

Speak Softly and Carry a Big BPM Suite

By Philip Larson, Director of Product Management, Appian

Businesses run on large, complex networks of underlying processes. Settling billing disputes, introducing new products, procuring goods and services, issuing loans, managing inventory—the quality and efficiency of these processes drive sustainable competitive advantages for the business. However, regardless of how efficient your processes are today, markets evolve, competitive landscapes change and regulatory pressures fluctuate. To stay ahead, companies need to become more process-centric and reduce their reliance on rigid outdated procedures. They require tighter controls over their processes and better internal alignment in order to navigate these uncertain and volatile waters.

The business process management (BPM) market is exploding thanks to its ability to address these problems. BPM suites provide organizations with greater management and flexibility of their processes while increasing visibility into where those processes are breaking down. By providing process automation in a way that transcends the typical hierarchical and political barriers in the organization, BPM suites are driving efficiencies across every major vertical.

BPM by Any Other Name...

Business process management has had a somewhat schizophrenic past. First, it had to differentiate itself from workflow. It did this by providing a standalone platform for defining processes involving multiple applications rather than merely stuffing flowchart capabilities into a single application like ERP or CRM. Second, BPM had to convince the market that its human-centric features for collaboration and task management made it more than simply repackaged enterprise application integration (EAI) tools, which primarily focus on message-based system-to-system integration. Third, it had to earn the right to call itself “BPM” by fighting a grueling acronym war with the likes of business performance management and business process modeling. But regardless of its history, BPM sales have grown rapidly thanks to

its promise as both a management discipline and an underlying technology platform.

Aside from well-acknowledged benefits like streamlining hand-offs and aligning incentives, BPM also helps bridge the business-IT divide. Standards such as business process modeling notation (BPMN), for instance, provide a common language for business and IT to model and understand business processes. Using BPMN, business analysts don’t simply throw requirements over the wall for IT to translate into automated solutions—they define abstract process flows by linking together tasks and activities. Unlike a static diagram like Visio, these same models govern the execution of the process. Moreover, when appropriate, business analysts can even retain the ability to modify and optimize these processes directly. This fundamentally changes the way the business is managed and how operational processes are executed.

For many companies, competition has never been more fierce. Therefore, using BPM to put business users back in the driver’s seat of corporate strategy is a good thing. Although the industry may have argued over what to call it, the benefits of BPM have been busy speaking for themselves.

Corporate Agility; Adapting Processes

Many BPM initiatives start by focusing on modeling and executing “as-is” business processes. In many cases, this is a good start. An as-is process is often understood reasonably well by the organization, and these processes can always benefit from smoother hand-offs, a full audit trail and the efficiency of real-time management. However, if you are only using BPM to automate as-is processes, you are missing out on one of the core promises of BPM—corporate agility. Corporate agility is the ability to sense change and adapt old processes to these new circumstances. It brings with it the vision of incrementally improving “as-is” processes until they become optimized “to-be”

processes. Continuous improvement is the name of the game.

Agility requires sensing market change. To sense change, organizations must analyze more information faster. On the end-user side, BPM helps by providing personalized dashboards with real-time analytics from the processes it manages. People gain access to the right information at the right time so they can make efficient decisions. What claims are open? What payments have processing exceptions? How many loans were fulfilled this month? Where are my bottlenecks? The BPM engine provides answers to these questions over the Web in real time and pushes them out to the right people.

However, sensing change requires more than pie charts and scatter plots. BPM therefore couples these analytics with other contextual information, including collaboration tools such as chat and message boards, as well as document repositories and knowledgebases. These tools provide greater context to particular processes, helping knowledge workers and managers sense change.

In addition to recognizing change, agility also requires organizations to adapt their processes to those changes. With traditional packaged (and custom) client-server software, this has been a nightmare. One problem is that these tools hardwire process logic into the application code itself. Some organizations give up on agility and impose these rigid processes on the corporation. For others, retaining agility means keeping large teams of “application maintenance” personnel in IT ready to hack into their commercial tools and modify them as needed (once they finish the other hundred things on their “to do” list, that is).

BPM technology, on the other hand, has put the power of process improvement in the hands of the business by giving authorized users control to make tactical improvements to the business processes in which they participate. BPM allows users to add new approval steps in-flight, modify the rules and policies governing a process, or simply pause or cancel work that is no longer relevant. No calls to IT; no expensive application maintenance personnel. In this way, BPM encourages a process-centric culture in which people participating in processes are empowered to continually improve them. This helps organizations to adapt their processes rather than hanging their old ones out to dry.

BPM & SOA: Two Peas in a Pod

By helping break the basic composition of software applications into subprocesses and tasks, BPM abstracts out the process flow into models that are easier for people to understand and build. But if BPM is about gluing activities together into a process, aren’t process designers limited by what building blocks are available?

Sure. This is why (good) BPM tools ship with a large library of pre-built services and components for doing everything from uploading documents to updating legacy systems. Plug-ins and starter kits in integrated development environments (IDEs) can also be used to further extend these lists of components. In this way, business analysts build working process applications based on components supplied by IT.

This fits in nicely with organizations' service-oriented architecture (SOA) initiatives. These initiatives expose business assets as reusable "services" that can be shared across applications. But having an infrastructure of services is not itself an end goal. SOA only becomes useful when those services are assembled into composite applications. This is when you benefit from service reusability, reducing application development time and lowering the incremental cost of future process automation. BPM is therefore a natural fit to combine with your SOA. BPM becomes the glue, sitting on top of the SOA, orchestrating calls to services from within enterprise processes. BPM makes it faster and cheaper to build applications on top of your SOA. The more services the IT organization exposes through the SOA, the more building blocks the business has to build BPM-based composite applications.

