What's the Difference Between Workflow and BPM?

Many readers have asked us to make a clear distinction between workflow and BPM. While workflow is concerned with application-specific sequencing of activities via predefined instruction sets, BPM is concerned with execution and management of processes defined independently of any single app. This month's experts explain.

by Penny Lunt

We've written about the differences between workflow and business process management before, yet readers are still confused and have asked for a clearer distinction. Here's what the pros say.

Nathaniel Palmer, Vice President & Chief Analyst, Delphi Group, Bosto

While often treated synonymously, BPM and workflow are, in fact, two distinct and separate entities whose differences are more than academic.

Workflow is concerned with the application-specific sequencing of activities via predefined instruction sets, involving either or both automated procedures (software-based) and manual activities (people work).

BPM is concerned with the definition, execution and management of business processes defined independently of any single application. BPM is a superset of workflow, further differentiated by the ability to coordinate activities across multiple applications with fine grain control.

Integration between workflow systems and externalities are comparatively limited, often only allowing the retrieval of documents or data variables, and only as a pass-through with no awareness of content.

BPM systems allow both the capture and introspection of external documents and data, presenting a closed-loop process for validating the integrity of transactions, data and content, as well as the initiation of compensating activities when necessary. BPM processes separate execution instructions from process flows; thus, routing can be tied to process outcomes and milestones. As workflow
processes are tied to single applications, process flow is hardwired and does accommodate alternative means for reaching the same task or goal.

Distilled into single-word definitions, workflow is about repetition and BPM is about coordination (also automation and orchestration, respectively).

Jim Sinur, Vice President, Gartner, Stamford, CT

Business process management (BPM) contains the flow of work (logical workflow), among other characteristics, so many folks are confused why BPM and workflow are not the same. Workflow implies a specific market that emerged in the mid-nineties that also contained the flow of work; however it mostly followed electronic forms as they traveled through an organization. The workflow products of that era had weak flow design functionality, poor scalability and were isolated. Despite these limitations, there were some wonderful success stories. This was the physical workflow market, not to be confused with the need for the flow of work.

BPM is supercharged workflow that has sophisticated flow design through process modeling and analysis. BPM supports hyper volumes of work and numbers of users with sophisticated event-state engines for long-running business events and transactions. It is user friendly, "insanely open," has smart agility features supported by rules engines and utilizes commodity integration technologies. Finally, BPM links to legacy composite components and applications, orchestrates Web services, measures business activity and optimizes processes for better business result and work throughput. As you can see, BPM is much different from the workflow of old, but still does help work flow through businesses at a global and local level.

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As the case of Enron and Arthur Andersen proved, people and companies can be destroyed by mismanagement of documents. "Many persons who work for organizations labor under the misapprehension that, unless and until they receive a subpoena, they can destroy a document with impunity," the authors of Electronic Records Retention note. "Such a supposition is legally invalid."

The authors, David Stephens and Roderick Wallace, explain what mistakes Andersen employees made and several of the laws that impact records, such as the E-Sign Act, IRS Revenue Procedure 98-25, the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. An appendix at the back of the book provides a synopsis of national records management laws.

Sample records management policies and procedures, best practices, case studies and solid advice abound in this guide to records retention. Special chapters focus on the preservation of Web pages, long-term data retention, e-mail retention and
software solutions to records management problems. This should be a helpful book to anyone charged with responsibility for corporate compliance when it comes to record keeping.

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