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Where Business Rules And BPM Intersect

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Sometimes it's good to separate things in an integrated way. The old good cop/bad cop routine works as well for parents trying to figure out who really broke the VCR as it does for law enforcement officials investigating a felony. Separating application logic from the user interface was a great breakthrough in the old days of fat client client/server computing, enabling much more manageable applications and laying the foundation for the application server revolution.

As some organizations move toward business process management (BPM) solutions, the need for integrated separation is becoming clearer. Many organizations are starting to use BPM solutions to not only automate their business processes and integration solutions, but to enable rapid process change in response to business conditions. Automating a process is good. Enabling dynamic and rapid modifications to an automated business process is better.

But there's the rub. Too often the very levers and controls most likely to be used to modify an automated business process are buried within the BPM solution. Typically many of the decision points are buried in an automated process as part of the process model or process flow. Unfortunately, that can leave organizations dangerously close to the fat client scenarios of the mid-1990s, when companies struggled to modify client/sever applications after they were created. In today's IT and business worlds, it doesn't really matter how good the initial solution is if it can't be effectively and efficiently modified over time to adjust to new business requirements and needs.

Hence the re-emergence (though some may argue that they've never disappeared—perhaps we should say “Hence the renewed importance”) of business rules technologies. Business rules are essentially statements or directives that guide or control business behavior (IT or human), in support of business policies. For example, an organization might define a rule that constrains the amount of product a person can buy (or is approved for) based on his or her numeric credit score — people with a credit score of less than 100 can purchase up to \$500 dollars worth of goods or services, while people with a score over 100 can purchase up to \$1000 worth.

Think of business rules as decision points or even important variables — if I'm an airline, at what inventory point (i.e., number of seats left) do I start raising the prices of the

remaining inventory? Business rules technologies enable organizations to implement business rules in a consistent and repeatable way, as well as in a way that can be used in conjunction with other business applications.

BPM solutions can't automate processes with business rules—although they may be defined implicitly, rather than explicitly. For smaller applications and processes, this isn't a problem. But when an organization begins to automate large processes, or wants to automate a particularly dynamic process, having a BPM solution that includes an integrated business rules capability is critically important. Trying to change (or maintain over time) a large process where the individual business rules and decision points are integrated into the process can be a frustrating and ultimately defeating proposition. There's no doubt that as BPM solutions continue to take hold and start to be used on an on-going basis to dynamically alter key business processes, their business rules capabilities (or lack thereof) will become critical factors in their ultimate success in the market.

Business processes management without business rules are like a car without a steering wheel — it's quicker than walking or doing it manually, but there will be hell to pay if you have to alter your course. Business process management solutions with integrated business rules capabilities put the steering wheel back on that car. By having a separate (but integrated) window in the business rules for a selected process, organizations can do anything from delegating individual rules out to distributed (and often autonomous or localized) users to rapidly modifying wide varieties of parameters and decisions that can dramatically alter the outcome of a business process. For BPM, separate but integrated business rules are the answer.

About the Author



David A. Kelly is an expert in Web services, application development, and enterprise infrastructures. As the former Senior VP of Analyst Services at Hurwitz Group, he has extensive experience in translating the implications of new application development, deployment, and management technologies into practical recommendations for enterprise customers. He's written articles for Computerworld, Software Magazine, and other publications, and spoken at conferences such as Comdex, Software Development, and Internet World. With expertise ranging from application development to enterprise management to integration/B2B services to IP networking and VPNs, Kelly can help companies profit from the diversity of a changing technology

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