# The Skinny on BPEL

*By Jon Pyke*

The value of BPEL (Business Process Execution Language) is based on two fundamental attributes of the technology. First, because BPEL makes no assumptions about the environment in which a business process will execute, the technology is completely platform-neutral. The second fundamental attribute that makes BPEL valuable is the language's complete focus on process-oriented abstractions. Rather than mix these higher-level concerns with the more detailed constructs found in traditional programming languages such as C# and Java, BPEL allows a clean separation between defining the business process itself and implementing the finer-grained business objects (probably written in C#, Java, or a similar language) that the process invokes.

While a BPEL definition can specify a business process's interactions with services and other processes, it provides only a starting point for fully implementing that process. In fact the name "Business Process Execution Language" is somewhat misleading, since BPEL's primary value lies more in the interactions it defines than in its execution capabilities. Implementations of business processes depend on capabilities that are specific to a particular execution environment. Because of this, implementing complete business processes in a truly portable way is not one of BPEL's goals. Even if a vendor claims to provide a "BPEL execution engine," the reality is that proprietary platform-specific extensions are necessary to support full implementation of business processes. Even process implementations created for these BPEL-based systems are not easily portable to other execution environments.

With the release of BizTalk Server 2004, Microsoft claims that it is the first platform vendor to support BPEL in an integration server product. In this new version, customers can import a standard BPEL definition that defines the public aspects of a business process, then use the full BizTalk Server to implement and run that process. Having said that, given its role as an interchange technology, BPEL will be far more useful when other vendors also support it. In the short run, the initial adoption of BPEL will be slow until these implementations are completed. Yet because of its broad industry backing, other vendors will support the language in the near future. Once this occurs, BPEL is likely to play an important role in implementing business processes that span multiple execution environments.

A final thought on the BPEL initiative; How does it relate to the work of, say, the Workflow Management Coalition—and in particular the WfMC specification of WFXML (interface 4 of the reference model)?

As we said above, BPEL is a language to describe system interaction; WfXML, on the other hand, is a protocol for specific generic operations. A good analogy to use would be: when connecting telephones, you could wire the phones directly into the network, or you could provide a plug and socket that allows an ordinary user to plug the phone in.

WfXML is that plug for basic run-time connections. BPEL is a somewhat powerful way of describing all possible different types of connections you might want to make, but the end result is somewhat hard-wired together without the ability to change at run-time.

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# People Improve Processes, Not BPM Tools

*By Arthur J. Hedge III*

Business process management (BPM) software is a relative enterprise software newcomer. Like any other enterprise software product, BPM takes far more than technical expertise to make it work. Companies pursuing implementation of a BPM project face a number of challenges beyond the installation of the software. BPM has a large element of process change. Whenever you are asking people to change how they do their jobs, resistance to that change is a definite possibility and risk. With resistance from the user community, the IT people face a significant hurdle that may never be overcome.

This article focuses on the tale of two business process improvement efforts, one that stalled and one that succeeded and has led to the organization undertaking more projects. In neither case was technology the driving factor in the outcome of the project, the people were.

## The Bad

The first story is about a client, who will remain anonymous, that failed. They are a mid-size engineering consulting organization, with approximately 800 employees working on client projects at any time. They were considering implementing a new HR and recruiting software package to run their business, but the management team realized that they had business process problems that needed to be corrected

# Web Exclusives

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## Empowering ECM with Rules-Driven BPM

*By Setrag Khoshafian*
*Quick Link 30358*

Rules-driven business process management (BPM) systems focus on the business policies, practices, and processes of the extended enterprise while enterprise content management (ECM) deals primarily with the organization of unstructured content or data, in essence, the documents we access everyday. Constant change within an organization or mismanagement of resources can result in organizations being less agile and more unproductive, prohibiting them from reacting quickly to changing customer, market, and competitive conditions. In many of today's larger or recently merged organizations, the rich media content of cases might be managed by one or more ECM systems. Rules-driven BPM systems support rules and delineate processes for smart case management. When these two systems, BPMS and ECM, are used together they are complementary and the integration of the two is almost essential to leading businesses in industries from financial services and healthcare to insurance or government. A rules-driven BPM system augments and empowers ECM with declarative policies, smart processing, and intelligent exception management. Furthermore, a rules-driven BPM system provides a platform for the intelligent process integration of multiple ECM systems.

