

HARMON ON BPM: Brett Champlin and the ABPMP July 6, 2020

Brett Champlin died on January 22, 2020 and it's appropriate that those of us who are engaged in process work take a moment to remember his contribution to our profession.

I first met Brett in the Spring of 2003. I forget the occasion, but he sat with me for a couple of hours explaining the need for a professional association to encourage and certify Business Process Management professionals. Brett had recently read *Business Process Management: the third wave* by Howard Smith and Peteringar and was convinced that it would open a new era in process work.

For those who weren't around at the time, let me set the scene. Let's begin with Business Process Reengineering (BPR), a movement encouraged by the books and lectures of Michael Hammer, James Champy, and Thomas Davenport. BPR dominated the thinking of process people in the early 90s. Gradually people from both business and IT converged on the idea that business processes could be revolutionized by applying the latest computer technologies. In the 70s and 80s, Hammer explained, companies had applied new computer technologies, as they were introduced, in an incremental and patchwork fashion. (E.g. a company develops a database for Inventory, then another unique database is created for personnel, and then an independently developed application to keep track of new sales is created for the marketing folks.) Managers, in the 80s hadn't had a good overview of what IT was capable of, so, in Hammer's famous phrase, they had simply "paved cow paths." Now, Hammer proclaimed, it was the time to start over, think big, and conceptualize new, IT-driven business processes – to create "superhighways" that would revolutionize the way businesses operated.

There was considerable enthusiasm for BPR in the first half of the Nineties. By the middle of the Nineties, however, several companies had launched major redesign efforts that resulted in costly failures, and the enthusiasm began to fade. In fact, Hammer and his friends had promoted new IT approaches a little too soon. Consider, for example, that lots of the process

designs they urged depended on linking computer systems and people together with communication networks. Unfortunately the only networks available in the early Nineties were proprietary and difficult to create and manage. Large companies could build them, if they devoted enough resources to the effort, but mid-sized companies had lots of difficulties. More important, large-scale process redesign efforts necessarily cause serious disruptions, and employees often thought that process improvement efforts were simply an excuse to fire lots of employees – which, in some cases, they were.

By the late Nineties, BPR had begun to fade. In its place there was a considerable interest in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) applications. Indeed, Davenport argued that ERP applications could deliver the promise of BPR. In effect, rather than create their own “superhighways,” companies could buy well-designed and easily connected applications from ERP vendors. Add to the idea of instant BPR the concern on the part of many companies that their existing applications would fail as the year 2000 arrived, and the rush to ERP was on.

Companies soon learned that ERP wasn’t nearly as easy as it had been advertised; its “best processes” were too rigid for the needs of most companies and the applications (processes) proved very hard to tailor, and even harder to maintain. And, of course, it was nearly impossible to link ERP applications from two separate vendors. Never-the-less, this is largely where the IT market was in the early years of the new millennium. ERP installations were progressing slowly and the interest in process work was at a low ebb.

Then, in 2003, Smith and Fingar’s *Business Process Management* book burst on scene like a fireworks display. Smith and Fingar pointed out that the newly, widely adopted Internet and its various open-source protocols (e.g. XML) made it easy to link ERP and other applications into a network. Indeed, they suggested, using tools designed for the purpose, business and IT people could easily design new business processes that could combine or extend ERP and other existing applications into tailored “superhighway” processes. It seemed that computer technology had finally caught up with the BPR dream and companies could now do what Hammer had urged them to do in the early Nineties. In essence, companies became excited about processes again – and the charge was to be led by Internet-savvy IT people [1].

The BPTrends website had been launched in 2003, in conjunction with my own book, *Business Process Change*, and we quickly found that our website became the central exchange for information on the new interest in BPM.

Hence, Brett met with me to urge me to promote ABPMP. BPTrends has always tried to promote anything that encouraged or supported business process work and we have been happy to advocate the ABPMP.

Over the years I've been a member of various professional associations, but I'm not the kind of person to manage an association. I've turned down offers to serve as an officer the couple of times I've been asked -- but I've always appreciated those who have the required skills and the energy to pull people together, form committees, raise money, and provide a place for professionals to meet and network. Brett Champlin was just such a person and he had the required skills in spades.

