
Industrial review

Business process orientation: a way of thinking or a way of working?

In the last two decades, considerable research and practical efforts have been invested in the domain of business processes (BP). Great achievements have been made both in the theory and in practice. However, as a new industrial editor, I see my task not in listing the achievements, but in highlighting the practical problems that remain.

In my practice, I am used to meeting people from various sectors, private companies as well as public and special interest organisations, for discussing issues connected to business process orientation. Some of these people know nothing about business processes, others have already completed a project of process identification and mapping by themselves, or with the help of some management consulting company. Those who have had experience with business process projects, sometimes, can proudly produce quite complicated process maps to show the results of such a project. However, facing the question on how the results achieved in the project have been used in practice, many people become confused, and sometimes offended. Some even do not understand the question; in their minds creating the maps has been the ultimate goal of the project, and nothing more should be expected. Some use the results for partial tasks, like education of new personnel. Some made obvious process improvements but have no idea of any other ways of using the project's results. From the experience of such discussions, my feeling is that most practitioners do not have a clear understanding of the objectives of process-orientation.

The BP literature gives an impression that at least some companies have heavily invested in the design of their business processes, and they have achieved measurable improvements. PC vendor Dell is often referred to as an example of such an organisation. I have quite good experience of buying things from Dell. However, one case gave me some doubts that BP ideas had strong roots in the company. A while ago, we got two deliveries of approximately the same laptops models. The first delivery had a TV cable included. The second one (a month later) had none. None of the packing lists had this cable specified. We sent a question to the Dell support to check if the cable should have been included in the second package or not, and postponed our payment for the second delivery. We never got any answer to the question, though representatives of various departments from Dell contacted us on the matter from time to time without any coordination between each other. After three months, the matter was solved by our Dell representative who ordered the cable delivery on her own risk. This incident clearly shows that walls between the departments are still in place, though some holes have been drilled in them to facilitate the main flow of BP.

Once, a priest explained me the difference between the religious philosophy and religion in the following words: "philosophy is a way of thinking, religion is a way of life". The question I want to put forward is "what is business process orientation all about? Is it a way of thinking, or a way of working?" It looks to me that, at least for now, it is the first rather than the second. We may analyse business processes, improve them, even sometimes assign "process owners", but then we proceed to work in a more or less the usual manner. Of course, there is a lot to gain by using BP as a way of thinking, but I believe that the greatest advantage lies in making BP a way of working. The latter includes genuine cooperation between all process participants independently of what department they belong to, and whether a particular process instance follows the standard pattern, or deviates from it. It also means more motivated involvement of process participants who understand their own role in the process and the roles of others (including the management). The motivation can be achieved by giving them a possibility to track the results of any process in which they participate. BP as a way of working also means that the experience gathered from previously completed processes is directly used in operational practice.

Converting BP from a way of thinking into a way of working requires serious attention from both researchers and practitioners. We need clear understanding of what BP as a way of working means, in other words, what BP "commandments" are. We also need to understand how the idea of BP as a way of working can be conveyed to all people involved in business processes, what tools (including information systems) are needed for this end, and how they could be developed and introduced into operational practice.

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