

HARMON ON BPM

Business Process Management in 2021

This is clearly going to be a transitional year: We will move from a Pandemic and a shutdown to a new, growing economy. Most estimates call for vaccinations to be largely completed by mid-Summer and safer procedures to be in place in the Fall, when the world's economies should begin to stabilize.

Most large organizations have used a combination of distancing and work-at-home to keep some semblance of organization in place. Some have and others will go bankrupt in the coming months, either to reorganize or disappear, but most will be returning to normal by the end of the year. The first question, of course, is what we will mean by normal. Some organizations will seek to reestablish things as they were before the pandemic began. Most will accept that changes have occurred and that customers and employees will seek a newer way of interacting. Some will continue to support work-at-home, and some customers will continue to prefer takeout and delivery instead of older shopping patterns. Organizations will need to experiment to see what works in the new world of 2022.

In addition to recovering from the pandemic the world will face major new challenges. China has surged in growth while other countries, like the US and Europe have lagged. New competitions will emerge.

The US government has announced a policy of shoring up supply chains. The term is being used very broadly, in some cases, to refer

to guaranteeing supplies of critical elements. It is also being used politically to refer to guaranteeing relations with countries. It also refers to specific supply chains that failed under the pressure of the pandemic. In the US, for example, we observed that two completely independent food supply chains existed, one that moved food to grocery stores, and another that moved food to restaurants. The two had little in common and, it turned out, could not easily convert to shift supplies where they were needed during the pandemic (e.g. moving food to groceries and not restaurants). Many organizations are going to be reconsidering supply chains and seeking to design safer, more flexible chains.

Finally, at last the world seems to be getting ready to be much more serious about global climate change. The effects of the change have become so obvious that even doubters are now ready to admit that some changes must be made. An easy example will be the shift from gasoline to electric power, particularly in automobiles. The shift, which is just beginning, but is ramping up very quickly, will have serious infrastructure implementations. Gasoline stations will decline and electric charging in parking lots and at home will become more important. Similarly, the importance of alternative sources of electrical energy will become more important and, we will see electric trains and airplanes. As this transition increases, computers that fine tune systems will become ever more important, and AI systems will continue to be used to redesign our processes.

At the same time computer interfaces of all kinds, for online meetings or for entertainment will continue to proliferate. People will increasingly shop online, from their phones or cars, and expect deliveries at home or work.

For better or worse, the Pandemic of 2020 has ushered in a new world. Process improvement in the course of the first two decades of this century had rendered a lot of workers redundant, but politics had kept employers from firing as many as they might have. That changed last year. Many of the people laid off will never be rehired. Moreover, new AI techniques will make computer automation an even more predominant trend as companies respond to increasingly competitive environments. As hard as it is to imagine, change will accelerate.

Processes will need to be redesigned. Quickly. Indeed, the era when process improvement specialists handled major redesigns has largely passed. Increasingly organizations will think of process change as something managers imagine and implement, and managers, in turn, will rely on key employees to help improve processes.

Process people who want to have a large impact on their organizations should increasingly position themselves as management consultants – prepared to give managers advice on how to effect process improvements.

Look at the software/social media startups that predominate today. How many of them employed process people as they established themselves? Instead, they were founded by brash young people out of computer and business schools who conceived of a new idea and rushed to implement it. They didn't worry about accounting or personnel systems – they simply bought packaged software to manage such routine tasks. They focused on the computer programs that provided the core services they offered their customers and built companies to support their software applications.

The world of 2022 is going to be like that, and those who want to prosper are going to want to provide services that new or transitioning organizations will need. They will need managers who can organize people to accomplish their critical goals. Those managers will need people who can quickly create procedures to accomplish goals, and then just as quickly adapt those procedures to accomplish modified goals.

For those who embrace change and innovation, the near future is going to be very exciting.

Author

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