

What's New in BPM

IMERGE Consulting, Inc

Jim Minihan

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jm@imergeconsult.com

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www.imergeconsult.com

Everyone has a list of things they would like to do but never get around to doing them. One of mine has been to collect the market size projections (for any given product segment) of some of the “research” firms and then, years later, track the actuals to what was projected. I have a feeling that retrospective view would make you wonder about the next forecast.

Another has been to follow the “what's new in...” proclamations for products in the BPM and Workflow space from the software manufacturers. Frequently, as I get calls from these companies that want to pitch me on their updates, I get that feeling of déjà vu, all over again as Yogi Berra put it.

I think it helps to understand the variations of the “what's new” theme so that focus can be spent on the good or at least interesting stuff and the rest can be noted and written off as marketing hype. Marketers have an obligation to get visibility for their products and announcements of “new” is trade craft 101 for them. As a product market matures and gets crowded, marketers have to make some noise to draw attention. The BPM space is so crowded now that even niches are being segmented along platform lines, business lines, process types and on and on. Even when there is nothing to say, an announcement is needed to combat the other guys announcement.

For a lot of products, the new disclosure sounds familiar simply because they have said it before but this time it is true. Since this is the October column we'll use the spooky example of a products evolving newness. As a metaphor (and with due credit to the creator) let's look at the marketing evolution of a Person. When you look at it retrospectively, you can see the fleshing out of what the product was supposed to have been all along. It goes something like this; “Announcing the completely new Person, an entirely new product.” It walks and talks and does terrific things. After you have had one for awhile, looking back you realize you had a skeleton. You recall the press release that announced a whole new set of features (you thought you had) which turned out to be some muscles and then, sometime later, organs and with yet another media blitz, “the all new Person V3” that one was the one with some skin...then some hair. Finally, around V10 a brain came along and Person actually did what you expected it was supposed to do all along. Of course, by now the marketers will claim this is a mature product with a long history and market leadership.

There are a lot of flavors of “new”. There is the truly substantive new, an example in BPM would be the addition of process simulation. This is a function that no product came with originally and once one had it, every other product was in a race to add it. Then there is the “sizzle without the steak” new. Here is where I would put the current fanfare about delivery of alerts to your mobile device.

Some people will find something new that is meaningful to them, but which for others interested in the same product elicits a big yawn. The big blitz about support for .NET or BPEL or Exclipse, might get your software team jazzed, but hardly cause a stir with the business users. Give that same business user an announcement about the all new dashboards and they might yawn yet again...until it gets installed and they say "that's cool" as your software team thinks, "sometimes its the little things."

Taking the exact same product and putting it on a different platform will often be cause for trumpets and the red carpet. Since many BPM products inherently can manage multiple process threads, a current trend is to offer the product in a Software as a Service (SaaS) environment. This is "not new squared" for anyone in the business long enough to remember the time share days of about thirty years ago. In this case, both the product and the delivery mechanism are not new, except perhaps to each other. So everything old can be new again...and yes, I must confess, that picture in the column header should be showing more gray than it does. Maybe I can be new again with an updated picture.