An Agile Business Process Improvement Methodology

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Abstract

Adoption of business process improvement strategies are now a concern of most organisations. Organisations are still facing challenges and finding transient solutions to immediate problems. The misalignment between IT solutions and organisational aspects evolves across space and time showing discrepancies. Unfortunately, existing business process approaches are not according with continuous business process improvement involving business stakeholders. Considering this limitation in well-known Business Process (BP) methodologies, this paper presents a comparative study of some approaches and introduces agility in the Business Process and Practice Alignment Methodology (BPPAM). Our intention is to present observed problems in existing approaches and introduce agility in our proposal to address features, like the alignment between daily work practices and business process descriptions, in a simple and agile way.

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1. Introduction

Adoption of business process improvement strategies are now a concern of most organisations [1]. Business Process Management (BPM) includes details on how to design and enact business processes into organisational practices [2]. Business Process Management System (BPMS) implementation involves an automatic execution of business processes that could not be constrained to a time period since organisational needs are always changing [3]. Organisations are always facing challenges and finding temporary solutions to immediate problems. The misalignment between IT solutions and organisational aspects evolves across space and time showing discrepancies. Thiemich and Puhlmann [4], based on their experience, conclude that most BPM improvements are motivated by a project. Nevertheless, Lund-Jensen et al. [5] affirm that Feral Information Systems, Shadow Systems and Workaround will be created to solve business process not supported by a Business Process Management System (BPMS). Feral Information Systems (FIS) is a separated system developed individually or collectively by users to support their business processes. A Shadow Systems (SS) is described as an alternative to the existing system formally supported by the organisation. Workarounds can be described as informal temporary practices for handling exceptions to normal workflow. In order to avoid chaos based on these other solutions, we argue that continuous BP improvement will be advisable. However, the question remains on how to carry out continuous improvement in an integrated way with existing BPMS.

The quest for the benefits of improvements in resource optimization and organisational responsiveness has raised several proposals for Business Process Improvement (BPI) methodologies [6]. Today we can find a broad range of process improvement approaches, distinct from each other, either on its principles and techniques, or the target area on which the improvements are focused. There are three kinds of approaches [4]: 1) Enterprise-BPM focused on the enterprise-wide establishment of BPM, 2) BPM focused on the process level that tries to find possible business process improvements, and 3) BPM focused on the project that helps business departments to state their requirements as process models. This paper focuses on the second case, which means that the approach proposed concerns business process improvements at the process level with the observation of daily practices.

Improving business processes, conforming to existing approaches, do not always give a quick response to business needs. In some cases, it is indispensable to adopt agile approaches to business processes improvement. Nevertheless, the agile business process definition is not consensual since several proposals have been issued in the literature. So, we start presenting definitions for the main concepts in this paper, namely agile business process and agile business process methodology. We also intend to describe the relationships established between them.

The focus of our work is business process improvement in order to be adapted to organisational changes. In this paper, we consider agility in business process methodologies. Our approach concerns the cycles of the methodology and modelling principles applied to business processes. We will not consider system development.

In this paper, we present our ideas according to the following structure. In section 2, we overview the existing literature about traditional and agile business processes. Section 3 presents the proposal to adjust BPPAM to an agile business process philosophy. Finally, section 4 concludes and discusses future trends.

2. The agile (software development) manifest and BPM

The Manifesto for Agile Software Development [7] introduces the core principles of the agile philosophy in the domain of software development. This section discusses the principles behind the agile software development and how they can be adapted to BPM. However, Agile Business Process does not have a manifesto, neither a consensual definition accepted by practitioners and researchers. The first goal of this section is to clarify the differences between traditional and agile Business Processes (BP); traditional and agile BP methodologies.

Traditional Business Process (TBP) follows a strict action sequence, creates a detailed business process model and implements it in the organisation. This approach may not be suitable for organisations classified as dynamic because of the high degree of changes. The adjustment to new requirements is a complex and arduous procedure [8]. With regard to the definition of Agile Business Process (ABP), it concerns the ability to discover changes and new opportunities, reacting quickly to them. In software development, we can consider BPMS a special case of a software system. So, it is possible to consider BPM methodologies also a subclass of software development methodologies. In the domain of agile approaches, the sequential life cycle associated with a TBP will require a
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