Brett's day job was in the IT department at Allstate Insurance, near Chicago. He was a manager with an MBA and a degree in computer science. He was already engaged in process work within Allstate, but, once he read *Business Process Management*, he was a man with a mission – to encourage IT people, and, as time progressed, all business people, to join together to network and encourage the business process approach within their organizations. Initially Brett gathered together IT people in the Chicago area to form a chapter of an organization that they eventually decided to call the **Association for Business Process Management Professionals (ABPMP)**. One chapter grew to several, and eventually the organization became international, with chapters throughout the world. For years Brett Champlin was the president of the ABPMP. Indeed, he stayed in office so long that I started kidding him by calling him "president-for-life." The fact, however, is that starting and heading a professional association is a thankless task and involves a lot of hard work. Brett tried several times to pass off the office of president, and, when no one could be found, continued to serve in the role. Eventually, he recruited Tony Benedict to succeed him as the new president and he "retired" – only to find that they "pulled him back in" to serve as VP for Finance or to head a task force..

While president, Brett was active in promoting both process work and the ABPMP. He spoke at conferences, delivered tutorials on process technologies, and developed a teaching relationship with first Roosevelt University and then the University of Chicago so he could teach undergraduates about process technologies. Later he guided the ABPMP in the creation of a series of BPM courses. Brett worked with Tony Benedict and others to create a set of process standards (The BPM-CBOK) that document process theories and best practices. Since then, the ABPMP has gone on to create a program that offers certification for individuals who meet certain knowledge and practice criteria. For years Brett worked to make process management work a profession.

That's probably why I appreciated Brett Champlin so much. I have always been amazed that companies simply "discover" business process concepts. They find an employee interested in process improvement, launch a program, improve some processes, and then switch focus and decide to focus, instead, on accounting, or decide to launch a new product line. The process people leave, and then, a few years later, the organization hires someone new who again urges that the organization consider process improvement, and they suddenly start off, again, on a new process journey. Process people don't agree on terms or approaches. Sometimes the process effort is launched by IT people; sometimes it's a Six Sigma or Lean effort. Sometimes it is led by a business manager, inspired by Michael Porter or Geary Rummler. Or it's a business transformation effort that some manager has just discovered. There was no accumulation of knowledge or best practices. Process simply isn't a profession! "Imagine," I used to ask, "what medicine would be like if it was reinvented every decade or so and no one agreed on what to call specific diseases or operations." Process people have spent decades reinventing the wheel, over and over again, always with new terminology and with slight variations.

From the beginning of this millennium, I have placed my hopes for the development of a process profession in two groups – the various BPM programs that have been launched in universities and the ABPMP. Neither has really succeeded, as yet, but neither have they failed. Each continues to work to create a professional body of process practitioners.

Brett continued to struggle with this problem throughout his professional life. He retired from Allstate and most of his process work in 2011. We continued to correspond. From our first meeting, Brett had always felt free to write me when he thought that the BPTrends website was off target. He could be especially harsh when he thought one of my columns was off base. To be fair, I felt free to write him when I thought ABPMP could do something better and usually defended what I'd written in my columns with considerable vigor. Throughout, I enjoyed our correspondence, and learned a lot from his emails.

One of my fond memories of Brett originated at a BPM conference. Curt Hall, who worked for me for many years, was, as a young man, a member of a Punk Rock Band, The Authorities, whose most famous hit was a song called "I hate cops." Somehow, in a conversation with Brett, at that convention, I happened to mention Curt, and Brett immediately asked: "Is this Curt Hall the guy who used to be lead singer for The Authorities?" I was amazed – who would know such a thing?

It turned out that, in his youth, before taking a computer science degree, Brett been a member of his own band (The Devil's Kitchen Band, www.devilskitchenband.com). Brett had apparently lived in Oakland CA in the 60's and had attended Authorities concerts. In retirement, Brett wrote to say that he was rediscovering his roots in music. I loved hearing about how he started playing guitar with Blues groups in the Chicago area.

And, of course, Brett continued to dash off emails, every so often, letting me know when he thought my BPT columns hadn't gotten things quite right.

Brett Chaplin saw a need and spent over a decade trying to create a professional business process management association, while simultaneously working to educate business managers and IT students to take advantage of BPM. And he did it while heading Allstate Insurance process improvement efforts. The ABPMP (www.abpmp.org) exists today because of Brett's efforts. He will be missed by all of us who have dreamed of a business process profession with its own standards and established practices.

[1] This isn't the place to review the development of the BPM, but suffice to say that today all the all modern ERP systems and many other enterprise applications have a 'process' engine at their heart. Some are evolutions of workflow engines. Some are rules-based. Some are both. And some are very new. At the same time, many other process innovations piggybacked on process tools, and most organizations are a lot more process savvy than they were at the beginning of the millennium.

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