The Four Myths of Business-IT Collaboration in BPMS

1. The Expectations for Business-IT Collaboration

In the bad old days before the modern crop of model-driven business process management systems (BPMS), the business wrote requirements and tossed them over the wall to IT, and IT went away for months – or years – and developed a workflow system that integrated with other line of business systems. Like other systems development, there wasn’t a lot of collaboration between business and IT, just a one-way flow of written requirements and change requests.

Any BPMS vendor today will tell you that one of the keys to business agility is model-driven development. In other words, you create a graphical process model that generates an executable process without writing code. Model-driven development does allow you to have a much more agile implementation, both in the upper-case and lower-case meanings of Agile: since builds of the process happen interactively, you can prototype your process in a matter of hours or days, then gradually fill in the rest of the functionality. Changes to the process flow can be made quickly in the graphical environment, and a BPMS provides a composite development environment for plugging in web services that you’ve built in your SOA initiatives.

The vendors will also tell you, however, that business users are going to create and maintain their own executable process models with no help from IT. In reality, that doesn’t happen very often, unless you’re doing only simple processes that have mostly human-facing steps, and even that is dependent on having a user interface generator that a business user can work with easily, too. Most vendors know that’s not realistic, but they do envision a mostly agile process with business analysts and IT working together to create the process models. In many cases, the expectation is that IT is going to use the process modeling software directly, while the business looks on and approves the results in near real-time. The vendors provide tools with a shared model and different perspectives onto the model for business and IT that expose different
information, but usually the business analyst is expected to do at most the graphical model drawing, then IT takes over.

This is not a bad situation, since it still provides a lot of agility, especially if the business analysts do the graphical process modeling in their view of the shared model, and work back and forth with IT to get the final result. Unfortunately, in many implementations, that’s not what happens. Some organizations have so institutionalized a waterfall development model as part of a standardized framework that this just isn’t possible. Instead, business users or subject matter experts tell their story to business analysts, who write requirements and pass them along to IT. Although the requirements will include some sort of process model, it’s usually not in a form that can be directly implemented in a BPMS, but includes all sorts of non-standard process flow notation that is made up by business analysts and process engineering groups. And in situations where use cases are used, there’s often not a match between the process flows and the use cases in the requirements.

IT is left with the task of translating the non-executable process model to an executable process model, then overlaying and matching the use cases and other requirements to the flow. Even though a model-driven development environment is used, it’s only used within IT like any other software development tool: it’s just a compiler with a pretty front end. All the agility benefits that could come from involving the business in process modeling are gone.

2. Myth #1: Business Users WILL Create Executable Processes

What, then, are the myths about how business-IT collaboration works on BPM implementation projects, and what’s the reality?

First of all is the myth that business users will create their own executable processes.

In reality, most business users are busy doing their job, and their job performance is measured on how well they do the job that they were hired to do, not on their involvement in creating process models. There are exceptions to this, especially at
higher levels within an organization, but most business users don’t have the time to
design and build their own processes.

In many cases, business users also lack knowledge that’s required to model the
business processes: they know their part of the process, but not how it works from
end to end. And although they know some of the pain points in the current process,
they may lack the analytical skills required to determine the problem areas in the
process and how to fix them: process analysis and improvement are learned skills, not
innate knowledge gained by performing one of the steps in the process.

3. **Myth #2: Business Users/Analysts CAN Create Executable
   Processes**

The second myth follows on from the skills issue of the first myth, but is more about
technical understanding. Even if you have a business analyst who has the analytical
skills to model the future-state process, there are implementation complexities.
Consider a step in the process that calls a web service, which is standard functionality
in any BPMS. The issue is not how easy it is to hook up the inputs and outputs of that
web service to your process instance parameters; it’s having some understanding of
the world of web services that are available to be called, and the impact and costs of
calling any particular one on the systems that are invoked by it. This is also true for
any direct API and database calls that might be done from steps in the process.

At some point, someone needs to cast a technical eye over a process model and
determine the best way to get that information from other systems. By all means, if a
business analyst – or even a business user – has process improvement and modeling
training, then let them model the processes. But in all but the simplest models that
include only human-facing steps, IT is going to have to be involved to understand the
integration issues.

