

Business process management (BPM) and data governance (DG) - strange bedfellows?

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I'm always interested in how current concepts and trends tend to define themselves among more mature concepts, often sacrificing shared goals and methods on the altar of differentiation. Rather than drawing parallels as a means of accelerating understanding and adoption of the newer concept, it seems as if comparative analysis to tried-and-true concepts is an undesired crutch until the newer concept is vetted and accepted within the industry of its own right.

Such is the case with the newer concept of data governance (DG) and the tried-and-true principles and methods of business process management (BPM): it is left to practicing schmoees like us to break down the terminology to the core concepts and figure out just what is, in fact, complementary versus unique.

There has been so much buzz around data governance, but many of my clients have difficulty envisioning what it means to their business organization. Can leveraging some more mature concepts and methods help to create a breakthrough? I'll explore this in the paragraphs to follow, but first: some definitions.

BPM: Method of efficiently aligning an organization with the needs of its customers, often using technology to help create flexible, integrated and continuously improving processes. It is often idealized as the bridge between the business functions and IT systems, striving to bring the power of IT to the users.

Data governance: Data governance is the specification of decision rights and an accountability framework to encourage desirable behavior in the authoring, storage, enrichment, publishing, consumption and maintenance of master data. (Gartner Group, Data Governance Strategic Panel, 9/07)

Despite all that has been written, printed, presented and theorized regarding data governance, it still is a concept best understood after its implementation, not prior. Like many other concepts, its definition is somewhat relative from one environment to another, and there are plenty of opinions trying to convince you that you're doing it all wrong. This doesn't promote a lot of confidence in the intrepid data governance sponsor trying to win support from his or her peers.

Four basic challenges have dominated my experience with data governance projects:

- Inability to envision the DG processes and how they fit into the existing business processes and organization;
- Uncertainty as to the amount of change and impact to existing personnel roles and responsibilities;
- Governing a DG design that is dependent upon human and system processes that span technology and business functional silos, managed by good intention; and
- Inability to consistently and accurately measure the process metrics as proof of payback.

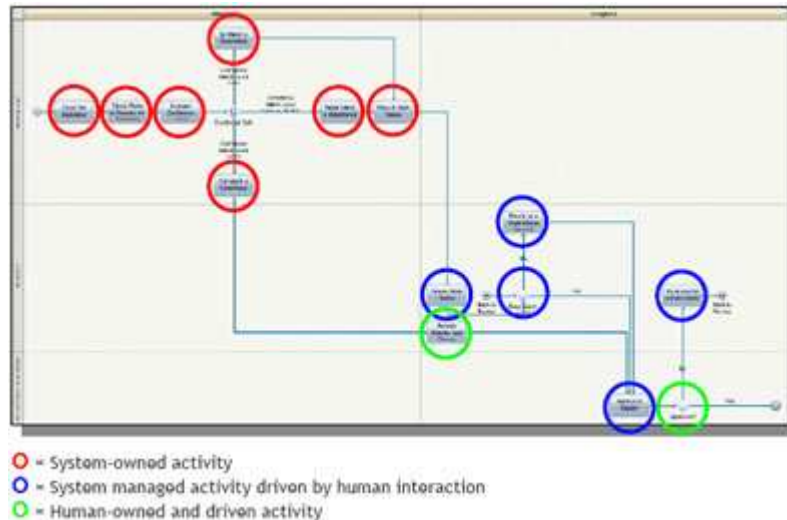
These challenges can be addressed conceptually with DG program stakeholders as the business case is built, but this selling process requires a lot of time from the sponsor group as well as flexible imaginations from the stakeholder audience to envision the solutions. Time and changing "yeah, but..." interactions with needed stakeholders are the enemy of any fledgling DG initiative. There has to be a more effective way to show data governance in action and address the four key challenges quickly and in unison to compel stakeholders to share the vision, understand what's to be invested and gained, and get on board.

Wouldn't this be an opportunity for horizontal expansion of functionality by some key application vendors of data governance and stewardship functionality? Perhaps, but it seems that the DG application vendor space is busy at present expanding depth of dimensionality more so than expanding horizontally, re: cross-functional and cross-technology integration. Those that are application-centric are rather process-myopic towards only the stewardship processes needed within their domain, while those that favor the mindset of a data governance and integration toolkit don't provide enough out of the box to address our four key challenges effectively.

The key may be to look at your BPM solution. Chances are your company already has one. Working on a project with several colleagues, we realized that a quick review of the functions and features that these solutions bring to bear read like a checklist of the common challenges facing DG:

- Process visualization features to understand flow, roles, systems interactions, decision points, business rules and remediation steps: Check!
- "You are here" process context to users unfamiliar with the systems used for enterprise data quality, standardization, and storage, with ability to see into process events without having technical user skills: Check!
- Scenario modeling to predict system and human workload and points of process constraint: Check!
- DG process automation, workflow and exception alerting across heterogeneous systems and functional DG landscape: Check!
- Ability to measure process key performance indicators: Check!

Let's illustrate with a simple example of a standard data matching and review process – one of many possible flows within the scope of an enterprise DG program:



As you can see from this process example, a number of "actors" are involved, spanning multiple systems. Even in this simple example, you can see the relative complexity of system behaviors, human-to-system commands and human-to-human interactions and responses. It is within this landscape that, among other challenges:

- The function and scope of applications are often misunderstood;
- Process life cycle context is lost and performance measurement is very compartmentalized, if it exists at all;
- Business rules configured in systems are invisible to interested parties, and therefore no longer understood.

I see compelling value in creating a living portal to provide context to different DG processes and sub-processes and simulating systems and human performance thresholds, while concurrently enabling a capability for process automation and measurement.

So what's holding you back? Well, the issue is commonly one of content. The BPM suite contains all the functionality needed once the process content is there. However, BPM vendors (so far) aren't in the process of defining enterprise data governance process content for their solutions. Also, there are no accepted industry models from which to work backward. Until the DG space matures and there is more industry standard process material available, the choices are to build the content yourself as a preliminary program discovery exercise, or engage a data governance specialist who can provide a solid nucleus of processes to kick-start your program.

One last thought: What if you don't already have a BPM solution? My experience tells me that this may actually be two opportunities rolled into one. An internal opportunity exists in that there are likely other peers in your company who have sized up BPM suites for their own purposes in the past, but simply couldn't define the breadth of value proposition to get the commitment from the corner office. DG use may be the chance to revitalize that enterprise value assessment. You may also find

data governance specialists that have brokered agreements with vendors as a means of bringing a total solution to the market, minus the up-front site license fees.

An external opportunity exists for the BPM vendors: Enterprise data governance applications may be the targeted value proposition that will thaw accounts previously frozen from consideration. Further, it may deepen the relevance of the BPM solution in accounts where maintenance is waning due to the solution having been married to a mature program initiative.

Often it seems that calculation of the opportunity for failure precedes calculation of the opportunity for early adoption of a new concept. I hope that leveraging proven technology enablers in your pursuit of more effective enterprise data governance will accelerate your program and increase its support and effectiveness. I also await the expansion of data governance process management ability across the vendor landscape.

About the Author

Matt Wienke has designed and implemented BI, MDM, EIM, and data governance solutions for more than fifteen years. He is an active speaker and passionate participant in the data management community, and currently serves on the Central Ohio Data Management Association board as President. He is a Partner with Attevo, Inc. and can be reached at mwienke@attevo.com.

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