

The Ideal Meeting Place for Business and IT

By Roy Massie, Vice President of Product Strategy, SunGard EXP

The long-standing separation of business operations and IT has become an unpleasant landmark for many organizations. While progress has been made in some cases, inconsistent agendas and vocabularies still hide areas where common ground is needed. Today, the process management movement is becoming a bridge for both the cultural and tactical aspects of the divide.

Generally speaking, business management specifies what should be done, and IT implements *how* it occurs in technology. The combination of “*what*” and “*how*” is the essence of a process. Business applications have traditionally been built assuming a certain role in an overall process, but the process itself was often obscured by the specialized, hard-wired capabilities of the application. The common ground has always been the process, but today we are more aware of its presence and impact.

Defining the word *process* is more troublesome than it might first seem. Rather than explore the competing formal definitions available, some examples of what processes are and are not can shed some light. *Open new account* addresses a process because it has a definite beginning and ends in one of a few predictable outcomes, whether successful or not. *Pay invoice* and *disconnect service* are processes for similar reasons. A process can be measured end-to-end, on at least its input and outputs, each time it occurs. Terms like *logistics*, *accounting*, *form HT-705* or *website XYZ* represent functional areas or objects in processes, but are not processes.

Modeling a process for long-term improvement requires a complete set of symbols to provide a view of the process as the backbone of operations for both business and IT. In business and IT, flowcharts or unified modeling language (UML) activity diagrams have been the preferred notations for process documentation. However, by only showing the flow of activities to be performed, these notations lack the precision needed to depict people, systems, data and other elements in a fully integrated process.

Business process modeling notation (BPMN) has become the new standard for comprehensively diagramming a process. Contemporary process modeling in business

process management suites (BPMS) or enterprise architecture (EA) tools uses BPMN to illustrate activities, flow, decision rules, data, personnel roles and other dimensions, through explicit and detailed diagramming.

Initially, business or IT can create a BPMN process sketch without detail, much the way it appears in flowcharting. As knowledge concerning the process grows, BPMN accepts more details which can lead to a model complete enough to be executed. The ability to describe a process in the detail needed for enforcement and measurement, not just documentation, is a powerful enabler to close the gap between business and IT. Being able to verify that your complex organization is running as designed, at very granular levels, is financially compelling for both growth and savings goals.

An organization with the discipline and technology to consistently enforce and maintain well-considered processes can expand efficiently. The process improvements may begin in back-office high-volume areas to complement previous generations of investment, or in customer-facing areas where opportunities for differentiation abound. In any case, business and IT should use the same process model as the basis for improvement.

Process: The Harness for Unbridled Technology

Today, many organizations have amassed a collection of different technologies to address specific pain points over time. Technologies such as websites, email, imaging and mobile devices have solved many localized problems. In some cases, they have also provided competitive differentiation.

However, this incremental silo approach lacks an overall harness to transform these islands of value into a coherent whole. These islands of technology can lead to discontinuities in which external customers or partners find their transactions that started in one area of the organization out of sync in other areas, and management cannot consistently improve the situation.

For example, a customer mails in a paper form containing data that goes through three departments for various decisions. After a



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week, the customer calls customer service, re-checks the status on the website the same day and two days later receives a reply letter.

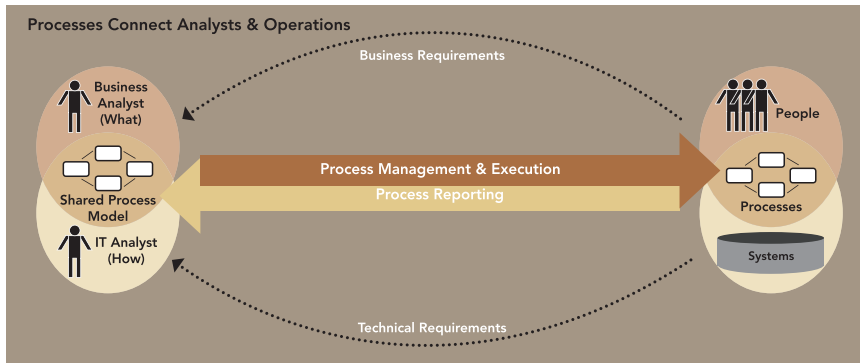
Is everything in sync from the customer's perspective? Does management know exactly how many of those requests are handled within a 10-day turnaround? What were the shortest and longest end-to-end times this quarter? How much more does it cost when a request takes 14 days instead of 10, and where are the bottlenecks? What are the predicted throughput and cost benefits of increasing staff in one of the departments as compared to upgrading one of the record-keeping systems involved?

