

Process Beginnings: Then and Now

IMERGE Consulting, Inc

Jim Minihan

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jm@imergeconsult.com

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In years past, interest in workflow or business process management applications often was sparked within an organization that "felt" they needed to get involved with this class of application but were not sure where to start. To find a candidate for that first project, one clue was to look for areas where logbooks or their electronic equivalent were kept — an effective way to identify processes important enough to track. Some organizations put extreme amounts of effort and cost in staying in control of their processes. Others put in very little. As for the depth and breadth of their problems, they had no idea. Of course, as document imaging came along and evidence of work began to hide in the machine, things would become impossible.

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In these early days of workflow and BPM, it was generally the intersection of value and volume that determined the need for an application to gain control over the process. You could have a huge volume of transactions that creates your need for management, similar to the way a manufacturer needs to control their production line, or you could have only a few items of high value. Value and volume could be used to identify the candidates for process control applications, but how much you were prepared to spend to get a handle on the problem was always the real metric.

Process Control in the Modern Environment

Today, it is almost taken for granted that some form of process control is needed in any number of systems across the enterprise. The cost of the tools has plummeted, and the diversity in which we interact with each other has changed. This has morphed our approach to implementation of process control applications. Where before, we looked at the beginning through the end of a process in a given (transaction) area of the enterprise so that we could define a workflow project, today, we look for all the possible beginnings and endings across an array of independent line of business applications.

More recently, email has become an important new portal through which business processes can be initiated. What is compelling about the email-submitted transaction is the potential for interaction between the submitter and processor. In many processes, the first step is to determine whether or not the item of work is complete enough to take through to a final disposition. Paper-submitted or web-submitted transactions don't provide for the same level of interactivity. A customer-initiated transaction by email, even if it is a forms-based work object they send you, is like opening up a direct line of communication that can be used throughout the process and for ancillary transactions. In fact, a recent project I was involved with did just that by using email-submitted applications from the customer. In this case, a fairly complex process was involved that would require a number of iterations with the customer. Once started, the system dynamically generated a new email response address that was used as an individualized case address for that customer. During the work process, any time additional information was needed or provided, the customer responded to "case1234@anewcorp.com." Rather than having to send responses to a caseworker that would then have to match the information to a case folder, the case folder was updated automatically and the process management application seeing this new content could automatically update the status of the case and generate a new status.

With the mechanisms of communication becoming more diverse, how we control the processes they can launch need to be equally diverse. I expect it won't be long before we start launching workflows based on instant messaging, blog participation and perhaps even social networking site comments.

