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Service Oriented Architectures and BPM

As every reader of BPTrends knows, we constantly struggle with the meaning of BPM. We prefer to define BPM as a management discipline focused on improving corporate performance by managing a company's business processes. Some tend to think of BPM as a new technology initiative that supports managers by automating the execution of specific business processes. Obviously, there is room for both definitions to co-exist, and any broad vision of BPM certainly includes the use of automation, where appropriate, just as it includes BPM governance initiatives, process redesign efforts, BP outsourcing, and Six Sigma programs.

This same tension between a broad, management-based vision of BPM and a more narrowly-focused technology initiative lies at the heart of any discussion of Service Oriented Architectures (SOA) and BPM.

Focusing, for a moment, just on SOA, we find divergent perspectives. Some think of SOA broadly as a new way of thinking about how companies can organize to accomplish work. In this vision, companies focus on their core value chains and business processes and consider outsourcing processes that can be managed more efficiently by other companies. Thus, the US company that suddenly finds itself with orders from South America or Asia probably doesn't want to expand its domestic distribution system to South America or Asia. Instead, it will more likely consider outsourcing its delivery process to a company that is already established and is experienced with the issues associated with distribution in those countries. Assuming they choose this alternative they will likely integrate their systems with the distribution company and will install software components on their website that will allow their customers to seamlessly track the status of their delivery. In a similar way, the company's managers will be able to track data on deliveries to assure that the delivery process is functioning properly. SOA, looked at in this way, is both a strategic approach and a high-level way of thinking about how business process architectures can be designed.

SOA depends on the internet and a collection of Internet protocols, including XML, SOAP, UDDI, and WSDL. It depends on organizing software applications as software components

that can be called via the Web. A manager considering how his or her company can outsource business processes while still maintaining control over the outsourced processes doesn't need to know all of the technical details. He or she simply needs to know that SOA will support new strategies that will improve corporate performance.

SOA meets BPM when one thinks about exactly how a business process will be distributed between a company and the outsourced company providing a service. Those involved in the development of SOA standards recognized this when they added BPEL4WS to the stack of internet protocols. Similarly, BPMI.org has worked to create BPMN, a notation that can be used to graphically represent distributed business processes. Managers responsible for specific processes will need to learn how to read high-level BPMN diagrams (flow charts) and IT developers will eventually need to understand the integrities of BPEL.

The real question, however, in any given discussion of SOA and BPM, is whether one is talking about strategic and process design issues, or whether one is talking about the specifics involved in linking systems together with BPEL code. Those who think of BPM as a management discipline will focus on the former. Those who think of BPM as a technology will spend their time focused on the latter. Those who want to sell SOA to senior management are well advised to focus on the former.

One of the email discussions we are currently following has several sophisticated corporate IT managers engaged in a very technical discussion about the exact nature of the components one uses in SOA and there are several other websites and discussion groups focused on how WSDL and BPEL work. These are important issues that need to be completely understood by those responsible for the development of software to implement SOA applications, but they are technical concerns and not management concerns.

>From our perspective, the interesting thing about SOA is that it allows senior executives and managers to reconsider their business strategies and design new, more effective business processes. Like any new way of thinking, it requires some new language to allow people to discuss how the new architecture will work. Everyone seems to agree that the best way of conceptualizing how SOA works is to start with a business process architecture and then divide that overview into core processes and subprocesses that will be maintained by the company, and processes that will be provided by others. From this perspective, a service is simply a process or set of processes that another company will provide. From a design perspective it's almost irrelevant that the service is being packaged as a software component and accessed via the Web.

We don't want to trivialize the technology that has made SOA

possible or the effort required to use a BPM Suite to develop a distributed SOA application. Before the internet and XML it was difficult and expensive to link software components together. Software integrators were faced with complex systems of proprietary technologies and every potential solution required considerable attention. Today, corporate integrators increasingly rely on the internet and XML and are able to link systems together throughout the world with almost the same ease that they formerly linked together PCs within a single office building. We aren't suggesting that a worldwide system development effort is trivial, but it is much easier than it was a few years ago, and this is primarily the result of the technology breakthroughs that most people now refer to as SOA.

On the other hand, once business managers realize that cell phones and TV are available they begin exploring the benefits of using these technologies for business purposes. But, they are not interested in an in-depth understanding of the underlying technology that makes these benefits possible.

SOA is not quite as well understood or accepted as TV or cell phones. The best technologists at most large companies are still struggling to determine just how effective and efficient SOA can be. They are engaged in discussions, as we already noted, struggling to define the specifics of SOA. Standards play a major role in this effort.

Unfortunately, too many business discussions get bogged down in the details that are only of concern to technologists. SOA, from a business perspective, is simply a new technology that makes new strategies possible and relatively inexpensive.

If one focuses on BPM as a technology, one can wax eloquent about how BPM is facilitated by SOA and how the internet and XML are integral to the success of BPM. We've published a lot of material on BPTrends that will help readers understand the technical aspects of SOA and BPM. We've begun to wonder, however, if the focus hasn't become too technical.

If one thinks of BPM more broadly, SOA is simply one more technology that makes new and, in some cases, better business process designs possible. Those who focus on BPM as a management philosophy are concerned with productivity and performance, on improving customer satisfaction, and on increasing the efficiency of key business processes to assure competitive advantage and improved ROI. Being able to more easily outsource subprocesses while simultaneously being in a better position to monitor the outsourcer is a very good thing. But the emphasis, for those seeking to enlist the support of senior management, needs to be on processes and productivity, not on the details of the underlying technology.

'Til next time,

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