

BPM without Boundaries? Let's get Real

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With an absolutely spot-on speech, Mr Cornelius Clauser, Chief Process Officer at SAP, caught my attention during a mixed practitioner-academic conference on Business Process Management (BPM), May 2014 in Liechtenstein. What was most compelling was his answer to the question of what he understood to be "just enough BPM" and correlatively, what he would eliminate in his definition of "just enough." The context for this discussion was his 20 minute talk on how SAP uses BPM internally. Here is his quote that stood out for me: "I would sooner say: when and where do you choose not to apply BPM in your organization."

Mr Clauser's presentation and the reactions afterwards caused me to recall what I've so often thought - that BPM academics and practitioners have taken the holistic nature of BPM one step too far, up to a point where I feel we are trying to over-sell our beautiful BPM discipline. This feeling was reinforced during the workshops with BPM academics on the second day of that excellent European BPM Round-table. The versatility of BPM as a discipline seems to be threatening its credibility.

Let me pursue that statement in greater depth. BPM cannot claim to be a young discipline anymore. It has been over 20 years since Business Process Reengineering (BPR) was popularized by the likes of Thomas Davenport and Michael Hammer, and at least over a decade since BPM came to follow up on the process orientation paradigm. Since then, many organizations have adopted at least some concepts of the process-oriented school of thought. We saw process roles being created, and then sometimes eliminated; we witnessed how Process Offices grew into Business Transformation groups; and we witnessed a wide adoption of BPM methodologies and techniques in process improvement projects. As a result, BPM seems to have become a commodity factor for many businesses.

Meanwhile BPM consultants and academics continued to build on the holistic nature of BPM, linking it with systems thinking, change management, organizational development, customer orientation and strategic thinking among other disciplines, thereby diluting the nature of the discipline. I hear claims now that BPM can be applied anywhere to any sort of problem, and that is where I object! Whenever a discipline is being misrepresented as a silver bullet, it is in danger of losing credibility. Beware of practitioners that will sell BPM as the solution to all your problems.

Therefore, I would like to call on academics and practitioners in BPM to clearly define what BPM is to them and when and where they would **not** use it. I hope they will take up the challenge to describe what the boundaries of BPM are and its limitations as a discipline. On the other hand, I am convinced that the essence of BPM, and previously the BPR and continuous improvement disciplines, namely adopting a

process perspective in business management, will continue to demonstrate its value for organizational challenges such as innovation, (digital) business transformation, platform and network management, and so on. So let me set an example first, by stating: BPM is not boundaryless! It should be applied consciously at the right time, under the right circumstances. It is not a panacea. BPM is a valuable discipline to add the process dimension to the multi-dimensional space of business management and improvement. No more, no less.

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