Based on modular services, applications built with BPM and SOA also have greater tolerance for change compared with tightly coupled applications that trap business logic in internal code. These services can be updated independently from the overall application without bringing the entire system down. This greatly simplifies enhancements and ongoing maintenance. Moreover, the interfaces for the services are well-defined, making it simpler to swap new services in and out of processes.

What other synergies exist? Well, BPM's native security and monitoring tools can be used to control access to services in your SOA and even monitor usage. This makes sure that only authorized users are calling your services under appropriate circumstances. Additionally, by monitoring all activities in a process, BPM can provide real-time reports on service performance, including completion times, uptime percentage and success-to-failure ratios. Service level agreements can be enforced, and breaches can be sent directly to the appropriate manager's inbox.

Fundamentally, organizations want to build applications faster, manage them better and make them easier to change. BPM and SOA are a perfect match for helping to get there.

Human Workflow: Is that BPM in Your Pocket?

But with all this talk of component architecture and service orchestration, haven't we forgotten about the people? Clearly, tying together Web services from an SOA into processes is only half the story. On the people side, human workflow features have helped to put the "B" back into BPM. Organizations realize that not all good ideas come in boardrooms. Often the people on the front lines have the best insights into where processes are breaking down. Therefore, companies must mine their knowledge workers for promising ideas and innovative recommendations on how to improve the organization's processes. As a result, BPM today provides collaboration technology, knowledgebase repositories and other tools that help to bring process management and process control to more people in varying roles.

BPM has cast a wider net by allowing employees to seamlessly interact with processes. This means allowing people to communicate with processes using mediums they are accustomed to. BPM plug-ins for Microsoft Outlook and Office, for instance, enable users to participate in processes—complete tasks, view reports, route documents—all from an environment with which they are already familiar.

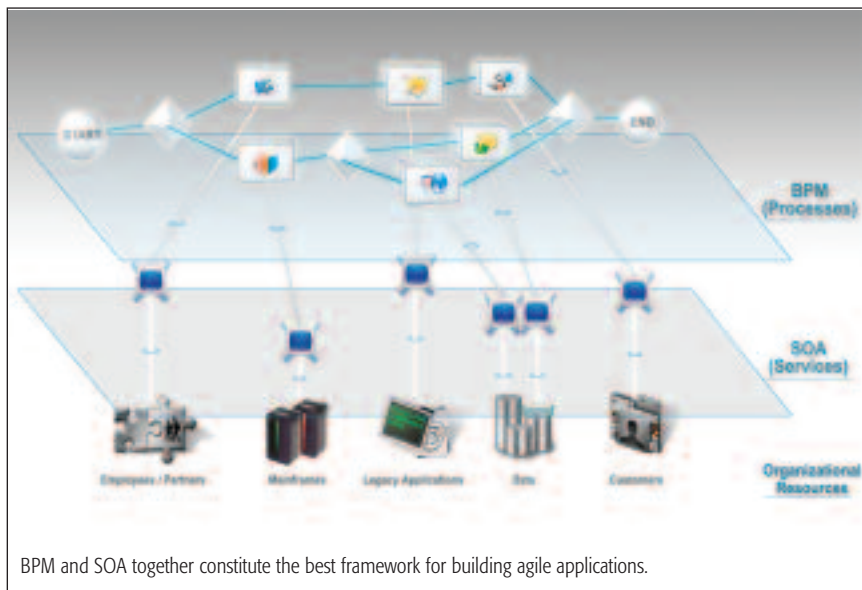
But the work here is ongoing. BPM technology will continue to evolve new and better ways for users to seamlessly interact with the process engine through mediums such as email, IM, text messaging and voice over internet protocol (VoIP). The day is not far off when people will receive voicemails from their process engines, enabling them to escalate or reroute work via voice commands from their cell phones or mobile devices. Any medium people currently use to communicate with others is ripe with opportunity for creating seamless inroads to process management.

The bottom line is that for BPM to work, people must participate. This means making process management easy to use and accessible from whatever device happens to be in the end-user's pocket.

Assessing the Architectural Approach

BPM has made great strides in helping organizations manage and control their business processes. It is helping put business users back in the driver's seat of process strategy. At the same time, BPM is helping organizations get more out of common IT initiatives like SOA. However, this architectural approach is also being coupled with a focus on the people—cultivating the ideas and innovation of employees and allowing them to seamlessly participate in processes from the tools they are familiar with using. Given the strategic importance of BPM to both the business and IT, some companies are hesitant to disclose everything they are doing for fear of giving their competitors a roadmap to success. However, even for companies that choose to speak softly about their strategic process initiatives, it is becoming more and more likely that internally they are carrying a big BPM suite. ■

Philip Larson is director of product management at Appian Corporation. He guides the strategic vision and roadmap of Appian Enterprise, the company's flagship business process management (BPM) suite. Appian Enterprise sports the industry's first 100% thin-client product, including a business process modeling notation (BPMN)-compliant process modeling environment. With more than 6.1 million seats deployed, Appian Enterprise is being used in a wide range of projects within government agencies, non-government organizations and Fortune 500 companies. More information is available at www.appian.com.



BPM and SOA together constitute the best framework for building agile applications.