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Interview with Michael Rosemann on ambidextrous business process management

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Abstract

Purpose – More than two decades after the early works about Business Process Management (BPM) were published by the discipline's thought-leaders of that time, the authors were interested in getting an assessment of what BPM has been able to achieve so far, what promises have been fulfilled, and where BPM should be heading in the future. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the above issues.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted an interview with Professor Michael Rosemann, one of today's authorities in the BPM field, who shared with us his thoughts on ambidextrous BPM.

Findings – According to Michael Rosemann, the BPM community has, since its conception, put much effort in mastering exploitative BPM that focusses on analyzing and automating single processes as well as on improving such processes step-by-step. However, explorative BPM, which emphasizes radical process change, process innovation and the enabling of new business models, still is in its infancy. Professor Rosemann therefore calls for ambidextrous BPM integrating exploitative and explorative capabilities, more interdisciplinary as well as a closer collaboration between academia and practice.

Originality/value – In this interview, Michael Rosemann points to directions of future development for the BPM community, particularly with respect to explorative BPM. Michael Rosemann also highlights the skillset explorative BPM researchers and professionals should have.

Keywords Business process management, Ambidextrous BPM, Exploitative BPM,
Explorative BPM

Paper type Viewpoint

Dr Michael Rosemann is a Professor and Head of the Information Systems School, Science and Engineering Faculty, at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. QUT's Information Systems School received a ranking of "above world class" in this area of research in Australia (ERA 2012) and includes QUT's Business Process Management Discipline, one of the largest BPM research groups in the world. Dr Rosemann is the author/editor of seven books, more than 200 refereed papers and an Editorial Board member of ten international journals. His recently edited *Handbook of Business Process Management* is the most comprehensive consolidation

of global BPM thought leaders. His main contributions are the concept of a series of innovation patterns, value-driven BPM, customer process management, BPM as a service, a BPM maturity model, guidelines of business process modelling, configurable reference models, ambidextrous BPM and context-aware BPM. Professor Michael Rosemann can be contacted at: m.rosemann@qut.edu.au and www.michaelrosemann.com.

BPMJ Guest Editors

Professor Rosemann, the topic of this special issue is "New Frontiers in Business Process Management (BPM)." In what direction do you think the field of BPM should evolve in the next few years?

Michael Rosemann

Over the last two decades BPM has gained maturity, but the path it took may be slightly different from what the initial papers had in mind. Michael Hammer and Tom Davenport, who without any doubt triggered much of the BPM development, used terms like reengineering and innovation in their seminal contributions 20 years ago. They wrote about fundamental redesign, new business models and new value propositions for customers. However, the management science discipline did not really take up BPM as a topic of investigation. It were mostly the fields of computer science and information systems that jumped on BPM. Close to the nature of their research, academics in these disciplines had much more interest in the methodological challenges related to how to model, analyze, simulate, automate and mine business processes. As a consequence, the majority of academic work on BPM, but also its practical implementation across industries, is focussed on tools, systems and techniques, and less on the managerial, organizational, strategic or cultural challenges of BPM.

This is what I call *exploitative BPM*. Exploitative BPM is about utilizing available knowledge, resources and capabilities. Corresponding to the current maturity of BPM as a discipline, this materializes in a strong focus on resolving problems within fine granular business processes (inside-out approach to process design). For example, Six Sigma is about reducing deviations in processes, Lean Management is obsessed with finding and eliminating seven types of waste, Workflow Management focusses on automating manual labor in a process, and so on. By now, the BPM community is doing this extremely well to the extent that the ability to eliminate problems within an operational process has become a commodity. As a consequence, we typically end up with massively streamlined processes, rather than highly innovative processes. In addition, exploitative BPM looks at risks related to process execution. For example, if a bank is not able to give you money at the ATM, if the point of sale checkout at a supermarket cannot process credit card payments, or if your payroll system does not execute, then you have a massive problem. However, nobody gets excited when these kinds of processes run smoothly. They are a commodity. Exploitative BPM has become a commodity.

BPMJ Guest Editors

Like a hygiene factor?

Michael Rosemann

Exactly, exploitative BPM can be regarded as a hygiene factor. While ten years ago the ability to conduct a Lean Six Sigma or Workflow Management project may have impressed us, today it has become a commodity, an expectation. After decades of BPM research and practice, we made a lot of progress in the area of exploitative BPM.

However, looking forward, organizations still struggle in what we call *explorative BPM*, i.e. the corporate ability to create process designs that truly excite customers. When we see large corporate innovations across industries, it is typically not the process team that initiates or even leads those projects – we rarely see a BPM team proposing breakthrough innovations.

