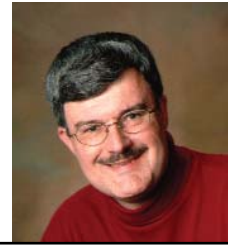


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The Ethics of Business Process Management

Whenever someone mentions the ethics of anything dealing with IT, professionals usually tune out and turn away. This isn't because they are unconcerned about these issues; it's because these issues are often complex

and confusing, defying simple resolution.

Business Process Management (BPM) has received much attention lately. However, there has been no discussion of the ethical issues emerging from the application of this new technology. Are there no such issues? Is it an ethically free technology? If so, that would be a first!

Let's define BPM as the smart redesign and execution of business processes resulting in better efficiency. The aspect of "smart" usually implies we are leveraging detailed and timely data for insights into our business operations. The aspect of "efficiency" usually implies we are cutting costs by reducing human involvement in these processes.

A concise way to describe IT ethical issues was outlined in the article, "Four Ethical Issues of the Information Age," which appeared in the March 1986 issue of *Management Information Systems Quarterly*. This article examined the following four categories:

- **Privacy:** personal identification and confidentiality
- **Accuracy:** data quality and liability
- **Property:** ownership and control
- **Accessibility:** haves and have-nots.

The privacy issues of BPM can involve the release of personal information of a customer to an employee or of an employee to management. In the first case, the issue is the extent of information required to serve the customer, beyond which may be an intrusion into their privacy. For example, consider a department store that collects detailed information on the personal habits and preferences of teenage customers. Is this information released to a clerk who is assisting this customer, even though the clerk may be a peer? Likewise, to what extent does the system monitor the personal activities of employees, such as recording toilet breaks? Dealing with privacy issues requires a proper privacy policy, including a notice of what and how data about a person is being used, a choice to opt-in or opt-out, and a review of one's data for correction. Does your BPM system support such a policy?

On the other hand, a properly designed BPM system has the potential to safeguard privacy. Decision rules could utilize personal data without revealing the data to the persons involved. For example, an insurance underwriting process could utilize sensitive data about credit history without displaying the details to the employee involved. Likewise, the flip side of privacy is security. Without security, any privacy policy is ineffective, implying negligence by the company maintaining the personal data.

The accuracy issues of BPM can involve the quality of the data used in complex decision rules. Getting the data correctly about your customers is always important. With BPM, it's more important to correctly match primary key values on entities. For example, nothing frustrates customers more than when they are confused with another customer. In addition, identity thief is confounding this matching process.

Accuracy issues go beyond increasing data quality. The analytical application adds another layer that may compromise the integrity of the BPM system. We may have "garbage in, garbage out" produced by complex analytics that may be invalid in certain situations.

The property issues of BPM involve the intellectual property rights of the process definition. In other words, who owns

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the process? Can Amazon have patent rights to a "one-click" process that prohibits other e-commerce vendors from implementing a simplified checkout process?

The accessibility issues of BPM usually surface the political tensions around power allocation of producer-consumer. The BPM system was created by the company to serve the company; therefore, the interests of the customer (or supplier) get the short end of the stick. However, companies such as Amazon have shown that, if the customer is in control of the search-choose-purchase process, there's increased satisfaction and greater sales. Therefore, consider all the stakeholders in a business process and decide an equitable allocation of control over that process. You may be surprised at the outcomes.

In summary, ethical issues are usually buried within the complexity of the BPM architecture. We need to become more aware of these issues, analyze them thoroughly, and make informed policy decisions. Ethical issues can't be ignored as business intelligence, data warehousing, and BPM find their natural point of convergence. Hopefully, the resulting solutions will be creative and compassionate while avoiding solutions arising from ignorance or malice. **bjj**

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