4. **Myth #3: Business Users/Analysts WANT TO Create Executable
   Processes**

In many large organizations, there’s a culture that places the responsibility for system
functionality squarely on the shoulders of IT. The business writes requirements, but
there’s usually such time delay between requirements and implementation, plus sufficient ambiguity to the requirements, that whatever is implemented never quite meets the business requirements. Inevitably, the business ends up complaining about how IT can’t give them what they want, while IT complains about the low quality of the requirements provided.

Agile model-driven development can put more development tools into the hands of business by providing simpler, graphical tools to perform some, if not all, of the process application development. Although business management is often excited about the concept of taking on their own process development, the business analysts and other business-side participants may not share their enthusiasm. First of all, it means learning how to create properly-formed models, and how to use the BPM tool to create those models. More importantly, however, it means that mission-critical business processes become end-user computing, and many people on the business team aren’t ready to take on that level of responsibility.

5. **Myth #4: IT WANTS Business Users/Analysts to Create Executable Processes**

The first three myths have focused on the abilities, or inabilities, of the business participants. But the lack of collaboration between business and IT can rarely be blamed on only one side.

The last myth is about IT’s attitude towards business, and that they want the business to be creating their own executable process applications.

In reality, technical knowledge sometimes breeds arrogance towards those without that knowledge: IT thinks that the business analysts and business users don’t have the analytical skills that are required for doing proper process modeling, much less wiring up web services to processes. In some cases, unfortunately, they’re right: organizations sometimes promote business users directly to business analysts without providing any training in analytical or process improvement skills. However, there’s many organizations that use only trained business analysts and process engineers,
and they are fully capable of doing the business side of process modeling in a BPM system.

6. What’s The Solution?

What’s the solution to enabling business-IT collaboration and creating more agile business processes? There are a few aspects to this, the first of which is having a baseline functionality in your BPMS that allows for a shared model between business and IT, with different views, or perspectives, showing different information to each. That means that a business analyst can create the first version of a process, then IT can perform some technical enhancements, then the business analyst can come back and make further changes: it’s all in one model, although the technical details are hidden to the business side.

There also needs to be some way to enable discussion around the required functionality, so that the requirements can be at least partly specified by the business analyst directly at each step in the process flow, or in a closely-integrated collaboration tool. Some BPM products offer this sort of in-system collaboration during process design, but many don’t and you’ll need to use something else for collaboration.

This type of business-IT collaboration during process design isn’t just about the tools, though, it’s about both business and IT actually using the tools the way that they were designed to be used:

- Business analysts create process models in their view of the modeling tool first, before writing requirements, and step through the executable process with the business users and stakeholders to get signoff on the process. There are only rough user interfaces and no services calls, but they’re able to validate the process very early in the project.
- Then, IT can come in and wire up web services, databases and other external systems, and possibly do some more sophisticated user interface design.
Business analysts, who have a much better understanding of the business, control the overall form of the process model, while IT, which has a much better understanding of the integrating technologies, makes sure that all the pieces fit together.

In many organizations, there needs to be cultural changes in order to make this happen:

- A commitment by the business, from the management down to the users and the business analysts, to participate fully in the process design process.
- IT must allow the business do this, since often they have control of the tools.
- The IT organization must discard any existing waterfall development methodologies to allow for lightweight model-driven development.

Model-driven development is a necessity for business agility, and model-driven development requires business-IT collaboration.

7. Biography

Sandy Kemsley is an independent analyst, application architect and blogger, specializing in business process management and Enterprise 2.0. During her career of more than 20 years, she has started and run successful product and service companies, including a desktop workflow and document management product company and a 40-person services firm implementing BPM and e-commerce solutions, and held the position of BPM evangelist for a major BPM vendor.

Currently, she practices as a BPM industry analyst and architect, performing engagements for end-user organizations and BPM vendors. She writes the popular “Column 2” BPM blog at www.column2.com, is a contributing author on other business and social media-related blogs, and is a featured speaker on BPM and its impact on business.