There is More Than Just the Atlantic Separating Europe and the USA
04/02/2019
Mark MacGregor

It is now 16 years since I wrote my first articles as an original columnist here on BPTrends. Two of my earliest articles were "Breaking Down the Language Barriers" and "Are you Really Doing BPM".

When Paul Harmon asked me to consider, once again, doing a piece or two here, he also asked that I might once again review the potential differences between Europe and the USA. The real challenge with such a comparator is that while much has changed in BPM over the past 16 years, at the same time some key things have not.

With vendors coming and going, new entrants and new ways of thinking about automation, the ways we automate have changed a great deal. Traditional BPMS players have fallen into one of three camps. Some have grown up into being serious players in the application space, such as Pegasystems, others have gone the low or no code route such as Appian, and others have just been swallowed up or disappeared, like Global 360, Metastorm and Cordys. Whichever camp people have played into, it seems clear that the old accepted BPMS market has become fragmented and despite the attempts of some, looks to be like a disappearing sector. That is not to say that process automation is going away, far from it, just that the old BPMS way of doing things may longer be as interesting.

As examples of growth, task automation and workflow seems once again to be on the rise, either through specialist vendors or as new Robotic Process Automation (RPA) vendors. The RPA message as we all know is really resonating within businesses. Forget the argument over whether it should augment people or replace them, that is a matter of business and personal choice. No, the fact that vendors in the space are able to show clear, quick, high returns is what is catching interest.

Another process technology that is starting to gain greater traction is of course Process Mining (or Automated Process Discovery, or Process Intelligence – if you prefer).

So process automation, and the management of that automation is still a topic that is riding high and consuming vast amounts of dollars all around the world. What is less obvious is where process analysis and design fits. By that I don't mean whether you should do it, but rather whether you think it important or not, which brings us back to the point of this article.

I purposely did not deep dive into the technologies, as I only wanted to use the state of technology to set the scene for the Europe vs. USA update.

Still 16 years on from my original posts the biggest difference remains the same. In Europe, especially mainland Europe there is still an acceptance that before automation comes analysis and design. While, for the USA it still seems to be a rush for quick automation results with little or no consideration to analysis. Whether it is because Europeans stay in role longer and are more likely to face the consequences of hasty automation efforts, whether it is driven by a quarterly reporting culture in US organizations, or something else we can't be sure. But, either way, the probability is that both groups are missing opportunities.

For Europeans, there is probably too much time spent documenting and analyzing current states, when in fact more time should be spent on future first thinking. While US organizations could do well to pause and think about whether the projects they are working on are really the ones likely to have the most impact on delivering business goals. All too often we hear
 of dealing with the easy things first. Well sometimes it is when we deal with the difficult problems that people most recognize value in what we bring.

One other trend that appears to be gaining greater acceptance on both sides of the Atlantic, although more on the business side than within IT, is the idea that we need greater involvement from a wider audience. We see this in the process modelling market, where traditional players seem to just struggle along, while newer entrants have and are enjoying tremendous growth. Those that are growing are helping broaden that process community to everyone in the enterprise, not just a selected group of process or IT professionals.

What can we deduce from these observations? Well for one I really think that we should stop talking about BPM! At least when using the letters – it still means too many different things to different people and hence is still too confusing. Personally, I have tried switching to simply referring to Process Management (no abbreviations, no TLM), I find that either people just accept what we are saying, or ask the question "what do you mean by it?" – and I am happy with the question as it forces discussion not assumption.

Secondly, that despite the efforts of so many people over the years it seems that automation before analysis remains the prime way for the USA, even if it still results in a continued siloing of process improvement between the non-automation Operational Excellence folks and the automation everywhere approaches of many IT teams.

Personally I think it is a shame, ready fire aim as an approach is sure to miss more often than it hits, conversely boiling the ocean is a sure way to get people thinking that analysis takes too long and costs too much. The reality for me is that future focused, just enough just in time analysis is crucial to ensure we expend our efforts in the right areas. While at the same time making smart use of automation where appropriate. This automation is likely best when dogmatic goes out the window; the most effective approaches will probably blend a range of automation technologies, orchestrated to play in harmony (ERP, BPMS, RPA, and Workflow) delivering the most effective business result, and for that to happen you need to have a good view of your overall process, not just a view of some small procedural piece of it.

Author

Mark McGregor
A former Research Director at leading IT industry analysis firm Gartner, Mark has an extensive background in enterprise architecture, business process management and change management, having held executive positions with a number of technology companies. Since retiring from Gartner he now works as an independent consultant with clients such as Changepoint, Erwin, Mega, Planview and Signavio

Mark has authored or co-authored four books on business and process management, including "Thrive! How to Succeed in the Age of the Customer" and "In Search of BPM Excellence" and "People Centric Process Management. Widely respected for his knowledge and views on business change, he is the creator of "Next Practice" and has variously been described as a "BPM Guru", a "Thought Leader" and a "Master of Mindset"

Mark is passionate about the people aspects of change, he has spent much of the last fifteen years travelling the world, learning, teaching and researching the cultural aspects of change and how executives perceive business and process improvement In this capacity he has literally taught hundreds of people and been fortunate to interview and interact with many CEO's

Mark holds certifications in Six Sigma, PRINCE2, Sales, Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Hypnosis! Mark suggests that it is the variety of his studies, which provide the depth he offers to his clients, in his words "It is the difference that makes the difference"

Connect with Mark via LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/in/markmcgregor