

Business Friendly BPMN

by Adrian Reed

Abstract

BPMN is a rich, well-established and comprehensive modeling approach that helps organizations model their business processes. It is fast becoming a 'de-facto' standard in many organizations, with the advantage that many tools and modeling packages support BPMN. It also allows precise communication of process matters to take place between teams, suppliers and a whole range of stakeholder groups.

However, it has often been said that BPMN can appear complex. In fact, print off a detailed, fully-executable BPMN diagram (complete with event-based gateways, exception flows and numerous types of intermediate events) and business stakeholders might quite understandably frown and say the diagram as 'too technical'. If they have never seen a BPMN diagram before they might struggle to know where to start, and certainly won't yet appreciate the nuanced meaning of the different types of symbol. Left unaddressed this can lead to frustration and even division—in a worst case scenario we might find that teams develop their own versions of process diagrams in other notations, since they never really warm to BPMN.

It can be tempting to blame BPMN in these circumstances, after all it is the BPMN diagrams that are being rejected! Yet it is worth reflecting on whether the modeling approach itself is really to blame. After all some BPMN diagrams are technical—there are 'views' on an underlying BPMN model that are more technical (or at the very least more detailed) than others. But does this mean we should abandon BPMN altogether?

An Analogy: The English Language

It is perhaps worth drawing a parallel before answering this question. Another way of conveying information is with written English. An author can make an English description of a situation extremely detailed and convey a lot of complexity, should they wish to do so. Imagine reading a fifty page medical research paper on an experimental drug that might cure the common cold. Would you understand every nuance of it? I suspect I'd understand very little of it! With diligent research and support we could eventually understand it—yet, I suspect we would all find a half-page summary more easily accessible. And if we only need to have a summary appreciation, why read the fifty pages? Perhaps the half-page summary provides all the information we need, just as a fifty page technical paper provides the information that a medical practitioner needs... and if we ever need more information, we can speak to the relevant expert (or, if we're brave, 'zoom down' to the fifty page version).

The same principle holds true with BPMN. Often when people complain that a diagram is 'too complex' or 'too technical', they are really saying that either:

- a) They have been presented with a diagram articulated in notation that they haven't been briefed on

And/or

- b) The diagram presents more detail than is appropriate for them

Sometimes both apply—that is fatal. Drawing on our previous analogy, it is as if they wanted a half page summary, and we've sent them the fifty page version in Swahili! Arguably this is not a deficiency in the modeling approach or the notation itself; it is the application that has caused problems.

Think "Stakeholder First"

The key to creating business friendly BPMN is to think about the audience—our stakeholders—first. A single underlying BPMN model can have multiple 'views'—we could (for example) show a very high-level view to an executive stakeholder (abstracting away the complexity). An operational stakeholder might need to see the detail of every single activity. Tailoring the level of abstraction for each stakeholder group will ensure that we show them just the right amount of detail.

It is also worth considering briefing or training stakeholders. Whilst it is normal for business and process analysts to learn BPMN, it is also crucial that those reviewing and referring to the models also understand the notation used. Running internal 'lunch and learn' sessions can be a useful way to start the conversation, more interested stakeholders might benefit from a formal training or e-learning course.

In any case, considering our stakeholders needs first, and producing artefacts that are relevant to them, will be an important factor in helping ensure that our process analysis, management and improvement initiatives are successful.

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