Because business process management (BPM) solutions include technology integration features and report process execution details, they can harness technology silos to become part of a managed process. For business, a guiding hand (the process engine) consistently moves enterprise data between people and systems across departmental boundaries, thereby increasing value to the customer. For IT, a related set of core technologies is used repeatedly as the backbone of nearly all implementations, rather than continually building purpose-specific application silos.

There are still calculations and algorithms needed for specific solutions, and these are still bought or built. But the most common productivity reports, work-delivery mechanisms, data-integration features, personnel roles and technical interface settings are consistently available. Applications, whether old or new, are linked in an overall process and horizontally integrated rather than vertically isolated.

Same Process, Same Environment

To achieve long-term business improvements through process management, business and IT require a rich, shared environment where they can improve processes as part of each business project. Process initiatives properly done are not short-term affairs. The software selected must grow



into the future as technology blasts forward on its roller-coaster pace.

Popular open standards are essential, not because they fulfill the latest buzzwords recommended by technologists, but because the alternative—proprietary process or project environments, no matter how attractive initially—will have more difficulty surviving the test of time. Of course, this advice is true of almost any software investment, but it is vital with process technology because any force that pushes IT or business into separate tools reinforces the long standing cultural gap and runs counter to the collaborative benefits process management can yield.

The pace of change in software development tools, driven especially by open source projects, such as Eclipse, is a fracturing force when it is applied against proprietary vendor environments. The vibrant open source community evolves new features literally by the day, not the quarter. Developers must gravitate to environments that deliver the best concentration of value for time spent. Many tools, whether commercial or open source, already offer Eclipse plug-ins or intend to in the foreseeable future. Process software that does not interoperate well with popular development standards risk becoming tools used only by business people.

Eclipse has won the development environment war for a number of reasons, but one is especially important in process management. It provides a proven, shared environment for projects of all types, not just coding. Version control of project timelines, managing requirements documents, forms design, database administration, report development/analysis and many others are all convenient today from within Eclipse.

Business projects will increasingly involve process modeling and related techniques, and therefore, increasingly integrate business with IT. This is especially true for business managers who can accept the shift toward more formal thinking about business as a set of systems, as well as IT personnel who can clearly see opportunities to help the business from a systems perspective. As the skill sets between business and IT merge, with process in the

center, Eclipse provides a natural environment for both roles.

Same Process, Different Perspectives

Even within a shared environment, business and IT each provide a unique contribution to the process design. Since the process model serves as the basis for future improvement, business analysts can contribute cost, risk, performance standards and other metrics as part of the standard template for the process.

Because the process model is a detailed blueprint for each possible occurrence that will occur day to day, these business parameters are used later in reports to gauge the performance of each occurrence. Similarly, IT has technical details—such as server addresses, application names, objects and data layers, which must be precisely laid into the same blueprint.

Consider the example of a new financial account opening process, performed by financial institutions hundreds or even thousands of times every day. A new account form comes into the organization via the Web or a paper scan. Some forms contain information triggering a review by a department head for VIP accounts, while others go straight to automated validation. The business analyst contributes to the process model in order to differentiate cost metrics from the original processor of the application versus that of the department head. In this case, the cost metrics become part of the process model.

The IT role contributes to the shared model by specifying the exact applications screens and other technologies involved for the original processor and department head. Both roles contribute to a rich, shared process model of the business from two perspectives. The overall process flow, main decision points, activity names and other important structural features are the same for IT and business.

Even the straight-through, or “pure,” system activities may have cost or other business expectations specified. Typically, the IT person specifies the detailed handling of the automated parts, including how to recover if an

interface fails to function, as in the case of a B2B partner. In a process-centric environment, even something this technical might solicit some input from the business side, since the recovery process itself probably has some business impact worth understanding. The process management mindset and related technology makes these new levels of IT and business interaction feasible.

Crossing a Trusted Bridge to New Places

There are various reasons most organizations still struggle with communication between business and IT. Perhaps the first step forward is to acknowledge that solving old problems usually requires new ideas and time. The powerful effects of process management revolutionized manufacturing and supply chains in the 20th century. Now, the focus has turned to the knowledge-driven business office.

If business and IT do not collaborate to continually improve their shared view of the processes that comprise operations, they will still try to achieve their goals, but probably in more isolation and each with a less complete view of the whole. Process management is not easy, and though technology is required, it is not a panacea. However, not using process management as a bridge between business and IT is a prescription to stay trapped in the past.

As increased competition and risk intensify in business, the ability to consistently improve interactions and holistically connect the entire organization is becoming more critical. Achieving personalized customer interactions while following carefully considered best practices is a major factor for business success in the 21st century. Many adopters of the process-management discipline, empowered by appropriate technology, are finding process management the ideal place for business and IT to meet for a breakthrough. ■

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