## Whither the Document

*By Bill Welty*
*Quick Link 30359*

No matter which industry a company may be in, there is a good chance that documents are at the heart of its business operations at virtually every level. Documents can take any number of forms, from office-supply receipts to complex regulatory filings, but they all serve to provide a record of a transaction or interaction that can be referenced at some point in the future. Without documents it would be nearly impossible for companies to function, and corporations have invested billions of dollars in document management systems to organize and retrieve relevant files in a timely manner. No matter how well these software packages function, however, most of them fail to address a fundamental aspect of modern business: the document in repetitive administrative processes plays a far different role than it does in knowledge work. It is only by understanding this distinction that organizations can develop effective ways to manage their paper and online documents.

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*AIIM E-DOC Magazine has published a number of articles on BPM in the past few years. Quick Links 30214, 29720, 29102, 28367, 27808, 27569, and 27528 provide access to a few of these articles.*

before the software was installed. They correctly recognized that "automating a bad process, just makes a bad process faster" is not an effective way to implement BPM tools. We went through and mapped out the existing business processes that were relevant to the project at hand. At that point it was clear to the entire team that there were significant issues with the existing operations, causing inefficiencies and customer service problems. The other conclusion that the team came to was that these issues were not going to be addressed by the new HR system. At this point everyone agreed that these operational deficiencies needed to be resolved. We began investigating using a BPM tool to redesign and automate the business processes. A demonstration version of one of the processes was developed and the user community was thrilled. But then the project took a turn for the worse. The team began to focus only on the one specific process that was demonstrated. The investment required to implement a BPM system would not be justified by correcting only this process. The management team could not reach a consensus on moving forward and the project stalled.

After looking back on the project, it became clear that the group that currently is responsible for providing the service from that first process would no longer be in control of that process if it was redesigned. So they began to frame the BPM project just in terms of the first process and not as the underlying solution architecture to run a significant portion of the business. The management team also likes to decide major issues by consensus and with one hold out, no one was willing to take the leap of faith and champion the implementation of a BPM solution. As a result, all of the operational issues still exist and they have halted the implementation of the new HR system.

### The Good

The second story is the success at Tetra, a Spectrum Brands Company that specializes in the pet supplies market. Originally the organization was looking to improve its procurement process, a common starting place for many organizations, utilizing a BPM tool, Metastorm's eWork. There was agreement that there was opportunity for

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improvement in this arena, but the return on investment was not clear and there was a level of skepticism on the part of the users that it had to be done. Yet, the visionaries within Tetra, including the IT department and the director of Finance, were not deterred. According to Charlie Lisanti from Tetra, it was very important that they get buy-in from the users. So rather than tackle the procurement process with the first BPM effort, which would affect a core piece of their business, they tackled a simpler process, the vacation request process. It was a low impact process with minimal downside business risk, yet it touched everyone, giving the entire organization exposure to Metastorm's BPM tool.

With the implementation of the first process, Tetra made a concerted effort to train the staff on the new application and how the BPM tool worked, increasing the overall understanding of how business processes are improved and automated. The implementation of a BPM strategy at Tetra has been a roaring success. Even though it took over a year for the team to roll out the purchase requisition process, they have rolled out 15 processes using eWork. Thanks to a concerted effort to include the users and a leap of faith at the beginning of the project, they are reaping the rewards of a BPM strategy.

## Steps to Successful BPM

Examining these two cases has led to the following conclusions on how to support the organization's people to make sure that the BPM effort is successful.

1. Constantly educate the user community; the concepts of business process management are almost always new to people.
2. Select an initial process that is low risk.
3. Select a process that benefits the project champion and does not negatively affect a group that is resistant to change.
4. Develop an ROI based on improving multiple processes.
5. Have a management team willing to take a leap of faith into a new way of doing business.

Remember to focus on the needs of the people as well as the needs of the business and you will lead your organization to new heights.

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