

BPMN and RADs—The Way Forward

Introduction

The BPM community is currently debating the standardization of graphical business process notation—in particular, whether an alternative notation to BPMN, one based on Role Activity Theory, is required to cater for collaborative human work. See, for example, the recent exchange on bptrends.com, concluded in “BPM, Anyone?” (<http://tinyurl.com/9aj7a>). This paper summarizes the issues, and outlines a practical way forward for business process notation.

Two notations are needed

The key point emerging from the recent public debate is that BPMN and the formulation of RADs used in Human Interaction Management (HIM) are notations that address essentially different problems. The situation is just confused by there being some areas of overlap. A parallel would be **ontologies** (OWL, from W3C) and **topic maps** (XTM, from OASIS/ISO) in knowledge management. Ontologies currently have more mainstream awareness, yet both are needed to solve certain business problems. For example, in my own consultancy work with UK government scientists, both ontologies and topic maps are used at different points of a processing pipeline in order to meet their knowledge management requirements.

Similarly, there will always be business problems for which you need both BPMN and RADs. In fact, since most organizations operate via a mixture of *transactional* and *tacit* interactions—to use terminology coined by McKinsey—this is likely to be the norm rather than the exception.

Further, the fundamental purposes of the two notations are different, so it would not be sensible to try and extend BPMN with concepts from RADs. Rather, an approach similar to that of the UML is appropriate—using different diagramming techniques for different aspects of a business problem. Taking this route will result in notations that are:

- Complete—covering the whole of a specific domain;
- Formally sound—not trying to bite off more than they can chew; and
- Lightweight—quick to learn, simple to adopt, and easy to understand.

As with the UML for software design, what we need is not one sole process notation, but a common interchange format for process notations—and we have one already, thanks to OMG MOF. Ultimately, anything that can be expressed in XMI can be manipulated by the same tools, so there are no practical barriers to an enterprise using both BPMN and RADs. BPMN can be expressed in XMI, and RADs are stored natively in XMI format (both process semantics and diagram layout), so the technology for this is already in place.

What we must avoid

By contrast, there are deep technical problems associated with trying to extend BPMN to include the powerful formulation of RADs required to deal with collaborative human work (the formulation incorporated in HIM). As explained in a recent [bptrends.com](http://tinyurl.com/b52xr) article, “Going to sea in a sieve” (<http://tinyurl.com/b52xr>), the underlying notational paradigms are fundamentally different, since BPMN is founded on classical automata theory and HIM-type RADs are not. Hence, attempting to introduce HIM-type RAD concepts into BPMN would break its logical foundations and give rise to all sorts of implementation problems.

It *would* be possible to try and extend BPMN with notational elements from the original IPSE2.5 formulation of RADs, as revisited in Martyn Ould’s recent work on the **Riva** methodology. Like BPMN, this formulation of RAD notation is based on an automata paradigm. However, such a route would add nothing except confusion to BPMN—Ould himself makes it quite clear that BPMN can *already* express anything you can do with his use of RAD notation. Further, such an effort would still leave BPMN unable to cater for collaborative human work processes, so it would even be dangerous. People trying to model such processes might end up wasting time trying to use BPMN for this purpose, before being forced to turn in the end to a more powerful formulation of RADs—and becoming disillusioned with BPMN in the process.

Conclusion

The way forward that we need is for all business processes to be:

- Expressed in a suitable notation—BPMN or HIM-type RADs, as appropriate
- Stored in the same repository;
- Manipulated by the same tools; and
- Instantiated by one another as and when required.

There is nothing to prevent this coming to fruition, since the necessary technology is already mostly in place. It is a simple, realistic and practical way forward for the BP community.

Author Bio

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