



The Beauty of the BPMN Sub-Process

by Adrian Reed

Large BPMN diagrams can get ‘busy’ very quickly. In this article, we discuss the usefulness of collapsed sub-processes, and explain how they can be used to create different ‘views’ on a process by abstracting detail away.

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Part of the art of accurately modelling a set of organizational processes is deciding how to deal with complexity. Even the seemingly ‘simplest’ of processes often start to look unexpectedly complex when they are examined in detail.

If we were examining the payroll process we might assume that ‘issue payslip’ is a simple task—but when we examine it further, we might find that how the payslip is issued depends on whether the staff member is working on-site, working elsewhere, on sick leave, on maternity leave and so forth. It might lead to different actors being involved (for example, if the staff member is working on-site, perhaps they receive an electronic notification via e-mail. If they are on leave perhaps it is printed and sent in the mail).

Dealing with this complexity can be a challenge. If we try to cram everything on to a single diagram, it is likely that it will very quickly become unreadable to all but the most patient. I suspect many of us have seen process models that span onto page after page, and keeping track of the various pathways is very difficult indeed.

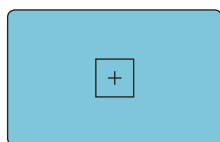
In a previous article, I discussed [Separating Business Rules From Process](#), this is one very practical way of keeping our process models concise. However, there will be times when the process itself is necessarily complex—and even when we separate out the rules, we may

find that any diagrams we create are too ‘busy’ to engage stakeholders.

The Power of the Sub Process

Just about every process modelling approach—including Business Process Model & Notation (BPMN)—includes the concept of a ‘sub-process’. A sub-process can typically be ‘collapsed’ (to hide the detail) or ‘expanded’ (to show detail). When a sub-process is collapsed it indicates to the reader that there is more detail available—but that the detail isn’t shown at the moment.

An example of a collapsed sub-process, shown in BPMN notation is shown below:



It is easy to imagine how elements like this can be used to ‘abstract away’ detail that particular stakeholders don’t need to see. An executive stakeholder examining the ‘run payroll’ process might not be interested in the previously mentioned complexity around issuing payslips, and therefore a collapsed sub-process simply labelled ‘issue payslips’ could be included. Of course, if she or he did want to see the detail, they will be reassured that the detail does exist.

Depending on the tool used they may be able to ‘click’ through to see the level of detail below.

This ability to zoom out and zoom in enables us to cultivate conversations with stakeholders throughout the business. We can serve up a high-level overview of a process to

those at the very top of the organization, to give them confidence over the broad context and flow. We can then zoom in to particular areas of detail when liaising with operational stakeholders who have the detailed knowledge. This enables us to address process improvement at both a micro and macro level—we can ask big questions (‘is the end-to-end flow efficient’) as well as detailed questions (‘are we over-processing or over-complicating the detailed steps’).

We can look for opportunities to improve, streamline and simplify the process.

In summary, sub-processes help us abstract away the detail and create ‘views’ of the process that different stakeholders will find useful. They can help foster a shared understanding whilst also helping to facilitate process improvement conversations at a micro and macro level.

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