Business Process Management: Attempted Concepticide?

Hajo A. Reijers

Department of Information and Technology, Faculty of Technology Management, Eindhoven University of Technology,
P.O. Box 513, NL-5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands, h.a.reijers@tm.tue.nl

Stefan Heusinkveld

Department of Business Administration, Nijmegen School of Management, University of Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9108, NL-6500 HK
Nijmegen, The Netherlands, s.heusinkveld@nsm.kum.nl

INTRODUCTION

The utopian picture of Business Process Management (BPM) is ubiquitous. It is "a fundamental change" (CSC, 2002), "the holistic business platform for the agile company of the future" (Smith & Fingar, 2002), "the monniker for the next Killer App" (Delphi, 2002), "the greatest return on investment" (Aberdeen, 2003) and "it will change industry; just like Deming" (Gurley, 2003).

Not just skeptics may wonder whether we are witnessing yet another *fashion* (Abrahamsom, 1996). In this paper, we examine this suspicion. In the first place, we will focus on the supply side of BPM. We argue that overselling of the concept, while understandable to a certain extent, may be driven by very particular interests of IT vendors and market analysts. Secondly, from a content analysis it follows that unlike what BPM propagandists would suggest, there are important similarities with earlier IT/management solutions. The problem, however, is that these links are hardly acknowledged or plainly denied in literature.

Our prime motivation for this paper is to warn for the equivocal qualities of BPM. As researchers being active in the BPM arena ourselves, we embrace the attention for this subject. At the same time, we fear the phenomenon of *concepticide*: the continuous and collective rejection of IT/management solutions that have been widely embraced only a short time before. Concepticide creates an atmosphere unfavorable to the academic ideology of accumulation. This implies that people (1) have to reinvent what others already knew, (2) continue to make the same mistakes and (3) are unable to deal with persistent problems. We hope that this paper enhances the sensitivity of IT academics and practitioners for this issue.

The structure of our paper follows the main arguments we described. In Section 2 we focus on a surface analysis of the fashionable aspects of BPM and their perils. In Section 3, we explore on a more substantial level the reincarnation of earlier solutions under the BPM label. We present our conclusions in Section 4.

A SUPPLY OF SOLUTIONS

To understand the current popularity of BPM we focus on the supply side of the market for management solutions. We consider several key actors involved in the creation and dissemination of allegedly innovative knowledge products. Our main argument here is that the 'productivization' of knowledge in solutions like BPM likely increases its commercial value on the market place, while it unavoidably lays the foundation for a collective downturn. As will be explained in Section 3, this is detrimental to knowledge accumulation.

Suppliers

Many vendors nowadays present themselves as BPM suppliers. Take for example Staffware, "Leaders in Business Process Management", or Intalio, "The Business Process Management Company". Vendors are involved in the production of new management solutions to enhance their business (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001). They can be regarded as important knowledge suppliers involved in 'productivizing' knowledge into a commercially viable commodity (Fincham, 1995). The repeated introduction of novel solutions unavoidably makes present ideas continuously regarded as 'old' (Ortmann, 1995) thereby reducing their attractiveness. New and untried ideas are always more appealing than the difficulties and practical problems associated with the implementation of existing organization concepts and technologies. This logic of 'planned obsolescence' (Huczynski, 1993) is probably reinforced by market analysts such as Gartner, GIGA, Delphi, and CSC, by establishing the popularity of specific topics and emphasizing what is 'in' or 'out'.

The reason for vendors to specifically invest so much effort in the promotion of BPM should perhaps be seen against the spirit of the times. Corporate performance has been weak all over the globe, leading to layoffs, cost pressures and intense scrutiny of each and every investment. The exploded Internet-bubble has also made investors shy. As Lunt et al. (2003) put it: "Blind faith in the latest and greatest technology has been replaced by drawn-out review and approval cycles. And if there's no clear return on investment, there is no investment. Period."

Under these circumstances, BPM seems to be the perfect answer. It promises "operational cost-cutting value in a recession environment where companies must reduce costs to compensate for lower-than-expected revenues" (Aberdeen, 2002, p.11). A skeptic may argue that this message is exactly the only message that investors may want to hear right now – even if the promises of BPM cannot be supported by facts. We conjecture that this suspicion accurately explains the tremendous interest for the reports and notes of market analysts on BPM. Bigger and bigger promises lure companies in considering to spend their precious money on BPM and all they need for the final decision is a third "objective" party who supports it.

Knowledge Products

Suppliers generally seek to transform their ideas into a particular form that can be sold on market for solutions (Fincham, 1995). Several key characteristics generally increase the attractiveness of their 'products' to knowledge consumers, which are:

- utopianism (Ten Bos, 2000)
- simplicity (Kieser, 1997)
- interpretive viability (Benders & Van Veen, 2001).

We will consider these in some more detail in the propagation of BPM.

