My Next Book: Management:
A Business Process Approach

By Paul Harmon

I am working on a new book and have decided that I will share bits of it with the BPTrends audience in the course of 2022. This month, let me provide you with an overview of the new approach.

I wrote Business Process Change (BPC) in 2002 and published in in 2003. I've revised it three times to try to include new information and keep it relevant. I believe it still provides the best overall introduction to practitioners who are interested in analyzing and redesigning business processes at organizations. It considers process issues at the enterprise (business architecture), management (process redesign methodologies) and activity levels (how to integrate a new software app with an existing set of process activities). Given all the information included in BPC, one might reasonably ask if a new book is needed. Let me suggest what a new book is, in fact, appropriate.

BPC targets process professionals who will actually be responsible for analyzing and redesigning business processes. In a sense it's a technical book for process technicians. I've spent a lot of time developing training materials to help process professionals become skilled at analysis and design.

At the same time, however, as I consulted with companies over the course of the last three decades, I've consistently noticed one thing: Process work at any given company largely depends on the attitude, the receptiveness, if you would, of an organization's senior managers. Middle managers are important too and a good middle manager can go a long way toward improving the business process he or she is responsible for, but, over the long run, companies either commit to process work and use process ideas to organize the productivity of their company, or they don't, and individual, departmental-level process projects, no matter how successful, don't really make a big difference to the bottom line.

The focus on business processes is something that some people "get," intuitively it seems. It's a way of organizing how you think about what an organization does. Some people think an organization exists to make a profit, and they focus on spreadsheets and financial data. Others think an organization exists to generate products and services and they focus, instead, on the activities or steps people take to generate products and services. (Obviously an organization should product both products and services and income, and the trick is to balance the various concerns, but we'll return to that later.)

Managers, especially senior managers ignore a process focus because their whole management culture ignores a process focus. Glance at the courses that make up

the curriculum of a business school. There are courses on finance, on managing people, on marketing, and on manufacturing or operations, but no courses on business processes. Some might argue that manufacturing or operations focus on processes, but in reality they only focus on operational processes, or on processes that organize the manufacture of products. It's a start, perhaps, but it's not what a real process thinker has in mind when he or she speaks of a business process. A business process analysis starts broadly and asks about goals and outcomes. It asks how resources and customers are obtained, how products are made and shipped, and how customers deal with problems, once they have the products. It goes further and asks how new customer needs are identified, and that information is fed back to design and incorporated into new products. And it asks how information is captured, at each stage of the process, how it is analyzed and used to control the flow of the process. And, of course, it asks about funding and the recruitment and training of the workers who perform the needed tasks. The basic idea of a process perspective is that one views everything that happens as part of a system, and studies how the parts work together to assure the efficiency and effectiveness of the whole business.

Breaking the steps in manufacturing from customer service, delivery, product design, IT application development or employee training and motivation programs is simply a way to introduce blind spots that will sooner or later be the source of problems that will blindside senior managers.

Few business schools have courses explicitly focused on a holistic approach to business process analysis or on the problems of managing processes to improve organization efficiency or effectiveness. In essence, MBA graduates think that finance is a legitimate business concern, but they do not feel the same way about process analysis and redesign. MBA graduates tend to specialize after graduation. They go into finance, or strategy, or marketing, or customer service. Later, managers who have proven themselves excellent at those tasks are chosen to become executives. One never hears of MBAs specializing in process work and going on to become CEOs of their organizations.

One might suggest, of course, that there is no such track because business executives have decided, based on experience, that such an approach isn't useful. I don't believe it – and exceptions to the rule, like Jack Welch at General Electric – where they introduced Six Sigma, a program Welch said was the best thing he ever did – seem to support my perspective.

In a book like Business Process Change I introduced concepts and practices that business process practitioners could use to analyze and redesign specific business processes. Some of those concepts, and other practices can be used by managers to analyze how their organizing work and how they can be improved. Managers do not need the same kinds of tools that practitioners need: Their goals are not the same. Managers need to understand how their organizations work to produce value, and they need to understand what levers they can use to adjust results. In essence, they need to be able to tie strategies and corporate goals to departmental organization, identify problems and bottlenecks, evaluate priorities, and select ways to effect changes and improvements. They don't need to know how to effect specific improvements; technicians will be better at organizing flows of activities, training and incentive programs, and developing software applications. They do, however, need to recognize when changes are needed and have a good idea of what kinds of changes will generate the best results.

The analysis of organizations and their problems is a critical part of management. Financial analysis is one way to identify and focus on problems. Process analysis is another.

This book will introduce business managers to process concepts, to analysis principles, and to procedures for identifying where interventions are most appropriate. It will pull together concepts that may have been taught in business school, but were not brought together in the way we will organize them here. We believe the principles and tools offered here will make managers more insightful and effective, and better able to understand their organizations and their jobs as managers.

We'll stop at this point. The above should suggest the alternative perspective that this book will promote. In out next column we'll lay out the organization of a book for managers to offer managers insight into process change. Hopefully, even if this book never gets published, readers will get some insight into what kinds of things they might say to the senior managers of their organization as they seek to build a relationship with them, and encourage them to support business process initiatives. As Jack Welch suggested, it might be the most important thing they ever do to improve your organization.