Practical Process   Roger Tregear

Umbrella thinking

I want to open an umbrella story and see what we can learn from it.

The story

In October of last year, I was at the IRM UK conference on BPM and enterprise architecture in London. On the last day of that event a colleague, let's call him Michael, who was staying at a different hotel, turned up at the conference with an umbrella. Not so strange, we were in London.

However, the umbrella wasn't his. He had been given it when he checked out of his hotel and the person at reception knew he had some walking to do and could see that it was raining. Michael said, "But I'm not coming back, and I fly out to Australia this afternoon". Reception person smiles and says, "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll be back with us some time."

Michael is not planning to travel home with an umbrella, so he gives it to me.

My wife and I are planning to drive around the south of England for the next two weeks so it might be useful. We never open it.

Leaving our last hotel room, I deliberately leave the umbrella behind. Waiting in the foyer for Jo (the aforementioned wife) to get our car, one of the hotel housekeeping staff rushes breathlessly over to give me the umbrella I must have forgotten to take from the room. I don't have the heart to tell her that we had deliberately and callously abandoned the umbrella.

So, Michael's umbrella travels with us from Southampton to the hire car depot at London Heathrow airport.

Stay with me, we're nearly there.

The hire car return process is way too efficient to let me leave the umbrella in the car, so it finds itself on the shuttle bus with us and headed for Heathrow Terminal 5. There is no way this umbrella is making the trip to Australia with us.

As we are unloading ourselves at the terminal, and more in hope than expectation, I ask the bus driver if he wants the umbrella. He is delighted with the idea and the umbrella has a new home. I guess Londoners can never have too many umbrellas.

A process view

Now I know what you are thinking "Roger, you'd see process anywhere you looked." And, yes, that's true, and indeed it is true. In this case we can also see the umbrella

as emblematic of an important element of good process-based management that is too often overlooked – *attitude*.

Opening umbrella thinking

In seeking to better manage and improve business processes we are often focused on modelling activities, tracking data flow, finding bottlenecks, automating, measuring, and other elements of logistics and physical operation. And so we should, these are very important aspects of improving organizational performance through improved process management and process performance.

The number is decreasing, perhaps rapidly, but there are still many processes that require the involvement of people. These manual processes – perhaps it would be better to think of them as human process – are critical to overall performance.

In the *Adventures of Michael's Umbrella,* I see two occasions where human intervention greatly improved the outcome. One spontaneous and one planned but executed through a human choice for a better outcome. Both coming from a very human attitude of striving to get a better result.

These processes could be automated – or perhaps we should say dehumanized – but in gaining the efficiency and consistency of automation might we also loose valuable aspects that come from human interaction?

When Michael checked out of his hotel he was participating in a well-practised process, both for him and the hotel staff member. Checking out is not random, it's a process that is given a lot of attention in any hotel. In a large hotel it may be done hundreds of times a day so it's worth finding *the one best way* to do it and then training and coaching staff to follow that standard process. So, giving away umbrellas is not going to be a random impulse.

I don't know the details of what happens in that hotel, but I think we can assume that the question of how and when staff hand out umbrellas has been considered for many scenarios. Michael was impressed with the ease with which he was told "please keep it, you'll be back some day". A very human moment. I hope the bus driver is displaying the hotel name all over London.

The process of checking out of a hotel can be annoying and inconvenient for everyone, and expensive for the hotel. Lots of people want to check out at the same time, all with planes to catch or other places to get to. Many hotels offer express checkout options or, effectively, no checkout and you just leave. The hotel has your credit card and housekeeping can easily tell if you've left. What's the point in joining the queue?

Making our processes more efficient can have lots of benefits for everyone involved. There is a trade-off, however, when that involves removing human interaction because we remove the possibility for umbrella moments.

Remember the housekeeping team member who ran after me to return the forgotten (abandoned!) umbrella? What was happening there? I doubt there is a defined process for chasing after guests who have left something in the room. However, it might be that in discussing housekeeping processes they have decided that handling 'left items' is something they'd rather not have to do and staff are encouraged to try to stop that happening if they can.

The more likely explanation though is this is an employee wanting to make sure guests have as few problems as possible. That attitude is hard to automate.

Umbrella moments

Sure, it's just an umbrella and these related processes are not going to change the world, but maybe they can prompt us to look at our processes through a different lens, to look for the human elements that we should protect and preserve.

When we dehumanize a process, we will make important improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, resilience, and consistency. In some cases, we will also lose something even more important.

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As the Principal Advisor with TregearBPM (www.tregearbpm.com), **Roger Tregear** delivers BPM courses and consulting assignments around the world. Roger spends his working life talking, consulting, thinking, and writing about analysis, improvement, innovation, and management of business processes. His work with clients is in organizational performance improvement and problem solving based on BPM capability development, and business process, analysis, improvement, and management. He helps small and large organizations understand the potential, and realize the practical benefits, of process-based management. Roger is the author of the book *Reimagining Management*. Contact Roger on +61 (0)419 220 280 or at roger@tregearbpm.com.

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