Solutions like BPM tend to be systematically oversold as to what they can accomplish (Land, 1996; Brunsson & Olsen, 1997). While this *utopian* picture can be understood from the perspective as sketched in the earlier section, we are specifically distrustful of the downplaying of

earlier concepts by BPM propagators. Smith and Fingar (2002) are notably good at this, addressing a whole range of earlier IT/management solutions, such as process modeling, computer-aided software engineering, and business process reengineering. One by one, they "failed" or BPM is able to address their shortcomings. Unfortunately, the lessons learned are hardly made explicit. Furthermore, the view on these earlier concepts as failures may be quite particular views, as can be concluded from ongoing research in all of these areas. Obviously, downplaying an earlier concept will put a newer concept in the best possible light. At the same time, it will puzzle end users and destroy the links to practices, experiences, and scientific results in such a closely related area.

The focus on *simplicity*, the second key characteristic we mentioned, is clearly present in the propagation of BPM. As Brunsson & Olsen (1997) argue, simple ideas are inherently more appealing than multifaceted descriptions of organizational reality. Obviously, a potential problem in promoting BPM, with its strong technological cone (see Section 3), is that it chases off the business-oriented decision makers. Gurley (2003) notes that "BPM purchasers want applications that are easily understood". Much emphasis is therefore put on the ease of applying BPM and its targeting of managers' needs:

The essence of BPM software is that it solves business problems for business users. Whether Web Services or Corba or .Net is part of the underlying technology is about as interesting to these decision makers as the brand of disk brake is to most people who purchase automobiles.
        (Gurley, 2003)

Even when business people would not immediately be attracted by the allure of BPM, it is impressed on them that they should not walk away from it: "We need brave managers who are willing to take advantage of BPM." (Delphi group, 2001) and ".. an intimate knowledge of BPM capabilities is a must for the business professional." (Gartner, 2003b).

Finally, the inherent *interpretative viability* of BPM increases its appeal to both producers and consumers of IT/management solutions. Gartner (2003a) points out that vendors and end users in the BPM market "lack a standard set of terms and concepts to support meaningful dialogue". As a result, many software vendors can easily claim to have a BPM tool even if they support just a few of the capabilities commonly associated with it. In this sense, there is an ideal "me too" situation from the suppliers' point of view. From the clients' perspective this is less than ideal, especially when market analysts point out that "comparison between process management products is currently difficult or even meaningless" because of these different implementations of BPM (CSC 2002, p. 52). Instead of putting forward clear taxonomies, terminology, and definitions, market analysts seem to dwell in this confusion. After all, it creates a continuous demand for their services. At the same time, vendors can continue to claim their products to be the true implementations of BPM.

THE INHERITANCE FOR BPM

In the previous section, we explored BPM as a management fashion. We indicated which questionable attitudes vendors and market analysts may adopt. We argue in this section that there is more continuity in IT thinking than is suggested by many BPM propagators. We illustrate our argument by drawing on literature from Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and Workflow Management (WfM), thereby presenting the ideas associated with BPM as a reincarnation of earlier solutions, both conceptual and technological. Our point is that such underutilization of present knowledge not only interferes with the academic ideal of accumulation (Lammers, 1988), but has also important implications for IT praxis.

The Reincarnation of BPR

The BPR concept was introduced by Hammer (1990) and Davenport & Short (1990). Theorists in the field consider these authors to be important in the development of systematic approaches to produce radical performance improvement of *entire* business processes. The major vehicles of BPR are the application of IT and the promotion of changing the structure of the process (Reijers, 2003). BPR has been

Figure 1: An overview of the tasks of a manager (Rummler & Brache, 1995)
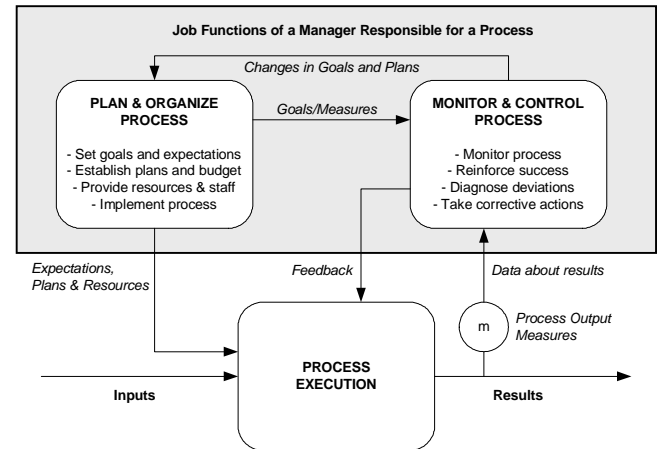
extensively debated and appreciated in the IT field (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001).

BPM is obviously paying homage to BPR in its focus on proces: "Business Process Management is all about transferring the results of business process re-engineering into production." (Leymann et al., 2002, p.208)

In addition, BPM can also be seen as addressing two shortcomings of its conceptual predecessor. In the first place, BPR focuses on just one of the phases in the life cycle of a process, the *design* phase. Design is but one of the issues that a process manager is concerned with when managing the performance of a process. Consider for example Figure 1, where the overall tasks of a process manager are shown.

