BPM (Still!) Too Confusingly to Be Taken Seriously.

Once again I am continuing the theme from my previous Article, of using the past to look at the present and consider the future. The motivator this time was my recent attendance at three conferences in the US, starting wit the Business Transformation & Operational Excellence Conference (BTOES19) in Orlando, then continuing with the OPEX Exchange event in San Diego and finally ending with the BPMNext event in Santa Barbara.

At risk of creating an "Oh, no it isn't. Oh yes it is!" Punch and Judy debate, I am going to state again what I said many years ago. "BPM is just too confusing to be taken seriously!" – When I talk with people these days, I try to avoid using the term at all. I find it easier to engage people using the terms process management or process automation, and I highly suggest you consider doing the same. It is incredible that three initials can cause so much misunderstanding, debate and heated arguments. Last time I wrote I used the following to remind people that the audiences they talk with think any one or more of the following when they here the term.

- Business Process Mapping
- Business Process Modeling
- Business Process Management
- Business Performance Management

Each of these is different and may or may not be dependent on each other. As an example, how can Visio be thought of as a BPM tool? Yet it is and is marketed as such, unless BPM is supposed to equal Business Process Mapping, as a mapping tool is what Visio is!

The we come to the Germany vs USA differential, significant numbers of organizations doing BPM, think of themselves as doing Business Process Management, but in effect what they are doing is Business Process Modeling and the management of those models and processes. Contrast that with the USA, where organizations equate Business Process Management with Business Process Management Systems, so by extension Business Process Management in the USA most often is seen as Business Process Automation. In fact, while in Germany, and many parts of Europe people start with the mapping and modeling, move into managing and then consider automation, in the USA there is a tendency to want to jump into automation without regard to mapping or modeling (whether of the current or of future states). One wonders whether this instant leap to automation is why (anecdotally) it seems that US based organizations change vendor and automation platforms more often. Maybe the ready, fire, aim approach is missing the target as often as it is hitting it!

As if the whole notion is not confusing enough already, at BPMNext we learned quite a bit more about the new wave of Intelligent Automation. This was an interesting topic and looks like it could be of interest and useful for many organizations, however, when one speaker explained that BPM now equaled Intelligent Automation, I had to role my eyes.

Many readers will know I am a huge fan of Business Process Management and the benefits it brings to business, but they will also know that I was brought up on the notion that it is a management discipline for better understanding and improving business, not a technology in and of itself. I suggest this need to separate the discipline from the technology is now more important than ever, and if we do separate we can create some easier opportunities for automation.

Historically Operational Excellence communities have been as disconnected from IT implementations as IT oriented BPMS groups have been from the business. However, based on what I was seeing at BTOES, and hearing at the OPEX Exchange, things are changing, and changing fast. The advent of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) is changing the narrative. Whether it is the stories of easy and rapid return on investment, the fact that RPA is more focused on human centric tasks, or that is just more easily understood by business users I can't say. What I can say is that an overwhelming number of traditional non-IT, non-technically focused Operational Excellence, Process Improvement and Business Transformation teams were very engaged talking about process automation like never before.

For those promoting and selling Process Automation tooling and solutions this is a good thing, it is a sign that after all these years there is recognition that the two sides really should be more tightly woven together.

However, be aware that of those who were now considering automation, most already thought they were either doing BPM, or were avoiding BPM (because BPM=BPMS and that means long waits for our IT department). Several of those I spoke to were also recognizing that the robots they use today will be changed within two years, they were either experimenting with RPA or had been early adopters. In most of those cases the users I spoke with were keen to have process models, both to inform RPA choices, but also to avoid vendor lock in on robots.

For some, having started down the path of RPA, they were already identifying some limitations and were now starting to look for solutions with more intelligence. So vendors actively working in the Intelligent Automation space may have some new opportunities. Going back to the beginning of this Article, there appear to be lots of new and potentially exciting opportunities to bring the process community together. This coming together won't happen if every automation choice; BPMS, RPA, Intelligent Automation etc. tries to label itself as BPM.

I strongly suggest that whether you are a vendor, a consultant or user organization you should avoid trying to be lazy or fashionable and instead use clear language. I think you will find it easier to engage with people, easier to get budget and ultimately easier to succeed. After all the chances are that Process Automation in most enterprises will encompass or be embedded in most of the following: CRM (Salesforce), ERP (SAP), ITSM (ServiceNow), BPMS, RPA, Workflow, Task Management, Intelligent Automation, Application Development etc. etc. — The days of one size fits all have long gone, and the future looks to be very fragmented once again.

So win through clarity and don't keep redefining or explaining BPM, simply talk to managing, modeling or automation.

AUTHOR

Mark McGregor - Bio

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, Signavio and LeanIX

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"

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