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The XML Business Process Language Standards Wars

IT managers involved in business automation projects are hearing more and more about terms like BPEL, WSBPEL, BPEL4WS, BPML and BPMN. These, and similar terms, all refer to standards designed to make it possible to represent business processes in ways that can be communicated by means of another Internet standard, XML. In essence, XML is a document or file format. If one company wanted to tell another company how its order process worked, it could send information about the inputs required for its order process via an XML document. Using a loose analogy, XML business process languages could be used to create distributed, Internet based workflow systems.

In a recent *Post Card from Europe*, Mark McGregor described a presentation on XML business process standards at a London business process conference. He suggested that the IT managers were interested, but that the regular business managers were totally confused by the presentation.

The whole issue is made more confusing because many of those promoting XML business process languages are using the term "Business Process Management" or BPM to describe their work on XML business process languages. This makes sense to IT developers. IT people already use the term CRM to describe Customer Relationship Management and SCM to refer to Supply Chain Management. In both cases, the IT folks are using the terms to refer to software packages that automate corporate sales and marketing or supply chain processes. They use the term "management" to refer to the fact that, once automated systems are installed, an IT manager can make changes in the software and change the way the software does what it does. In other words, they can more easily manage certain aspects of the sales or supply chain software systems, once these systems are installed.

Most business managers don't use the word "management" to simply mean "managing software applications." We spent the first part of this week attending a Six Sigma in Finance conference and heard VPs from banks and brokerages use the term "business process management" over and over again. They were consistently referring to what managers do to manage processes, and more specifically, what managers do to manage the employees who implement processes. The finance VPs would have been surprised to hear a talk on "Business Process Management" or BPM that focused on XML standards that could be used to automate processes. Their eyes would have glazed over.

We've tried to resist using the term "BPM" to refer to these standards, and prefer the more descriptive term, "XML business

process languages." However, BPM has taken hold among software developers and we are going to continue to see it used by them, causing more confusion in an already confused business process market. We'll simply have to be certain to always make the distinction between BPM as generic business process management, and BPM as software standards languages.

Leaving the terminology issues aside, however, XML business process software languages are of great interest to those interested in cutting-edge software technologies. But, they are years away from actually changing the way most business process people work. There are several standards being put forward. One group has submitted a proposal to the W3C - an Internet standards group -- and W3C is considering it. IBM, Microsoft, BEA, and a growing number of supporters are rallying behind what is variously called BPEL4WS, BPEL or, WSBPEL. This standard is being considered by OASIS, another Internet standards group. There has been some effort to coordinate the two different approaches, but so far there has been little progress made. If one believes, as we do, that IBM and Microsoft are going to win out in this contest, then sooner or later OASIS will formalize a WSBPEL standard, which will probably then be forwarded to still other standards groups for their imprimatur. This same procedure has been followed with other XML standards, including SOAP, UDDI and WSDL. Companies are already using SOAP, UDDI and WSDL, but as far as we know, none, or perhaps only one, has received final approval from the various Internet standards groups. In summary, there are competing XML business process language standards, and even after the dust settles and one is agreed upon, it will be awhile before the standards groups finish tweaking it and it becomes a widely accepted international standard.

Some organizations are already building experimental applications using XML business process techniques. Some vendors are working on tools to help companies use these techniques. Most companies, however, won't begin to do anything more than study these techniques during the next 2-3 years. They will wait until a few industry leaders have tried and succeeded, and until the standards process has evolved to an official standard.

There are many problems with existing XML business process language proposals. First, most assume that automated processes will communicate, via the Internet, with other automated processes. While there are areas where this might be useful, this approach will hardly apply to those business process domains where the work is done by people and not automated systems. Second, the advocates of these techniques are making major claims for how these approaches will simplify software maintenance. The details, however, are lacking, and it isn't clear how much, in fact, these new systems will actually do. This month we published a White Paper on BP XML by David Frankel, who has worked for years on OMG technologies. [1] David discusses how BP XML technologies are going to need to be wedded to technologies like the OMG's Model Driven Architecture (MDA) if they are to be truly effective. If Frankel is right, then we are talking about a very complex approach that is going to require rather sophisticated software architects to implement. We hardly know what

the answer is, but clearly it is going to be years before the issues are all explored and sorted out.

Meantime, the XML business process languages are being over-hyped by some of their advocates. The idea of using XML to help describe and link business processes is an interesting one. In a few years, once standards are developed and lots of details are worked out, it may prove a valuable approach. It will probably prove as useful as current workflow systems and be quite a bit more flexible. But, it won't solve the business process problems the VPs of finance were discussing at the meeting we attended last week. It won't eliminate the need to create business process designs that are aligned with strategies, to measure results, to deal with process changes that involve employees, to manage processes on a day-to-day basis, or to use most of the methods and techniques currently in use. Instead, if it proves workable, it will be one more tool that managers concerned with business process change will eventually use in their continuing effort to improve the ways their companies do business.

We are interested in XML business process languages, we support their development, and we will continue to report on their development @ BPTrends.

Til' next time,

Paul Harmon