It seems that BPM is *extending process awareness* as raised by BPR from the single design phase to other managerial areas of interest such as process analysis, definition, execution, monitoring and administration. This view is consistent with views and process 'life-cycles' as presented by Smith & Fingar (2002) and Van der Aalst et al. (2003), which present the focal areas of BPM in a way which is very similar to Figure 1.

In addition, BPM *extends the options for change* from the radical approach of BPR to gradual, incremental strategies characteristically associated with Continuous Process Improvement (CPI) or Total Quality Management (TQM) efforts. In other words, "BPM integrates different scales of business process change such as total quality management, BPR, and innovation in one unified process performance improvement strategy" (Al-Mashari, 2002).

It is curious, however, that the links between BPM and BPR are virtually absent in most publications on BPM. Yet, there is an abundance of publications on BPR, more specifically on implementation issues, methodologies, and success and fail factors (e.g. Grover et al., 1995; Kettinger et al., 1997; Al-Mashari & Zairi, 1999). Because of BPM's overlapping of BPR – redesign is still on the map, although as merely one of the managerial tasks – there is a risk that this knowledge moves out of reach for current and future adopters of BPM. If this does not worry the propagators of BPM, it is at least something that IT academics and practitioners should care about.

The Reincarnation of WfM Technology

The functionality of tools that support BPM is typically listed as a set of five or more capabilities, slightly differing depending on the source (e.g. compare Smith & Fingar, 2002; Silver, 2002; CSC, 2002; Delphi, 2002; Gurley, 2003; Gartner, 2003a). Aside from build-time and run-time diagnostic capabilities, wider capabilities for enterprise application integration (EAI) and Business-to-Business Integration (B2Bi), WfM capabilities are among the mostly mentioned functionalities of a BPM system.

Basically, WfM ensures that work can be automatically allocated by a computer system to resources – humans and/or applications – in accordance with a predefined schema of the process, the available resources, and their dependencies (see e.g. Jablonski & Bussler, Van der Aalst & Van Hee, 2002). As part of a BPM system, WfM capabilities are expected to cover a broader spectrum of work support than the existing stand-alone solutions (Van der Aalst et al., 2003).

The interesting thing is that although the resemblance between BPM and WfM technology is quite obvious, there are parties who plainly deny this link. For example, consider Silver (2002) who discusses the relation between BPM and WfM technology:

Where workflow once tried to stamp out inefficiency by automating isolated functional bottlenecks, BPM software aims to interconnect the myriad islands of process automation created by that earlier effort.

Interestingly, WfM technology has *never* focused on functional departments, but concentrated from the start on the improvement of cross-departmental processes (Jablonski & Bussler, 1996).

It is also interesting how Delphi interprets the outcomes of a large survey on BPM. They brand the small minority of respondents to a large survey who see BPM as "simply the cosmetic re-branding of previous generations of workflow software" as "cynics" (Delphi, 2002, p.2).

Also consider Gartner's opinion on WfM technology. First, it was positioned by this market analyst as indispensable for any modern company: "workflow addresses e-business needs, will streamline transactions and is the glue for process coordination and consistency" (Gartner, 2000). But in 2003, the new kid on the block is BPM and interest in workflow seems lost. In a half-hearted attempt to address the confusion between the BPM and workflow concepts, workflow is on the one hand referred to as "a legacy market" and BPM as simply "more focused" than workflow (Gartner, 2003a).

We fear that this casual, very business driven and obscuring way of treating the resemblances between BPM and WfM technology will bar for many interested parties access to the knowledge and experiences that has been gained with the use of WfM technology (e.g. Georgakopoulos et al., 1995; Van der Aalst, 1998; Grefen et al., 2001). As a result, the implementation of a BPM system may once again experience the same type of problems which have long been known in the WfM field.

CONCLUSION

We hope to have made plausible the lurking danger of exaggerating the innovativity of BPM or overselling the technical superiority of BPM systems. To maintain demand for their services, vendors have an interest in discarding the old by introducing new solutions. The resulting dangers are twofold. In the first place, there is the risk of *concepticide*, which is a direct menace to the accumulation of knowledge. The propagation of solutions like BPM constitutes a strong danger of underutilization of present knowledge. It rediscovers what others already new. Not being able to build on present knowledge leaves people with no option but to start from scratch and reinvent the wheel. The discontinuity that concepticide brings, reinforces making old mistakes, but then under a different label.

The second aspect of the dangers we are addressing is that hyping BPM may eventually shy away businesses from what may very well be a sensible concept supported by powerful systems. We focused quite arbitrarily on BPM's resemblances with BPR and WfM. It is true that BPR has its share of criticasters today and WfM systems have not caught on as was expected a decade ago. However, there may be a core of such earlier concepts and technologies which is worth asking attention for, again and again. As Land (1996:16) argues: "the nostrums prescribed by the new alchemists are not irrelevant", but "nevertheless they are oversold and overhyped". Repeating relevant concepts is not something we should be ashamed of, as long as being relevant under the circumstances and under acknowledgement of earlier results, knowledge, and experiences in the field.

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