I do not think we have a sufficient academic or professional body of knowledge in the area of explorative BPM. In both practice and research, the notion of explorative BPM is a new frontier. Explorative BPM is quite different from exploitative BPM. It is opportunity-driven and follows an outside-in approach. The current exploitative way we deal with BPM is focussed on single processes as the unit of analysis. We take a single process, often represented by a process model, and then work out what can be done to overcome identified problems and incrementally improve this process. In contrast, in an outside-in approach we assess trends such as social media, big data, or the Internet of Things in terms of their ability to innovate our business processes.

Any large company – let it be a retailer, an insurer, an airline – has hundreds or thousands of processes. Instead of picking one of these processes and trying to improve it, the focus of explorative BPM is much more on assessing what new capabilities are emerging from modern technologies and asking which of the processes would benefit most from them. Today's BPM cannot give you the answer for that sort of challenge. I believe that the next decade of BPM research needs to focus more on explorative change and not so much on exploitative execution. With regard to the process lifecycle, that means shifting the focus from the ability to model, simulate, analyze, execute, monitor or mine processes to an increased focus on the ability to innovate processes.

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Do you think that this shift in focus is something that should be driven by practice or by academia?

Michael Rosemann: It should be driven by both. Many BPM professionals and academics are very comfortable in the corner of exploitative BPM, which could explain why BPM did not have the expected impact in academia and in practice. For further progress, we need the real world challenges and pressure combined with the rigor and soundness of academia. At this stage, explorative BPM is a topic in very few organizations, and if it is a topic, then it is often driven not by the BPM team, but by people who are pushing innovation, and process innovation is part of their portfolios. Instead of fixing problems and having a cost-cutting mentality like the BPM team does, these stakeholders explore new revenue opportunities.

Let's take Amazon as an example. They started as a provider of a scalable process for selling books online. Today, Amazon sells all types of products, even fresh food in certain parts of the world. This is a good example for how you can generate new revenue opportunities by generalizing process capabilities.

BPMJ Guest Editors
So BPM moves away from modelling and executing, the early stages of a process life cycle, to improving and innovating?

Michael Rosemann
Absolutely. Of course, we do not want to compromise our developed exploitative BPM capabilities, but we need to expand the focus of BPM. Instead of being centered on pain points, we need to explore the notion of opportunity points.

BPMJ **Guest Editors**
Is there a need here for academics and practitioners to work more closely together?

Michael Rosemann
I think there is a need for practitioners and academics to become more inclusive in their discussions, their work, their methods and their tools. The last ten years were characterized by an isolation of the BPM community rather than an inclusion. We need to move away from the belief that breakthrough innovation can be achieved by redesigning a process model. We need to see BPM in the context of other developments, such as new product development or technology innovations, as the true breakthrough is where process innovation interacts with other technologies. If the only tool I have is my Workflow Management system, then I typically do not end up with radical innovation.

BPMJ **Guest Editors**
Can that discussion be facilitated by more conferences, workshops or industry roundtables?

Michael Rosemann
What we need is a way to mix up relevant communities. We need to increase the appetite of BPM researchers to be present, let's say, at innovation or sustainability events. We need to position our skill set in the context of other communities.

BPMJ **Guest Editors**
Do you think there is a danger of the BPM community being isolated, because of its focus on exploitative BPM?

Michael Rosemann
Absolutely. We have to get back to the roots of BPM, back to the ideas of Hammer and Davenport. Many BPM academics and professionals would benefit from going back to those fundamental papers and appreciating the original ambitions of BPM, which are very different from the ambitions we have today.

In this context, I like to differentiate back-office and front-office BPM. Today, we have a lot of back office ability in BPM. This is the organization where the head of the BPM Center of Excellence looks at the process architecture rather than at creating new revenue opportunities. Moving from exploitative BPM to explorative BPM means you also need people who have broader and more challenging ambitions. They tend to be more extrovert than introvert, and are more inclusive than exclusive. The lack of that kind of people in BPM is potentially an even bigger roadblock than the lack of process innovation methods or tools.

BPMJ **Guest Editors**
What is the ideal background or skill set of the explorative BPM practitioner?

Michael Rosemann
The explorative BPM professional is more comfortable in the managerial than in the methodological disciplines. She has a solid understanding of change, design, innovation, transformation and, to a certain extent, a black box understanding of BPM. These people do not have to be experts in complex event processing or the latest modelling tools; they

have to understand the core capabilities. Explorative professionals are creative and able to influence even without a budget. They are able to excite, stimulate and energize. They also need to have solid environmental scanning skills, i.e. they need to be able to identify emerging business and technological opportunities and their potential for new process designs. This includes, for example, the ability to identify those business processes that would benefit from mobile or social technologies (outside-in approach to process design).

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Professor Rosemann, thank you very much for this interesting discussion.

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