

Business Process Management: an expert perspective

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Business Process Management (BPM) has been identified as the number one business priority in the years to come. Yet, while the long-term benefits of BPM are undeniable, many BPM initiatives are doomed to failure. In this article, we present major hindrances to successful BPM, and provide recommendations for implementers - all from the perspective of experts.





Introduction

14 global BPM experts were interviewed throughout a six-month period (between March 2006 and September 2006). Identities are confidential, but experts were identified based on their track record in leading research and book publications, BPM events, institutions and other recognitions.

During the interviews, the experts highlighted certain issues found within BPM. In response to these issues, they made certain recommendations. In this article, we categorize the issues according to what is typical in organizational structures. Fig. 1 presents these in three categories.

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Strategic: Being the highest of three, this level relates to top management support, business and IT alignment, process organization, and governance issues.

Tactical: The second level includes challenges found in process modeling, process performance measurement, and BPM methodologies.

Operational: This level refers to all technological issues such as technology capability, Service Oriented Architectures (SOA), technological maturity, XML standards, etc.

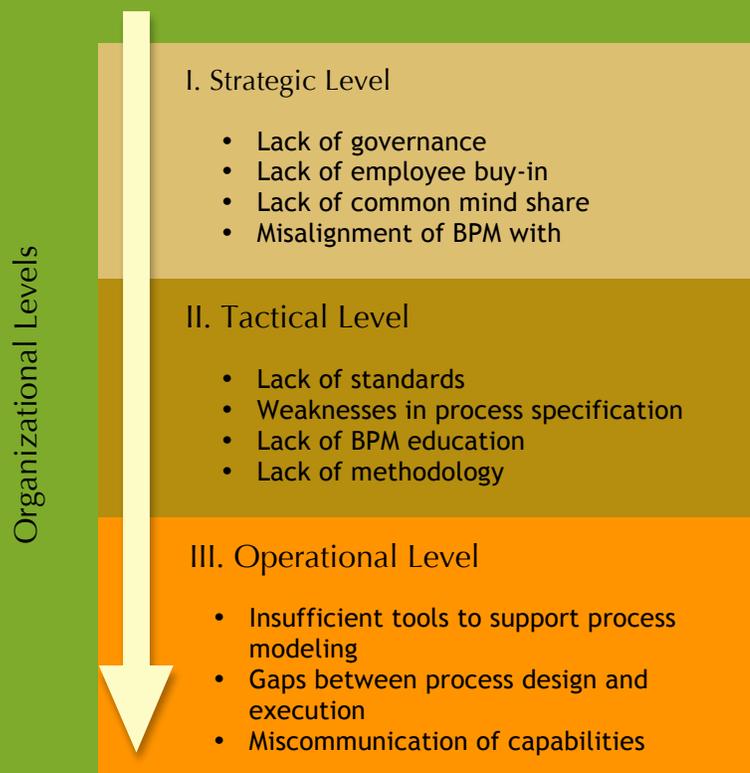


Fig. 1: Major issues in BPM at different organizational levels, as noted by BPM experts



I. Strategic Level

"The biggest challenge for the next step forward in BPM is proper representation of organization and assignment of responsibility and allowing organizations to be extremely flexible while at the same time not losing track of any piece of work."

Lack of governance

The lack of governance is an oft-quoted concern where issues like a lack of ownership and process controls are present across business units. While some experts opined that solving such issues is an uphill battle, others recommended having clear documentation and consistent standards for access to BPM-related systems, and directories that depict organizational flow. However, the above is only possible with adequate sponsorship from top management.

Misalignment of BPM with organizational strategy

There should be no gaps between organizational strategy and BPM efforts. Between strategic intents, strategic objectives and stakeholders, there must be total alignment; measurements of value must also be in place. Many projects in no way tie in together with an organization's overall business strategy.

Lack of employee buy-in

A lack of a common understanding of what BPM is, leads to a low level of employee buy-in. The multiple perspectives often creates confusion and disagreement on the benefits, expectations, and deliverables of BPM; middle managers are also not excluded from this muddle. Experts believe that the way to remove this barrier is to obtain top management support, which in itself is also a challenging task. Indeed, quite often the bottleneck is at the top of the bottle and careful measures need to be taken to obtain the buy-in from these top level managers.

Lack of common mind share

One of the major problems is the lack of agreement on what BPM is and what it can provide. Some attribute this to its the broad terminology - BPM; what does it actually mean? Hence the key is in ensuring a consensus between all stakeholders.



"4,5,6 different places in the organization run BPM projects, so you have the problem of how to bring these local projects together in an overall process architecture."

