Know the Events to Know the Process

by Adrian Reed

In the previous article "Scoping a Process with BPMN", the importance of start and end events was discussed.

In this article, we continue the discussion exploring what an event actually is and outlining the importance of intermediate events in a process.

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When undertaking process analysis, there will be a wide range of information and insight that we'll need to obtain. It's necessary to understand how the work 'flows' through the organization, when it crosses the boundaries between teams or organizations, and also where any key decisions take place and where any relevant business rules are relevant. It can be tricky to know where to start!

As outlined in the previous article "Scoping a Process with BPMN", a very useful place to start can be to understand the start and end events of the process. A process model can be built iteratively from there, with the start and end events acting as a logical boundary of scope. In this article, we expand this idea further and outline why it is useful for us to consider events more generally.

What is an Event?

As a starting point, it is worth stepping back and asking what we mean by the word event. In business and process analysis, IIBA®'s Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK®) guide provides the following definition:

"An occurrence or incident to which an organizational unit, system, or process must respond." IBA, 2015

This is a very wide definition, which is indicative of the relevance of events to process modeling.

This can include events that are outside of the boundary of the process itself, which might include a customer making a request or even the passing of time. The Business Process Model and Notation (BPMN) provides us with three general types of event, including events that can take place during the execution of a process:

START EVENT
An event that starts the process

INTERMEDIATE EVENT
Occurs during a process, can affect the flow of the process. An example might be a message is received. An intermediate event cannot start a

END EVENT
The end of a process

BPMN is a rich approach, allowing more information to be denoted about each event. For example, there are subtly different symbols for events that involve messages, delays/time, errors and so forth.

This enables us to convey very precise information very concisely.

Why do Events Matter?

As outlined in the previous article, start and end events are extremely important as they help determine the scope (i.e. the logical boundaries) of the process itself. Yet, intermediate events that happen during the running of the process itself are also very important.

They have many uses, one possible use being to show how the flow of a process can vary depending on whether or not a customer (or other external actor) sends a particular 'message'. Message intermediate events are useful to highlight the points at which a process is waiting for a response from an external party.

This is illustrated in the process fragment below:

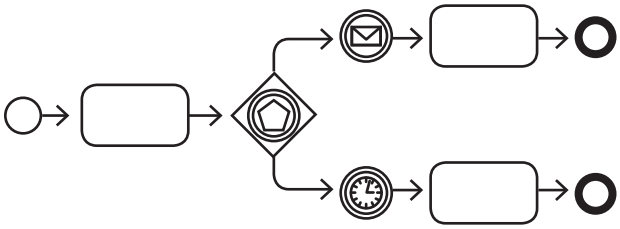

Figure 1: *Process fragment showing an event based gateway (note: this is not an end-to-end process)*

In this diagram, an 'event based gateway' is used to vary the flow depending on the event that occurs. Here, the process requests supporting documentation and then there are two outcomes—either the correct documentation is received (in which case funds are issued) or 30 days pass (in which case the request is archived).

I am sure if this were a real process we would elaborate it even further, and ask questions as to whether there were other possible paths through the process (for example, what happen if we receive documentation that is incorrect)? In fact, one of the benefits of modeling processes is to create those types of conversation.

We can encourage our stakeholders to think broadly about the types of scenarios that might occur in the real world. This can also help cultivate discussions over where process delays take place, and how we can minimize them. These are just a few specific examples, there will be many others relevant to a particular process, and there are many other types of events supported by BPMN.

In summary, knowing the events helps us to scope out our processes and helps enhance our knowledge of the way the work will flow throughout the process. BPMN supports many types of events, and is a rich notation for conveying this information.