A Consistent Model With Multiple Views

by Adrian Reed

BPMN is more than just a notation. Whilst the focus of attention is often (quite rightly) placed on the visual aspects of BPMN, there is much more beside.

One particular aspect that is useful for business-focused users of BPMN is the ability to create different 'views' on a single underlying model. In this article, we explore this idea further.

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One thing that differentiates the Business Process Model and Notation (BPMN) standard from some other approaches is that it is more than just a notation. Whilst the visual notation is, of course, a key component of BPMN, it provides a level of rigor beyond this. If you were to pick up the formal BPMN specification, you would notice that the visual representation of BPMN is just one aspect—a formally defined BPMN model can be represented in XML too.

If you are using BPMN in a business context, it is unlikely that you are ever going to need to know the finite detail of the BPMN specification, nor are you likely to want to delve into the detailed XML schemas. Yet the level of rigor that is built into BPMN is significant for a number of business focused reasons, including:

- **Executable Processes:**
  It is possible to specify executable processes with BPMN - i.e. processes that can be run in a process automation engine or workflow system, and could also be used for process simulation, etc.

- **Multiple Views:**
  When using the visual elements of BPMN, the concept of different 'views' on the same underlying model exists. This can be very powerful from a business perspective.

This second point, around multiple views can be extremely beneficial when modeling complicated business processes. Often we will find that it is necessary to model a very granular level of detail to fully understand the process, so that it can be managed, improved (or even automated). This will require detailed discussions about how the work needs to be carried out, where exceptions can occur and the data that is read, captured or processed at each stage.

We need to know every step where the process waits for a message to be received from an external participant (perhaps we wait for a customer to reply via e-mail), and we need to know what happens if they don't reply. This type of detailed information is necessary to understand precisely how the process works so that it can be fully documented, improved or formally managed. Yet, elaborating a process to this level of granularity can lead to challenges. We may find that we end up creating a very precise, but busy model. It will specify precisely how the work should be undertaken, but might seem very daunting to those who haven't used BPMN before, or those who need a much higher-level understanding of the end-to-end process.

Yet when BPMN is used as a consistent and connected model, it is possible to 'zoom out', to create a view that is relevant for particular stakeholders that we need to communicate with. We might use a collaboration diagram, perhaps starting with 'black-box' pools (to show the message flow between participants only), and then perhaps elaborating to show the key process steps expressed as collapsed sub-processes.

We can have a single model, but create multiple views to facilitate discussions, validation, analysis and improvement. And the various 'snapshots' or views - visual diagrams - are connected via the underlying model. This approach will be much easier in a suitable modeling package rather than a drawing package.

Whilst drawing packages will help us create diagrams, we may find that each diagram is essentially separate. A modeling package will help maintain the underlying model too.

In summary: BPMN is a rich and useful standard, which allows us to elaborate a process to a very granular level. Yet we will often be collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders, and the ability to create 'multiple views' on the same model is a real bonus.

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