

Process pioneers

By managing IT infrastructures along so-called 'top down' lines, organisations can streamline their business processes, eliminate redundant tasks and increase automation.

Business process, according to John Pyke, chief technology officer of workflow management specialist Staffware, is king. "Understanding it is critical, automating it is essential, and managing it is vital," he says.

By managing IT infrastructures along so-called 'top down', business process lines (that is, identifying the individual tasks that make up a business process, the order in which they should be handled, and the technical elements that support that process), Pyke argues that organisations can build responsive, flexible systems at speed, typically exploiting an underlying and pre-existing software infrastructure. These systems, he believes, will enable companies to streamline internal and external business processes, eliminate redundant tasks and increase automation.

Workflow is an essential element of

business process management (BPM), in that it handles the routing of work between resources, whether those resources are people, systems or machines. It also manages the order in which those steps are handled. But most important, it enables employees to check on and, if necessary, reconfigure the flow of a business process when unforeseen or exceptional events occur. "As much as we'd like to totally automate processes, there are some parts of processes that cannot be left to computers, some decisions that need to be made by people. Where human intervention is required, that's when workflow comes into play," says Ismael Ghalimi, CEO of BPM software firm Intalio and a founding member of business process standards body BPML.org.

Neither workflow nor BPM are new concepts, points out Ghalimi. "Each has its

roots in a long tradition of developing methodologies to help businesses become more agile," he says. But the combination of the two technologies is spurring the development of BPM tools that bridge the gap between modelling a business process and executing it.

EXECUTABLE PROCESS

"What is different now is that, all of a sudden, process becomes executable. Process modelling tools of the last 15 years provided a way to represent business processes, but the outcome of that was that [visual representations] of business processes prepared by business analysts had to be handed over to IT people to execute. Now, organisations can automate much of that work using BPM tools without requiring significant hard-coding," he explains.

These tools, according to Howard

Latest standards developments

ARE standards in business process management (BPM) beginning to converge? They are, if recent announcements from the software industry are to be believed:

BPML 1.0

Almost two years after inception, BPML.org released the first draft of its Business Process Modelling Language in June 2002. The specification provides:

A process-independent definition language

"BPML defines a language for expressing business processes and their components, including activities of varying complexity, transactions and their compensation, concurrency and exception handling," says Sharyn Leaver of IT market research company Forrester Research. It also defines a set of common terms that express standard business processes, so

that employees and business partners can use a common understanding of terms like 'process', 'activity' and 'transaction' as they work together to define collaborative processes.

XML syntax for representing business processes

BPML 1.0 also defines a technical XML schema for describing process definitions, including all their components. Leaver says that the XML syntax standards give organisations a method for exchanging process definitions across heterogeneous systems and modelling tools. "For example, [organisations] can export an XML representation of their product development process. A business partner can then import the XML representation of the process, make modifications with its own design tools, and send it back," she says.

WSCI

The Web Service Choreography Interface (WSCI) specification, developed by BEA Systems, Intalio, SAP and Sun Microsystems, was announced in late June 2002. It is incorporated within the BPML 1.0 specification. Pronounced 'whisky', the WSCI is designed to track the sequence of messages, logical dependencies and exception handling that occur when business processes are made up of multiple web services from potentially multiple sources.

"For example," says Sharyn Leaver of Forrester Research, "a company can describe the flow of purchase orders and order acknowledgement messages passed between buyer and supplier in the context of that buyer's overall source-to-pay process."



Jon Pyke,
Staffware



Howard Smith,
CSC



Ismael Ghalimi,
Intalio

BPMI.org and WfMC's standards summit

SENIOR technology decision-makers can hardly be blamed for feeling bewildered by the plethora of products and standards littering the workflow and business process management (BPM) landscape, says John Pyke, chief technology officer of workflow management software specialist Staffware.

"If you're not confused about what's happening in workflow and BPM, then you just haven't been paying attention," he jokes.

Pyke is well positioned to comment: He currently serves as chairman of the Workflow Management Coalition, (WfMC), a non-profit industry body that aims to promote and develop the use of workflow by establishing standards for "software terminology, interoperability and connectivity" between workflow products.

Not only that, Staffware is an active member of the Business Process Management Initiative, BPMI.org. Also a non-profit organisation, BPMI.org's stated aim is "to promote and develop the use of Business Process Management (BPM) through the establishment of standards for process design, deployment, execution, maintenance, and optimisation." Its three-pronged approach to achieving this goal involves developing open standards, assisting IT suppliers in marketing

their BPM products, and supporting organisations using BPM technologies.

Clearly, the two organisations have overlapping interests and concerns. But in the past, each has individually developed its own standards and specifications – arguably adding to the general confusion of prospective customers. With this in mind, the WfMC and BPMI.org held their first formal joint meeting at *Information Age's* Agile Business Conference in June 2002.

"What brings us together is the understanding that business processes rule the way that organisations manage their business," explains Ismael Ghalimi, chief executive of Intalio, a BPM software specialist and a founding member of BPMI.org.

The aim of the discussions, according to Pyke of Staffware, was to reduce the duplication of effort expended by the two bodies on the development of standards for workflow and BPM technologies; to minimise confusion about what the respective technologies are and where they overlap; and, ultimately, to boost acceptance and take-up of the technologies.

"The meeting was extremely productive. It produced a vision for the two organisations going forward," reports Pyke. But, he adds, "This is not a marriage. It's a first date."

Smith, director and co-chair of BPMI.org and chief technology officer for Europe at systems integrator Computer Sciences Corp (CSC), are spurring "a process revolution". Today's BPM tools, he says, provide an answer to the problem of finding a single methodology and toolset, underpinned by a single technological founda-

tion, for the representation of processes.

Smith cites a handful of organisations that might use BPM tools to solve business problems and become more agile: "A global logistics company wanting to design corporate processes top-down and to manufacture localised variants [of its products] in order to avoid duplication among

its business units; a national telecommunications operator that needs to respond to new market opportunities and strategic threats by radically reducing the time it takes it to introduce new tariffs from weeks (or months) to days; and an IT services company that discovers that workflow engines are insufficient to meet the challenges of providing clients with business process outsourcing."

However, in order to use BPM effectively, says Smith, organisations must first stop focusing exclusively on data and data management, and instead adopt a process-oriented view that makes "no distinction between human and computer work".

DREADFULLY WRONG

Quoting from *Business Process Management: The Third Wave*, a book co-authored by Smith, Ghalimi and respected technology consultant Peteringar, Smith underlines this point: "There is something wrong with IT, something dreadfully wrong. For the past 50 years, computers have been data machines, recording the after-the-fact results of business activity. Companies are stuck in this data-centric world of IT, where there's an ever-growing disconnect between the business and the technology it deploys."

"The idea of BPM is to bring processes, people and information together," agrees Ghalimi. "They must be unified so that organisations can become more agile."

Smith firmly believes that without the shift in thinking from data to process, the evolution of the agile business could be stalled: "Because the data-centric paradigm of IT won't take us past where we are today, we must break it!"

C O N T A C T

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