

Masking flexibility behind rigidity: Notes on how much flexibility people are willing to cope with

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Extended Abstract of Keynote Talk

Introduction of workflow management systems in practice brought about the famous problem of their flexibility. A lot of research efforts were, and still are directed to solving this problem. Hype around the flexibility problem makes an impression that the end-users of the workflow systems strive after flexibility. However, in the everyday business practice, most people do not want to have much flexibility, but would like to follow very simple rules to complete their tasks, making as little decisions as possible. Why they complain then? The most probable answer is that their complains are not about lack of flexibility, but about the “wrong” rigidity.

A workflow system, as any other business application, is normally built based on the business analysis conducted in the frame of an organization where the system is to be installed. For the workflow systems, such business analysis mainly consists of the analysis of business processes (BP) existing in the organization. The main tool of BP analysis, independent of a particular technique, is “talking” to people. Dependent on the experience of the analysts, this “talking” includes management only, or major part of participants of the BP in question. In any case, the “talking” method can produce only some kind of approximation of the business processes existing inside the organization. The latter is only to be expected. When you ask people how they do things, they, most probably, will explain how things are done in “normal” circumstances, forgetting many of not so normal cases. The normality can embrace everything from 50% to 90% of cases, but never 100% of them. No wonder that the end-users start to complain about “lack of flexibility” as soon as the system is in place.

The “wrong” rigidity due to insufficient business analysis is often aggravated by the fact that introduction of a workflow system may result in considerable changes in routines and procedures. Combination of these two factors can turn the whole process of introduction of a workflow system in practice into a nightmare. Here, we have a kind of a catch. On one hand, the workflow system cannot have the “right” rigidity from the very beginning, which requires flexibility. On the other hand, to make the introduction of a new system easier, we need to produce simple and straightforward instructions on how to use it, which requires rigidity. Solving this catch requires considerable amount of flexibility from the system, and at the same time, capability of making it look rigid to the end-users from the first glance. It also requires considerable skills from the introductory team to find out what rigidity is required during the introduction of the system in the operational practice.

The current talk is devoted to discussing a particular experience of solving the above-described catch. The experience has been, and is being acquired in the frame of a small consulting company that deals with the development of business process support systems and their introduction in the operational practice. The development process is based on the state oriented view on business processes [2]. This experience is briefly described in [3], though not from the flexibility point of view.

The most common view on business processes is workflow, i.e. flow of activities. The state oriented view considers the process as a flow of states, independently of what activities causes transitions from one state to another. A system built based on the workflow view, normally, starts with rigid definition, which should be later loosen by exception handling, etc. As a result, complains on lack of flexibility are heard from the end-users in the beginning of system introduction in practice. A system built based on the state flow view starts from the other end (see discussion on the topic in [3]). It starts with full flexibility that should be limited by imposing constraints and prescriptions. As a result, complaints on “too much” flexibility are heard from the end-users in the beginning of the introduction. This complaints concern both flexibility of the system itself and flexibility it allows in the business process instances it helps to run.

In the talk, examples of various cases of “too much” flexibility will be given, as well as pragmatic solutions used for solving the problem.

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