that could capture the knowledge of human experts and make it available everywhere, inexpensively. Most AI theorists begged the leading Expert Systems gurus and vendors not to over sell what AI could deliver. Their warnings went unheeded. Expert systems gurus and company marketing folks pumped out books and press releases claiming that AI and Expert Systems would soon solve all manner of problems, and government and industry bought the hype. By the middle of the Eighties, expert systems were very hot, and by the end of the Eighties, AI had entered its second AI winter, as everyone cut back on their AI spending. It wasn't that no expert systems were built, or that some difficult problems weren't solved; it was just that by the time the spin masters had done their work, there was no way that what was delivered could ever match what was expected.

Something similar is currently taking place in the business process arena. We've already had one surge of interest in Business Process Reengineering (BPR) that was over-hyped by Michael Hammer, and others, in the Early Nineties. By the late Nineties, predictably, the initial BP winter had set in. In the past few years, stimulated by a continuing need to understand and improve business processes, there has been a renewed interest in business process and the wide variety of approaches to business process improvement.

Currently, there is a tendency to over hype what is currently being called Business Process Management (BPM). If you believe the claims, software development, as we have known it, will soon be a thing of the past, and, henceforth, business managers will describe "business processes," in languages that can then be executed in Business Process Management Systems (BPMS).

BPMS is essentially workflow for Web Services. There is nothing wrong with workflow systems; they have a very respectable place to play in automating business processes. But the workflow approach, even enhanced and extended as it is in the BPMS version, doesn't begin to be a complete solution for every business process problem. Suggesting it is, will only lead to unrealistic expectations and to a negative response when this new technology doesn't deliver according to expectations.

BPMS is a high risk, highly technical approach to automating business processes. It doesn't address many of the more important areas of business process improvement, including high level architectures, the actual redesign of large scale processes, the management of processes, or the humans who make most processes work. BPMS standards are still being developed and only a few applications have been built. It's much too early to determine if it will prove valuable or not.

To make matters worse, the more vocal advocates of BPMS use the term Business Process Management (BPM) as if it were synonymous with their specific approach to automation, and seem to suggest that it is the only business process approach worth considering. In fact, business process management means many different things. In effect, the BPMS folks have expropriated the generic term BPM. If the term BPM becomes associated with a single technical solution to business process modeling, people working in other areas of business process management are going to find themselves associated with the hype and the disappointment that will likely follow.

The current books describing BPMS don't include much in the way of implementation details, and, in our opinion, they significantly underestimate the extent that BPMS applications will need to be linked with legacy applications. Business analysts may be able to analyze processes, but only someone who understands mainframe applications is going to be able to link those applications into new business process applications.

Those who are hyping the Business Process Management Systems (BPMS) approach are over-enthusiastic about a new technology that has yet to be tested extensively. Note that I'm NOT saying that BPMS theory is wrong -- only that it is a rather limited solution. There will be a few great BPMS applications built that will seem to prove that it can do just what its strongest supporters claim it can. But going beyond what's reasonable and suggesting that BPMS will radically simplify complex application development is inviting a very negative reaction in 2-3 years.

Obviously, most of those interested in BPEL and BPMS are not fooled by theoretical fantasies. Instead, they know that BPEL, and other BPMS approaches, will be used in conjunction with legacy applications and will provide managers with ways of manipulating existing software components - not as an alternative to current software. Unfortunately, it only takes a few, sufficiently vocal advocates to get a new technology over-hyped, and once the various BPMS vendors add their claims, and companies attempt things that are impractical, the backlash will start to build.

The BPMS hype is already starting to cast a shadow over other business process change initiatives that can deliver more in the way of short term gains. We believe that, over the next few years, the Supply Chain Council's SCOR methodology, the daily work of Six Sigma teams, the redesign of systems that clarify the role of the business process manager, and the growing interest in Business

Process Outsourcing, will all do more to improve corporate process than will BPMS.

It would be nice if we could turn the hype down and focus on helping managers see that they have lots of options, and no magic solutions. We don't need another BP winter.

Til' next time,

Paul Harmon

