

Book Review

Business Process Management: The Third Wave

by Howard Smith and Peter Fingar

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Describing the emerging field of BPM (Business Process Management) in terms of both the promise and the reality is, to put it mildly, a difficult task. Yet that is exactly the task Howard Smith and Peter Fingar tackle in their recent book, *Business Process Management: The Third Wave*. The authors are obviously sold on the benefits to be obtained by adopting BPM principles and their enthusiasm shows in this first book on the topic.

Part of the problem with explaining BPM is the insistence by many on holding onto old ideas. BPM is not just another approach to Business Process Reengineering or workflow, and if one insists that it is, then its potential is lost. It becomes extremely difficult to avoid such definitions that would define away the novelty and so the challenges of BPM. Another difficulty arises from the fact that the field is only about five years old and far from mature, either in terms of business practice or supporting technology. That makes it difficult to describe case studies that carry convincing weight. Yet Smith and Fingar manage to avoid most of the confusions and present a vast and valuable array of business cases.

This book walks a fine line among a mine-field of vendors, each of whom are trying to define BPM to their own marketing advantage. The authors specifically chose to avoid any “how to” descriptions involving the technology, believing it to be premature. They take the point of view that BPM is changing and technology in support of BPM is also changing, seeing BPM as a continuum from earlier approaches such as BPR. This is a valid perspective, although I believe the truth is that BPM is so revolutionary that these predecessor business management techniques and the associated technologies are better viewed as false starts. The phrase BPM almost speaks for itself: it is about managing businesses from the perspective of process and therefore about managing business processes. Perhaps all that is lacking is an understanding that this is a highly agile and continuous (as contrasted with iterative or disruptive), approach compatible with a broad spectrum of business management styles.

Readers should not expect to find a methodology for either the business executive seeking to adopt BPM or the IT searching for an understanding of BPMS technology or standards. The book was written to be an introduction to the topic and to be readable by both business managers and IT professionals. Read from this perspective, it will be a fast and enjoyable book. *Business Process Management: The Third Wave* is, reportedly, being used as a source of benchmark criteria by some companies implementing BPM for the first time. In this regard, I particularly liked the section “New Rules for Process Managed

Enterprises.” If you read nothing else in this book, read that section with care and much subsequent thought.

Those of you who have followed my publications and seminars know that I’ve been involved in the development of BPM and especially BPMS from its inception. I’m hardly new to either BPM or BPMS, having designed, developed, and used the technology long before most people ever had a chance. Therefore I feel obliged to voice a few of my more serious disagreements with this book. First, I wish it were somewhat better structured. In particular, I became convinced of the value of BPM long before the authors stopped selling it to me, and I wasn’t forewarned that I wouldn’t find “how to” answers. Second, the authors keep saying that BPM is not about a new technology, but also repeatedly reference technology. In fact, a process language, BPM technology (BPMS), and theoretical foundations are “talked around” in three appendices (A, B, and C) without actually defining any of them. It was a horrible tease. Finally, I disagree with the authors’ perspective on the history of BPM and BPMS, some key concepts having occurred earlier than stated, others later, and the critical influence of some being overlooked altogether. My sense of integrity having thus been satisfied, buy and read and talk about this book!

David McGoveran
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