II. Tactical Level

Lack of standards

Standards provide an agreed-upon basis on which software, hardware, and communication can be specified; they promote more consistent and complete BPM solutions, and enhances inter-department communication. Standards can also assist organizations in aligning BPM initiatives with essential compliance requirements. Furthermore, it is said that open standards will allow for better interaction between enterprise applications, which is conclusive to process management.

However, the *application* (as apposed to the creation) of standards is often an issue - when to use what standard and when to deviate from these is not an easy decision to make.

“Use them where they exist and they’re good, and then, depart from them if you have a good reason to. But don’t propagate a non-standard simply because it’s more convenient for you.”

Lack of BPM education

For successful BPM implementation, past research have emphasized the importance of having people skilled in the area of BPM, yet, the lack of it is still a perennial issue today. In fact, interviewees are of the opinion that universities should jump onto the BPM bandwagon, teach it, and research it - contrary to what is being done at top business schools.

Weaknesses in process specification

Process specification gives a broader perspective on the problem at hand, so that current processes can be analyzed and improved. Business process modeling is typically employed to achieve this purpose. However, some may over specify their processes and hence lose sight of the original intent of modeling. Experts suggest that process modeling be done at different abstraction levels.

Lack of methodology

There is a consensus among all the interviewees that there is no reliable *and* holistic methodology that guides BPM projects from start to end. Companies therefore focus too much on the details of a specific (and ad-hoc) methodology (e.g. Lean or 6-sigma), or try to find the "right" methodology. Yet, experts felt that none applied very well to overall business process improvement.



"From a methodology perspective... really, the biggest issue is that there are none. "

III. Operational Level

Insufficient tools to support process modeling

Process modeling helps stakeholders to visualise the business processes; it depicts the entities, activities, enablers and control flows, hence deconstructing organizational complexity for the employees. However, the problem lies with designing huge business processes. For example, drawing up "monster diagrams" does not reduce complexity; it *adds* visual complexity. It is also difficult to enforce a single type of modeling technique across the board. Certain techniques (e.g. BPMN, flowcharts, EPCs, Petri nets) may be well understood by technicians and process analysts, but the same cannot be said of other stakeholders.

Gaps between process design and execution

Tools for BPM are currently quite fragmented. Different vendors specialize in different aspects of the BPM life cycle, and often, due to a lack of standards, activities completed in one phase with do not translate well into the next step of the life cycle. This creates a large amount of rework and sometime loss of information in the process of translation.

One expert had a vision of a technological solution that (a) allows one to quickly construct process or information systems; (b) allows the flexible execution of these systems. If these requirements are not met then it is the view of the expert that "the whole technology will eventually fail."

Miscommunication of capabilities

Many users are not aware of the full functionality of the tool(s) that they have purchased. Tool vendors and consultants have been criticized for providing incomplete details of the software and/or misleading information.

"There's a lot of hype in the market... a lot of misinformation out there that large corporations are spreading in order to sell their product."



What BPM implementers should do



Recommendations from the experts:

- Ensure stakeholder buy-in, starting from top management

Some experts suggest selling BPM top-down via benchmarking and story telling. More importantly, implementers must show how it fits into the company's overall strategic goals.

Setting the right organizational culture is also important, and it is suggested that companies should adopt a three-way approach: (a) Talk about it and educate employees, "grassroots" style; (b) Stress the organizational aspects over the technical; (c) Leave people with the impression that they are still in control - the new BPM system merely makes their jobs easier.

- Employ BPM in a holistic manner

BPM must be seen as part of an important organizational strategy to be effective. This can be done with proper documentation of procedures and policies that show how organizational strategy, corporate mission, and supporting technologies fit together. Portfolios and strategy maps can be used to show the various processes in an organization, and how they relate to overall strategy. This also helps to align different BPM projects and communicates the value of BPM to various stakeholders.

- Get away from the one-size-fits-all mentality

Instead of insisting on a specific methodology, companies should borrow relevant ideas from different methodologies (e.g. 6-sigma, Lean), and adapt them to their own needs; there is no common model that meets all purposes. And as one interviewee suggested, "look at what the continuing improvement opportunities are; try to focus on what you need to focus on".

- Employ process modeling at different abstraction levels

The experts argued that process modeling needs to be done at different levels of abstraction so that different stakeholders (at different levels) are able to view and understand those models. It is also important to find the right modeling language for the right audience. BPMN, Petri nets, flowcharts of EPCs are modeling techniques well understood by technicians and process analysts, but the majority of the business world would not think in terms of "boxes" and "arrows". Some prefer to view the processes in a simplified and abstract manner, so even if these models are being transformed to include more technical details, the abstract view should still be available. ■

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